

Legal framework

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, is the world's most closed, isolated, and repressive state, with one of the worst records for human rights. It is ruled by the only dictatorship in the world which is both a dynasty and portrays itself as a deity.

There is no freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in North Korea, and any citizen who expresses an opinion or a belief which differs from the regime's propaganda faces severe punishment.

Commission of Inquiry

The gravity and extent of human rights abuses being perpetrated by the North Korean regime were exposed in the ground-breaking United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) published in February 2014.¹ It concluded that the 'gravity, scale, and nature of the violations of human rights in North Korea reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world' and recommended that the UN Security Council refer the situation in the country to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The COI report detailed widespread crimes against humanity and noted that 'there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.' It concluded that the regime 'considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat' and as a result, 'Christians are prohibited from practising their religion and are persecuted.' Severe punishments are inflicted on people 'caught practising Christianity.' Documented incidents include Christians being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges and trampled underfoot.

In 2018 CSW's North Korea report *Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance* found that although the North Korean regime has not shown any signs of change in regard to human rights, increased flows of information into the country via radio broadcasts, DVDs, USB sticks and other means, as well as economic changes in the country, have resulted in a greater awareness among North Korean people about the outside world.² The COI is also believed to have had some impact within the country, resulting in anecdotal reports of a reduction in the most severe violations. That does not mean that there is any meaningful improvement in human rights in North Korea, but it does mean that international pressure and information flows need to be maintained and increased.

In July 2021, a report by the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on North Korea found that the situation of human rights in the country has not improved since the COI report and that the atrocities 'amount to crimes against humanity.'³ It states that 'there are reasons to believe that some of the atrocities reach the threshold of genocide, particularly in relation to three groups: Christians; half-Chinese children; and the 'hostile' group.'

In September 2024, CSW's North Korea report *We Cannot Look Away* - published to mark ten years since the publication of the COI's report - found that the Kim regime has made no effort to uphold international human rights standards and has taken no steps to participate as an equal and active member of the international community.⁴ The situation of human rights in the country remains unchanged at best and may even have deteriorated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increased prioritisation of weapons testing and development, the introduction of new domestic legislation, and the continued forced repatriation of North Korean refugees from neighbouring China.

Prison camps

According to The Korea Institute for National Unification, a South Korean government agency, an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 people are detained in prison camps, where they endure dire living conditions and brutal torture.⁵ Many of these are Christians.

Defectors who are forcibly returned to North Korea are charged with 'treachery against the nation', sent to prison camps and face abuse, violence and even execution. Despite this, the Chinese government has retained its policy of repatriating all North Korean defectors.

In January 2024 two teenage boys were sentenced to 16 years of hard labour for watching K-Dramas.

General remarks

The DPRK was the first country in the world to close its borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the last to re-open. This prolonged isolation only exacerbated food insecurity in the country and reduced virtually all legal and illegal trade in the country.

The DPRK is using hackers to steal crypto currency to fund its nuclear projects most notably through cells like the 'Lazarus Group'. These groups have been reported to steal at least 600 million dollars in 2023.

Kim Jong-Un has sold weapons to Putin to be used in the Ukraine War and North Korean labourers are being sent into Russia in increasing numbers.

1 United Nations General Assembly, Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 7 February 2014 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/108/66/pdf/g1410866.pdf>

2 CSW, 'Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance', 31 January 2018 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/01/31/report/3832/article.htm>

3 All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on North Korea, Inquiry into Human Rights Violations in North Korea 2014-2020/1, July 2021 https://b64a88a3-b1cd-4d11-8279-50610a8df584.filesusr.com/ugd/897883_e29ba84cd0fc4e92a2dc7182050f9e11.pdf

4 CSW, 'We Cannot Look Away', 11 September 2024 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/09/11/report/6311/article.htm>

5 BBC, 'North Korea: How many political prisoners are detained in prison?', 10 May 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44069749>

Recommendations

To the government of North Korea:

- End the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Implement the recommendations of the COI report in their entirety.
- Release all persons currently detained in prison camps immediately and unconditionally.
- Stop charging defectors with 'treachery' or requesting that defectors into China and other countries be returned to the DPRK.
- Clarify the fate and whereabouts of repatriated North Korean refugee Kim Cheol-ok and allow her to contact her family
- Clarify the fate and whereabouts of missionaries Kim Jeong-wook, Kim Kook-kie and Choi-Chun-gil and allow them to contact their families, lawyers and consular officials.
- Immediately return all abductees, detainees and unrepatriated POWs, including missionaries Kim Jeong-wook, Kim Kook-ki and Choi Chun-gil.
- Uphold, in law and practice, freedom of religion or belief as stipulated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
- End the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Implement the recommendations of the COI report in their entirety.
- Invite the United States (US) Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, the European Union (EU) Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and other UN Special Procedures and investigative mechanisms, to visit the country with unhindered access.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Ensure targeted sanctions are upheld and expanded against North Korean officials responsible for human rights violations, including crimes against humanity as outlined in the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report and push for a referral to the ICC.
- Demand an end to the persecution of religious minorities, ensuring that individuals imprisoned for

their faith are released, and monitor violations through UN mechanisms.

- Pressure China and other countries to cease the forced repatriation of defectors and provide resettlement opportunities for refugees fleeing persecution.
- Address North Korea's forced labour practices, particularly abroad, and target the regime's illicit financial activities, including cyber-attacks.
- Ensure that human rights, especially the right to freedom of religion or belief, are consistently raised in bilateral dialogues with North Korea's key partners, such as China and Russia.

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T +44 (0)20 8329 0010
✉ @CSWAdvocacy
f /CSWUK
csw.org.uk

**PO Box 99
New Malden
Surrey, KT3 3YF
United Kingdom**

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