



## Universal Periodic Review

### Democratic People's Republic of Korea

April 2009

The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International submits this analysis of religious freedom in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review of UN member-state the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Whereas most other Human Rights NGOs focus on the human rights situation in general, the Advocacy Department of Open Doors International focuses on the situation of freedom of religion and belief, especially the position of Christian minorities in North Korea<sup>1</sup>.

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#### Religious demography

Due to the closed system of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), it is very hard to estimate and verify the exact number of Christian believers in the country. A conservative estimation of the number of Christians in the DPRK is 200,000, but the Advocacy Department of Open Doors International estimates approximately 400,000 adherents to the Christian belief.

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#### Political and historical context

When Kim Il Sung came to power, he transformed the country into a communist society. As a consequence, many religious adherents, especially leaders, fled to neighbouring countries. Between 1953 and 1960, the authorities arrested or executed all religious leaders who had not escaped. Entire religious families were detained in forced labour camps, or moved to industrial cities. Only a few were allowed to lead the only recognized churches in the capital Pyongyang.

In Pyongyang, there are two Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and one Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church. The churches are strictly controlled by the government, and, in

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<sup>1</sup> Sources used are: Open Doors and Unites States Commission for International Religious Freedom.



practise, appear to be show churches for foreigners,<sup>2</sup> Some sources state there are more recognized family churches, but this has not been verified by North Korean defectors.

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#### Legal context

The Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea provides for “freedom of religious belief”. Its law also forbids torture.

Furthermore, as a member state of the United Nations, it is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

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#### World Watch List position:

For already seven years, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea ranks the first place on the Open Doors World Watch List, as the worst violator of religious freedom for Christian believers, but also other believers, in the world<sup>3</sup>.

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#### Freedom of Religion

Although its constitution guarantees the “freedom of religious belief” and the DPRK government claims that it protects religious freedom, in practise there is virtually no genuine religious freedom.

According to the DPRK, religion, also called superstitious belief, exerts an evil influence in North Korean society and is the greatest obstacle to the country’s Juche ideology<sup>4</sup>. For this reason the DPRK seems to aim the extermination of all religion in the country.

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<sup>2</sup> Sources state that North Korean visitors arrive at and leave the church together in touring cars, indicates that the church visits are strictly controlled and organized by the state for political and propaganda purposes, rather than as an instrument for supporting religious freedom.

<sup>3</sup> The Open Doors World Watch List is compiled from a specially-designed questionnaire of 50 questions covering various aspects of religious freedom. A point value is assigned depending on how each question is answered. The total number of points per country determines its position on the World Watch List. The questions differentiate between the legal, official status of Christian believers and the actual situation of individual Christians. Attention is paid to the role of the church in society and to factors that may obstruct the freedom of religion in a country.

<sup>4</sup> Juche: the official state ideology, also called KimIlSungism, or veneration of the Kim family.



The government severely restricts religious activities and only allows religious groups recognized and tightly supervised by the government. The fact that provinces do not have religious facilities indicates the lack of freedom of religion and worship.

The possession of a bible or other religious literature is illegal. Reportedly, those who are caught with one in their possession are (as well as their family, through the guilt-by-association system) likely to be sent to prison or labour camp, or to be executed.

Furthermore, it is forbidden to share one's religion or to be engaged in proselytizing, actions which are seen as undermining the Korean regime. Allegedly, the government of the DPRK is doing its utmost to control religious activities in both the DPRK and the border district with China. Specially trained agents reportedly organise fake religious meetings in order to trap Christian believers, and infiltrate in Chinese churches to find North Korean defectors.

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#### Detention situations

Conservative estimates claim there are approximately two hundred thousand prisoners. Open Doors International Advocacy Department estimates the number of detained people in North Korea closer to a million. The number of detained Christians is hard to estimate, but approaches the ten thousands.

The DPRK knows seven camps for political prisoners, comprising approximately between half a million and one million prisoners. The country subsequently holds hundreds of thousands in the approximately thirty other camps<sup>5</sup>.

Reportedly, situations in the camps are atrocious. Torture and execution, either in secret or publicly, occur often. Allegedly, prisoners are frequently being used for testing biological or chemical weapons. Sources say that especially political and religious prisoners are being used for this purpose. However, this has not been verified.

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#### North Korean refugees

At the border district between the DPRK and China, North Koreans try to flee to China. Despite the extremely tight and strict border patrols, several refugees, called defectors, succeed in doing so. North Korean agents, however, are ordered by the government to spy on North Koreans in China. If a defector gets caught, he or she is likely to be repatriated to North Korea and placed in camps for a couple of years.

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<sup>5</sup> Those camps are reportedly as big as villages, which makes them invisible on satellite pictures.



If a detector is found to have had contact with Chinese or South Korean Christians, the person is likely to be punished more harshly, through detention in a labour camp and torture, or to be executed. The United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) confirms in a report that Christian believers are a specific target group for the DPRK government. The government fears the spread of Christianity through cross-border contacts with South Korean or Chinese religious groups.

### Recommendations

The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International recommends and urges the DPRK:

1. To immediately release all prisoners of conscience, and to dismantle the labour camps.
2. The DPRK is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The legislation regarding, and treatment of, religious groups and organizations falls short to the obligations following this covenant. The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International urges the government of the DPRK to review the laws regarding religious groups and organizations and make sure that they comply with the obligations under the ICCPR.
3. To end the practise of incommunicado detentions and corporal punishment.
4. To engage fully and positively with the Universal Periodic Review process, with a view to improving the human rights situation in the country.
5. To recognize the UN Resolution mandate of the Special Rapporteur of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Vitit Muntarbhorn, and the report made by the Special Rapporteur, to fully cooperate with him, permit him access to the country and to provide him all necessary information.
6. to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, to fully cooperate, and permit the Special Rapporteur access to the country and to provide all necessary information.
7. To invite the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment to assess the situation regarding the treatment of prisoners in the country.
8. To take care that food aid supplies are given to most needy citizens of the country.