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North Korea Should Be Held Accountable for Persecuting Christians

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In February 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) confirmed the world's worst fears: North Korea is guilty of crimes against humanity.¹ In addition to the atrocities committed by the Kim regime, the report found that "there is no effective freedom of religious belief in the DPRK."²

Justice Michael Kirby, the lead U.N. investigator for the COI, said that the persecution of religious minorities, in particular Christians, is one of the least discussed findings of the report.³ As a global leader on international religious freedom, the U.S. can do more to hold North Korea accountable for its egregious violations of religious liberty.

The Findings of the Commission of Inquiry

The COI provided verifiable proof that North Koreans are denied religious freedom. The report details historical and current acts of persecution committed by the regime toward religious minorities and specifically highlights the extreme persecution faced by Christians.

The report's key findings include:⁴

- **The right to religious liberty is technically enshrined in article 68 of the North Korean constitution, but in practice North Koreans are granted no such right.**
- **The true religion in North Korea is the worship of the Kim family.** The cult of personality surrounding the Kim regime encompasses the deification of the Kim family, absolute worship of the Kim family, and strict adherence to the Kim philosophy of *Juche*. The Kim regime considers religious activity subversive to the government, as it detracts from the worship of the Kim family.
- **North Koreans are tortured, sent to labor camps, and even killed for their faith.**⁵ North Koreans cannot erect a religious building without first receiving permission from the government, are only able to study religion if they are a member of the elite, and can only attend the limited number of state-sanctioned religious institutions.
- **Christians face unique persecution.** Possession of the Bible is illegal, and non-approved Christian religious activities are considered political crimes. Christians and North Koreans who have contact with Christians often face the harshest punishments for practicing their faith.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
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Christianity in North Korea

The Kim regime is particularly hostile toward Christianity, in part because of the role that Christianity played in the collapse of other communist regimes, including the Soviet Union, Poland, and Romania.⁶ As a result, the North Korean regime has systematically persecuted the estimated 200,000 to 400,000 Christians in North Korea.

According to Open Doors's World Watch List, North Korea was the worst persecutor of Christians in the world in 2015.⁷ Christians are often sent to prison camps for possession of Bibles and are sometimes even executed for their faith. The State Department estimates that 80,000 to 120,000 North Koreans are imprisoned in labor camps, many because of their religious beliefs.⁸

Documented instances of persecution of Christians are not uncommon. In November 2013, 80 North Koreans were reportedly executed for possession of Bibles and South Korean films.⁹ Until he was released in late 2014, Kenneth Bae, a Korean American pastor, was detained, imprisoned, and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor in North Korea for sharing his faith and allegedly undermining the Kim regime.¹⁰

Despite continued persecution, Christians have nonetheless played an important role in North Korean society. Underground churches in North Korea and church groups from the U.S. and South Korea are intimately involved in rescuing North Korean defectors.¹¹ Other Christian groups have been responsible for getting outside information into North Korea through radio broadcasts and information dissemination.¹²

What the U.S. Should Do

The U.S. has an interest in promoting religious freedom abroad. Historically, religious groups have often been the catalyst for political reform—especially in communist and post-communist countries. In partnering with religious groups to promote religious liberty in North Korea, the U.S. may be able to encourage incremental reform.

- **The State Department should continue to designate North Korea as a country of particular concern in the *International Religious Freedom* report.** Since 2001, North Korea has been designated as a “country of particular concern” (CPC) in the State Department’s

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 2. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
 3. Center for Strategic and International Relations, “North Korean Human Rights: The Road Ahead, Commemorating the One Year Anniversary of the UN Commission of Inquiry Report,” February 17, 2015, <http://csis.org/event/north-korean-human-rights-road-ahead> (accessed April 7, 2015).
 4. U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”
 5. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2014: North Korea, 2014*, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/North%20Korea%202014.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2015).
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 11. Durihana, “About Durihana,” http://www.durihana.net/about_durihana.aspx (accessed April 7, 2015).
 12. North Korea Freedom Coalition, “Ways You Can Get Involved,” <http://www.nkfreedom.org/Get-Involved/Ways-You-Can-Get-Involved.aspx> (accessed April 7, 2015).
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International Religious Freedom report and was re-designated as a CPC in 2011.¹³ CPCs are guilty of severe forms of persecution including torture, discrimination, and denial of religious freedom. Despite North Korea's designation as a CPC, sanctions under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) have been waived and subsumed under sanctions that have been imposed pursuant to the Jackson–Vanik Amendment. This strategy has failed to garner compliance. Due to North Korea's ongoing violations of religious freedom, it should remain a country of particular concern and face sanctions under IRFA specifically for its violations of religious freedom.

- **The U.S. should increase funding for broadcasts into North Korea.** Most defectors say that access to outside information was an integral reason behind their decision to defect.¹⁴ Interestingly, high-level defections from the elite class are not uncommon. This is unsurprising since members of the elite class have the most access to outside information.

The U.S. should deepen its partnership with the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia to disseminate timely outside information into North Korea. The BBG and its affiliates reach over 215 million people worldwide weekly and conduct programs in some of the world's most repressive regimes, including North Korea, Iran, and Cuba.¹⁵ Such programming could

influence political change in North Korea that leads to respect for basic rights, including, but not limited to religious freedom.

- **The State Department Office of International Religious Freedom should support religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) seeking to disseminate information into North Korea.** Part of the mission of the Office of the International Religious Freedom is to “assist religious and human rights NGOs in promoting religious freedom.”¹⁶ The U.S. government should support religious NGOs that are broadcasting information on religious matters into North Korea. Many of these operations are often underfunded, but with the support of the U.S. government, they would have the ability to continue broadcasting into North Korea.

Conclusion

The U.S. and the international community cannot afford to be silent about violations of the essential right of North Koreans to practice their faith. The U.S. should be more vocal in its criticism of North Korea and should do more to hold the Kim regime accountable, not just for its human rights atrocities, but for its egregious violations of religious liberty.

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13. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013: Korea, Democratic People's Republic*.

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16. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “Religious Freedom,” <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/> (accessed April 7, 2015).