

Persecution of Christians in North Korea

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Recent Developments

When North Korea released the report of Kim Jong-il's death on 19 December 2011, Christians throughout the world held their breath. Would the thousands of Christians imprisoned in Kim Jong-il's death camps finally be allowed to go free, or would new leadership continue to perpetuate the same anti-Christian policies?

After much international speculation, North Korean television announced that the new 'Supreme Leader' would be Kim Jong-un, son of the deceased leader. Hardly anything is known about Kim Jong-un, who is presumed to be around twenty-seven years of age.

It remains uncertain how much actual power Kim Jong-un wields. Does he control the nation's nuclear arsenal, or is he simply a figurehead for a military oligarchy? Whatever the answer is to these questions, it became clear throughout January 2012 that little will be changing in this East Asian police state.

On 11 January reports began to leak out that Kim Jong-un's government was systematically sentencing to hard labour anyone who did not cry during the organized mourning periods following his father's death. Those who cried but whose tears did not appear genuine are also reportedly being sent to the camps.

Although the human rights violations of Kim Jong Il rivals that of Hitler and Stalin, the majority of Westerners are unaware of what is happening there. Even in the media coverage Kim Jong-il received after his death, his crimes were continually downplayed and received only minimal coverage.

The Late Kim Jong-il: Profile of a Tyrant

The late Kim Jong-il came to power in 1994 following the death of his father, Kim Il-sung (1912 – 1994), who had been helped by the Soviets to found the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Like his father before him, Kim Jong-il used a cult of personality to solidify his position as absolute dictator.

From a young age, North Koreans were taught to revere Kim Jong-il as a god, while many even believed their 'Dear Leader' could control the weather through his moods. (Those in positions of power and influence generally know that the whole thing is a sham, but they have powerful financial incentives to keep the show going.)

According to legend, neither Kim Jong-il nor his father were born of natural generation, but placed directly by God on the top of Baekdu mountain bordering China and North Korea. In

turn each baby rolled down the slope of Baekdu onto the Korean side, blessing the nation with his presence ever since.

Under Kim Jong-il's regime, homes were installed with radios constantly broadcasting government propaganda, while the image of their 'dear leader' was erected and venerated in almost every public and private place.

The late Kim Jong-il advanced his father's race-based nationalism, a philosophy that associated foreign religions with foreign races. While opposed to all religions in general, Kim Jong-il believed that Christianity was a particularly harmful threat to his power. North Koreans still recall how in the early 50s thousands of Christians fled the country because of the War with the South – a fact that is taken as confirmation that Christians are disloyal to the nation.

Starving His People

It was not just the Christians who suffered under Kim Jong-il's seventeen-year dictatorship. Food shortages plagued his tenure, thanks to his mismanagement of the nation's resources.

Given the scarcity of good agricultural land, as well as the fact that the government is responsible for feeding and financing the world's fifth largest military, it is impossible for North Korean farmers to produce enough to feed their 24 million population. Other nations with cold, mountainous terrain like North Korea can compensate for this through trade, importing food to meet their needs. However, Kim Jong-il has continued his father's philosophy of radical self-sufficiency known as *juche*. Since this philosophy necessitates that the nation be entirely self-sufficient, farmers were required to produce enough to feed the whole population.

The situation was made worse in the mid 90's when massive floods destroyed up to 15% of the country's already scarce farmland. At that point, Kim Jong-il did the worst thing he could have done: he punished the farmers by withholding food from them in the distributions. Predictably, farmers began to secretly hoard huge quantities of their own grain, leaving even less for everyone else.

Some aid did arrive through the United Nation's World Food Program, yet this did not penetrate beyond the capital city of Pyongyang, where it helped to feed the wealthy, the military and the government elite. Meanwhile, the poor were left to starve.

Even as an estimated 1 to 3 million people were starving, with malnutrition effecting one in every three children, Kim Jong-il and his favoured officials enjoyed a luxuriously rich diet. On his personal train, it was reported that one could "order any dish of Russian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and French cuisine," while the dictator once personally spent more than \$800,000 on Hennessy cognac in a single year.

In 2009, with the nation again facing a severe famine, Kim Jong-Il called for a '100-day battle' to strengthen the economy. What this meant in practice was that everyone had to go to work on state farms as slaves. Those found on the street without a valid reason were immediately shipped off to concentration camps. This resulted in many fathers being unable to provide for their families, and in the Hwangae province it was normal to see children lying

dead in the streets. Some parents began working illegally at night to provide for their children before reporting back to the state jobs in the morning.

Atheism in Action

In North Korea, if anyone is caught carrying a Bible, it is impossible to save your life short of divine intervention. Those who get executed are the lucky ones as punishment often also includes the imprisonment and torture of a Christian's mother, father, sisters, brothers, children and grandchildren.

Putting into action their philosophy of militant atheism, the North Korea's National Security Agency stops at no limit to hunt down Christians, including pretending to be believers in order to infiltrate their underground prayer meetings. One former NSA agent reported that they are trained to look for signs of faith in Christ such as "a person who remains silent with closed eyes and meditates, or when habitual smokers or drinkers quit smoking or drinking all of a sudden."

It is estimated that at least a quarter of all the Christians in North Korea have been incarcerated in prison camps, where inmates face everything from starvation to beatings to Nazi-style gas chambers to experimental torture techniques that defy comprehension. Inhuman experiments have even been known to be performed on babies that come to the camps or are illegally born there.

Many North Korean Christians have found refuge by fleeing to neighbouring China, where between 30,000 and 300,000 refugees now reside in secret. However, if any of these refugees are caught, they are immediately sent home where they face certain death.

In recent years the North Korean government has found that they can save money by simply shooting those who have been condemned. This has led to a decrease in the number of death camps. Nevertheless, the American State Department can confirm the existence of at least two death camps which still operate, populated by political prisoners and Christians. (This does not include the less severe camps where it is possible for strong people to survive but where the death toll is still exceptionally high.)

By listening to the stories of prison guards who have defected, and comparing their accounts with former prisoners who have successfully escaped to China and conducted secret interviews, we know that the following procedures permeate the detention systems:

- water torture
- motionless-kneeling for long periods (detainees who move while they are supposed to be kneeling motionless are handcuffed from the upper bars of their cells with their feet suspended off the floor)
- beating prisoners to death
- sleep deprivation
- cutting off women's breasts
- forcing detainees to beat each other
- breaking fingers

- making prisoners watch other prisoners being executed and then forcing them to throw stones at the corpses
- working prisoners to death through hard labour
- forcing prisoners to live in permanent situations of deliberately contrived semi-starvation
- placing prisoners in a 1.5-meter-square (16.5-feet-square) punishment cell for a week or more, where they are unable to sit up or lie down
- forcing prisoners to remain for long periods in the cold
- raping women with tools until they are dead
- routine infanticide and forced abortions, including stamping on the necks of babies until they die.

In addition to the above, documents smuggled out by defectors reveal routine chemical experimentation on human beings. One document from 2002, stamped “top secret”, reads: “The above person is transferred from ... camp number 22 for the purpose of human experimentation of liquid gas for chemical weapons.”

Escape to China

When researching for this article, I had the opportunity to interview one South Korean Christian, whom we will call Jin-ho, who befriended a number of North Korean refugees who had escaped. He told me about the time he met a woman in her 30s, whom we will call Chin-ho. At the time she was living in China, terrified of being discovered and sent back to certain death.

Chin-ho had made her first attempt to escape in the 90s, in order to save her little son’s life from the grip of the famine then gripping the town of Musan where they lived. The first two attempts to escape ended in failure and on the third attempt her son drowned in the Duman river bordering the two countries. Despite Chin-ho’s grief at losing her son, she had no choice but to press on.

Immediately upon entering China, Chin-ho started looking for a Korean-Chinese church, having been told by friends in North Korea, “if you ever succeed in crossing the Duman river into China, you should look for Christians. They will help you.”

When Jin-ho met Chin-ho, she was being protected by Chinese Christians. Although she was relatively safe, she had to remain in constant hiding for fear of being discovered and sent back. Eager to help, Jin-ho collected enough money to hire brokers who arranged to smuggle her into South Korea, where she lives to this day.

PRAY: that God bring a miracle of deliverance in this country which is a relic of the Cold War era. Ask for the Lord’s provision on those who are suffering even worse atrocities than those occurring under Islamic regimes and arguably even more challenging than what the early Christians faced at the hands of Rome. Ask the Lord to grant them victory over their enemies. Pray for the missionaries who have been secretly labouring to bring Bibles and comfort to our North Korean brothers and sisters, as well as those churches in China that hide escapees.

Although the North Korean government has been waging war against their own citizens to degrees that make last year's trouble in Libya and Egypt seem insignificant by comparison, these atrocities have been largely ignored in the West, which continues to focus its attention on the Middle East and North Africa. Pray that as North Korea has been in the news more recently that these issues would come more to the international limelight.

WRITE: to your MP and ask him to ask the Foreign Secretary what he is doing to help Christians in North Korea. Ask when the UK and the rest of the West is going to start to voice concerns and do a bit of sabre-rattling about the North Koreans "killing their own people"?

Also write to the ambassador for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 73 Gunnersbury Avenue, London W5 4LP. Protest the treatment of Christians in North Korea, specifically mentioning some of the abuses stated above. Ask him to urge the country to implement the recommendations made to it by the U.N. Human Rights Committee in July 2001 and by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in April 2003.

Also write to the Chinese embassy in London and ask them to stop repatriating North Korean refugees. Contact the Chinese ambassador at 49-51 Portland Place London W1B 1JL.

READ: Deut. 7:21-23; 2 Chron. 7:13-14; Ps. 9:8, 33:12, 37:12-15, 58, 59:5-10, 60:11; Prov. 1:24-33, 11:5-8 & 21, 12:7, 24:11-12; 1 Sam. 2:10; Mt. 5:10-12; Lk. 6:22-23; 2 Thess. 1:9-10, 3:2; 1 Pet. 4:12-14; 2 Pet. 2:12-13.