



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### **Korea, Democratic People's Republic of**

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief"; however, in practice the Government severely restricted religious freedom, including organized religious activity, except that which is supervised tightly by officially recognized groups linked to the Government. Genuine religious freedom does not exist.

There was no change in the extremely poor level of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The regime continued to repress unauthorized religious groups. Recent defector, missionary, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports indicate that religious persons engaging in proselytizing in the country, those who have ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border in the People's Republic of China (China), and specifically, those repatriated from China and found to have been in contact with foreigners or missionaries outside the country, have been arrested and subjected to harsh penalties. Defectors continued to allege that they witnessed the arrests and execution of members of underground Christian churches by the regime in prior years. Due to the inaccessibility and inability to gain timely information, the continuation of this activity during the time period covered by this report remained difficult to verify. The Government allowed foreigners to attend government-sponsored religious services.

No information was available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom.

The U.S. government did not have diplomatic relations with the country. Since 2001 the Secretary has designated the country a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government raised its concerns about the deplorable state of human rights in the country with other countries and in multilateral fora.

The Government does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other invited guests freedom of movement that would enable them to fully assess human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses. This report is based on information from interviews, press reports, nongovernmental organization reports, missionary and refugee testimony obtained over the past decade, and supplemented where possible by information drawn from more recent reports from visitors to the country and representatives of nongovernmental organizations working on the Chinese border. Refugee testimony is often dated because of the time lapse between refugee departures from the country and contact with NGOs able to document human rights conditions. The report cites specific sources and time frames wherever possible, and reports are corroborated to the extent possible. While limited in detail, the information in this report is indicative of the situation with regard to religious freedom in the country in recent years.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 47,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at 22.7 million. The number of religious believers was unknown but was estimated by the Government to be ten thousand Protestants, ten thousand Buddhists, and four thousand Catholics. Estimates by South Korean church-related groups were considerably higher. In addition, the Chondogyo Young Friends Party, a government-approved group based on a traditional religious movement, had approximately forty thousand practitioners. According to a South Korean press report, in 2002 the chairman of the Association of North Korean Catholics stated that the Catholic community in the country had no priests but held weekly prayer services at the Changchung Catholic Church in Pyongyang. According to state-controlled media reports, following the death of Pope John Paul II in April 2005, a memorial service was held at this church, and services were also held at family worship places across the country.

In Pyongyang, there were reportedly three Christian churches: two Protestant churches under lay leadership--the Pongsu and Chilgok churches--and the Changchung Roman Catholic Church. The three churches have reportedly been open since 1988. However, these churches are tightly controlled by the state. One of the Protestant churches is dedicated to the memory of former leader Kim Il Sung's mother, Kang Pan Sok, who was a Presbyterian deaconess. The Korean Presbyterian Church, under an agreement with the North Korean Christian League, has reportedly been building a new church in Pyongyang.

In its July 2002 report to the U.N. Human Rights Committee, the country reported the existence of 500 "family worship centers." The country did not define the term; however, observers stated that "family worship centers" were part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation, while "underground churches" were not part of the officially recognized church structure and were not recognized by the Government. NGOs estimated that there may be between 500 and 1,000 underground churches. The regime has not allowed outsiders the access necessary to confirm such claims. Some older citizens who were religious believers before 1953 reportedly have maintained their faith in secret over the years.

There were an estimated 300 Buddhist temples. Most were regarded as cultural relics, but religious activity was permitted in some. A few Buddhist temples and relics have been renovated or restored in recent years under a broad effort aimed at "preserving the Korean nation's

cultural heritage." In October 2005, tourists from the Republic of Korea and other international tourists were permitted to view the reconstruction of the Shingye or Singyesa (or Holy Valley) Temple, which was destroyed during the Korean War of 1950-53. The reconstruction was funded by the ROK government and foreign tourists. It was expected to be completed in 2007. A South Korean monk, the first to permanently reside in North Korea, has lived at the temple since 2004, but was expected to serve primarily as a guide for visiting tourists rather than a pastor caring for Buddhists living in the area. According to the country's media accounts, renovation of the Ryongthong temple in Kaesong was completed in early 2005. A restoration ceremony was held in October 2005 with participants from North and South Korea and Japan. Foreign diplomats resident in Pyongyang who visited the site and were told that the two monks living there may soon be joined by more. State-controlled press reported on several occasions that Buddhist ceremonies had been carried out in various locations. Official reporting also linked descriptions of such ceremonies with the broader theme of Korean unification.

The Russian Orthodox Church continued to build an edifice in Pyongyang, reportedly commissioned by Kim Jong-Il after he visited an Orthodox cathedral in Russia in 2002. The building, the first of its kind in the country, is scheduled to open by August 2006. According to a Russian press report, a Russian priest served the cathedral.

Several foreigners residing in Pyongyang attended Korean-language services at the Christian churches on a regular basis. Some foreigners who had visited the country stated that church services appeared staged and contained political content supportive of the regime, in addition to religious themes. Foreign legislators attending services in Pyongyang in previous years noted that congregations arrived at and departed services as groups on tour buses.

Outsiders had limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups, but was generally assumed they are monitored closely.

According to the 2006 Korean Institute for National Unifications (KINU) White Paper, there was no evidence that any of the central religious organizations maintained branches in the provinces.

Prior to 2003, many foreign religious leaders visited the country. However, after the Government expelled U.N. inspectors from the country in 2003, the number of religious visitors appeared to decrease.

In April 2006, the Catholic archdiocese of Seoul sent a sixty-one member delegation to the country, led by Mgr. Thomas Aquinas Choi Chang-hwa, the director of the National Reconciliation Committee. During the visit, the Catholic Association of North Korea proposed a joint visit to the Vatican with the Seoul archdiocese, which the association said it hoped would lead to an audience with the pope.

In spring 2006, Bishop Lazarus You Heung-sik of the ROK Taejon diocese also visited the and established an agreement that all Catholic humanitarian aid to the North would be directed through South Korean Caritas and discussed through inter-Korean cooperation channels.

In June 2005 Venerable Beop Jang, head of the largest ROK Buddhist group and at the time the chair of the national council on religious leaders in that country, traveled to Pyongyang to mark the fifth anniversary of the Inter-Korean summit.

Episcopal pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, announced in July 2006 that he had been invited by the Government to preach to an audience of fifteen thousand Christians in the country in March 2007. Warren was to visit the country in July to plan the 2007 preaching trip, but the planning trip was postponed following the Government's July 4-5 missile launches.

In October 2005, a delegation from the DPRK Christian Federation attended an international solidarity meeting in Frankfurt, Germany, sponsored by the German Evangelical Church, according to a Government media report.

In December 2005 citizens who were expected to staff Pyongyang's Russian Orthodox Cathedral when it opens traveled to Vladivostok for training in ordination and other rituals.

Foreign religious activity frequently is connected with humanitarian relief, and overseas religious relief organizations have been active in responding to the country's food crisis. An overseas Buddhist group, Join Together Society, continued to operate a factory in the Rajin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone to produce food for preschool children, which it has done since 1998. A noodle factory established by contributions from Catholics of the Seoul archdiocese opened in 2001. The Unification Church, which had business ventures in the country, was believed to be constructing an interfaith religious facility in Pyongyang.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief"; however, in practice the Government severely restricted religious freedom, including discouraging organized religious activities except those controlled by officially recognized groups. Genuine religious freedom does not exist. The constitution also stipulates that religion "should not be used for purposes of dragging in foreign powers or endangering public security." Ownership of Bibles or other religious materials is reportedly illegal and may be punished by imprisonment or execution.

The cult of personality of Kim Jong Il and his father remained important ideological underpinnings of the regime, at times seeming to resemble tenets of a state religion. Faced with famine and the succession process in the mid-1990s, Kim Jong Il's regime increasingly emphasized a "military first" policy to gradually replace *juche* (often described as extreme self-reliance) as the de facto ruling logic. However, *juche* remained an important ideological concept. Indoctrination was intended to ensure loyalty to the system and the leadership, as well as

conformity to the state's ideology and authority. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority, exemplifying the state and society's needs, is regarded as opposition to the national interest and may result in severe punishment.

Although the country's first constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, the Government identified large numbers of religiously active persons as "counterrevolutionaries," both during and immediately after the Korean War. Many of these individuals were subsequently killed or imprisoned in concentration camps.

The Government later codified the oppression of religion in the early 1970s through a constitutional revision on "freedom of antireligious activity." The Government began to moderate its religious discrimination policies in the late 1980s, when it launched a campaign highlighting Kim Il Sung's "benevolent politics." As part of this campaign, the regime allowed the formation of several government-sponsored religious organizations. Foreigners who have met with representatives of these organizations believe that some members are genuinely religious but note that others appear to know little about religious dogma or teaching. According to NGOs, these religious organizations have been organized primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organizations or international aid agencies, rather than as instruments to guarantee and support free religious activities. A constitutional change in 1992 authorized religious gatherings, provided for "the right to build buildings for religious use," and deleted the clause regarding freedom of antireligious propaganda.

Civic groups and religious organizations in the ROK continued to be active in efforts to promote inter-Korean reconciliation. During the reporting period, Buddhist and Christian groups from the ROK traveled to the country for discussions and cultural exchanges with their counterparts in the country and ended the meetings in joint prayer sessions for unification. These exchanges generally received favorable coverage in the state-controlled media; however, their true effect on religious freedom in the country was unclear.

Several schools for religious education exist in the country. There are three-year colleges for training Protestant and Buddhist clergy. A religious studies program also was established at Kim Il Sung University in 1989; its graduates usually worked in the foreign trade sector. In 2000 a Protestant seminary was reopened with assistance from foreign missionary groups. Critics, including at least one foreign sponsor, charged that the Government opened the seminary only to facilitate reception of assistance funds from foreign faith-based NGOs. The Federation of Chosun Christianity, a religious group believed to be controlled by the Government, contributed to the curriculum used by the seminary. In September 2003 construction reportedly was completed of the Pyongyang Theological Academy, a graduate institution that trains pastors and evangelists.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The KINU 2006 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea indicated that the regime utilizes authorized religious entities for external propaganda and political purposes and that citizens are strictly barred from entering their places of worship. Ordinary citizens consider such sites to be primarily "sightseeing spots for foreigners." KINU also concluded that the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicates that ordinary citizens still do not enjoy religious freedom.

Little is known about the day-to-day life of religious persons in the country. Members of government-controlled religious groups did not appear to suffer discrimination. In fact, some reports claimed, and circumstantial evidence suggested, that many, if not most, have been organized by the regime for propaganda and political purposes, including meeting with foreign religious visitors. There have also been reports that funds and goods which are given to government-approved churches were channeled to the Korean Workers Party (the only party in the country). There are unconfirmed reports that nonreligious children of religious believers may be employed at midlevels of the Government. In the past, such individuals suffered broad discrimination with sometimes severe penalties or even imprisonment. Members of underground churches connected to border missionary activity were regarded as subversive elements.

In 2001 the U.N. Human Rights Committee noted "with regret" that the Government was unable to provide up-to-date information about religious freedom in the country. The committee also noted its concern regarding the authorities' practices with respect to religious freedom, "in the light of information available to the committee that religious practice is repressed or strongly discouraged." The committee requested that the Government provide up-to-date information regarding the number of citizens belonging to religious communities and the number of places of worship, as well as "practical measures taken by the authorities to guarantee freedom of exercise of religious practice" by the religious communities in the country. In 2002, the country submitted a report to the U.N. Human Rights Committee. In the report, the country claimed that there were few religious adherents in the country because "Many of them were killed during the three-year-long Korean War. Old people died of age and young people seldom believe in religion."

The KINU 2006 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea concluded, "North Korea utilizes religious activities only for political and economic goals; namely, to improve its international image, to secure humanitarian assistance from overseas, and to earn foreign currency."

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government deals harshly with all opponents, including those who engage in religious practices deemed unacceptable to the regime. Religious and human rights groups outside of the country have provided numerous, usually unconfirmed, reports that members of underground churches have been beaten, arrested, tortured, or killed because of their religious beliefs in prior years. In recent years, defectors who had been in prison stated that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs generally were treated worse than other inmates. A refugee who arrived in South Korea in 2001 claimed that he was tortured for his Christian beliefs after a Bible was discovered in his belongings.

Over the years, there have been unconfirmed reports from a few defectors alleging the testing on human subjects of a variety of chemical and biological agents up through the early 1990s. Some accounts have alleged that political or religious detainees were specifically selected for this testing. The Government effectively bars outside observers from investigating such reports.

NGOs, defectors, and refugees have reported that the Government executed opponents of the regime in recent years. Executed individuals reportedly included some targeted for religious activities such as proselytism and contact with missionaries while in China.

Defector reports indicated that the regime has increased repression and persecution of unauthorized religious groups in recent years, but access to information on current conditions was limited. Despite these restrictions, reports indicated that contacts with religious personnel both inside the country and across the border in China appeared to be increasing. Reports from NGOs, defectors, and missionaries indicated that persons engaging in religious proselytizing, those who had ties to overseas evangelical groups operating across the border in China, and, specifically, those repatriated and found to have contacted Christian missionaries outside the country have been arrested and subjected to harsh punishment.

During the reporting period, ROK media reports, including testimony from a 2003 defector, indicated that citizens who received help from churches inside China were considered political criminals and received harsher treatment. This included imprisonment, prolonged detention without charge, torture, or execution. The Government reportedly was concerned that faith-based South Korean relief and refugee assistance efforts along the northeast border of China had both humanitarian and political goals, including overthrow of the regime, and alleged that these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. The official Korean Workers Party newspaper criticized "imperialists and reactionaries" for trying to use ideological and cultural infiltration, including religion, to destroy socialism from within.

In March 2006, the Government reportedly sentenced Son Jong Nam to death for working as a spy for the ROK. However, NGOs claimed that the Government issued the sentence against Son Jong Nam on the basis of his contacts with Christian groups in China, his proselytizing activities in the country and alleged sharing of information with his brother in the ROK. Because the country effectively bars outside observers from investigating such reports, it was not possible to verify the country's claims about Son Jong Nam's activities or determine whether he had been executed.

In April 2006 a ROK court sentenced alleged agent Yoo Young-hwa to ten years of imprisonment for his role in the abduction of Kim Dong Shik. Kim, a missionary who worked with North Korean refugees in China, disappeared from his home near the China-DPRK border in 2000. He allegedly was kidnapped by North Korean agents for assisting in the resettlement of DPRK refugees in the ROK. Because the country effectively bars outside observers from investigating such reports, it was not possible to determine Kim's whereabouts.

NGOs reported as recently as 2001 that the Government conducts "education sessions" to identify Christian leaders so that they could be apprehended in periodic crackdowns.

News reports in recent years indicated that the Government has increased the reward for information on any person doing missionary work in the Chinese border region.

There was no reliable information on the number of religious detainees or prisoners, but there were unconfirmed reports that many people were detained for their religious beliefs and activities. Prison conditions were harsh; starvation and forced labor were common. In the past, visitors to the country observed prisoners being marched in leg irons, metal collars, or shackles. Sanitation was poor, and prisoners reported having no change of clothing during months of detention.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There was no information available on societal attitudes toward religious freedom. The regime does not allow representatives of foreign governments, journalists, or other visitors the freedom of movement that would enable them to assess fully religious freedom in the country.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government did not have diplomatic relations with the country and has no official presence there. Since 2001 the Secretary has designated the country a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The U.S. government regularly raises religious freedom concerns about the country in multilateral fora and bilaterally with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill publicly stated that dialogue on the country's human rights record will be a part of any future normalization process between the country and the U.S. government. In April 2005 several U.S. State Department officials testified before the House International Relations Committee on the country's human rights record and U.S. government efforts to implement the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA). They and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom have repeatedly raised awareness of the deplorable human rights conditions in the country through speeches before U.S. audiences.

In response to serious concerns over the country's human rights record, Congress enacted the 2004 NKHRA. In August 2005 the president appointed Jay Lefkowitz as Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea in keeping with one provision of the NKHRA. Since his appointment, Special Envoy Lefkowitz has urged other countries, including the Republic of Korea and Japan, to join the growing international campaign urging the country to address its human rights conditions and abuses of religious freedom.

In April 2005, for the third consecutive year, the U.S. government worked with other concerned governments to win passage of a resolution condemning the country's deplorable human rights record at the 61st Session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. The resolution expressed "deep concern about reports of systemic, widespread and grave violations of human rights...and note(d) with regret that the authorities...have not created the necessary conditions to permit the international community to verify these reports...." The resolution also called on the Government to fulfill its obligations under human rights instruments to which it is a party and ensure that humanitarian organizations and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK have free access to the country. In November 2005, the U.S. co-sponsored a similar resolution before the U.N. General Assembly that condemned the country's human rights record, marking the first time the General Assembly passed such a resolution.

In 2005 the U.S. Department of State provided the National Endowment for Democracy with a \$496,000 grant to improve and expand monitoring and reporting on human rights conditions in the country. The U.S. Department of State also provided a grant to Freedom House for a series of conferences and other activities dedicated to pressuring the regime to end its abuses. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America also provides regular Korean-language broadcasting. U.S. government policy allows U.S. citizens to travel to the country, and a number of churches and religious groups have organized efforts to alleviate suffering caused by shortages of food and medicine.

The country remains subject to the economic restrictions of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment on international trade. Following CPC designation in 2001, these restrictions were also tied to the country's status under the International Religious Freedom Act.

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