



## Religion and Belief in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: A Report of the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief.

*"We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer*



*"the gravity, scale and nature of these violations reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world...there is almost a complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion... the State considers the spread of Christianity a particularly serious threat."*

**– Report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, 2014, leading to 111 nations voting for a referral of North Korea to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.**



*This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this Report are those of the Group.*

*This Report was researched for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief by Open Doors UK & Ireland. This Report was made possible by financial support from the Stakeholders of the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, as listed on the final page. The Report was written by Zoe Smith and edited by Stephen Rand.*

## Foreword

I passionately believe that there must be no coercion of belief or unbelief: following the religion or belief of one's choice, and listening to the still small voice of the conscience, is a crucial part of the inherent dignity of what makes us human.

This is why, in the twenty-first century, I joined the rest of the world in horror at the reports coming out of the DPRK, including the brutal state-sponsored oppression of followers of religion. This is a country that has suffered severe oppression in its past at the hand of its neighbours. Now it oppresses its own people, suppressing their precious internal freedom of thought, conscience and religion. For the last sixty years-plus it has committed egregious human rights violations – the details of which would turn the stomach of even the most hardened person. This includes banishing those followers of religion to remote places, incarcerating and subjecting them to torture in labour camps, or murdering Christians for merely possessing a Bible.

The DPRK is one of the most closed nations in the world. Resigned for many years as an impossible case, the international community is finally beginning to afford it the attention it so desperately deserves. Nearly seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz, it is inconceivable that the DPRK is still able to operate prison and labour camps that have been regularly compared to the concentration camps of the Nazis. The human suffering is immense and we have a moral and political duty to do all we can to bring this devastation to an end and hold people to account.

I would like to offer my particular thanks to Lord Eames, Jim Shannon MP and other members of the APPG who participated in the oral hearings for this Report, and also to Lord Alton, Kay Carter, Clare Lay and James Burt. Especial thanks are also due to all those who gave written or oral evidence: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the founder of HH\_Katacombs, Rev. Hanna Park, Marie-Laure Verdier-Shin, Professor Colin McCulloch, Joo-il Kim, Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, Benedict Rogers, Professor Hazel Smith, and those who could not be named for security reasons.

As Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, I commend this report to you. Lord Alton of Liverpool, who chaired this inquiry, often speaks of his conviction that *"when small stones move, landslides happen."* This report is one such small stone, joining others around the globe to create a landslide; a landslide which must ultimately see the freedom of the people of the DPRK from a lifetime of oppression.

***Baroness Elizabeth Berridge of the Vale of Catmose, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief.***

## Introduction

In February 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) released a 400 page report documenting chronic, wide-spread human rights abuses in the DPRK. The COI concludes that: *"there is no effective freedom of religious belief in the DPRK. Such belief is treated as basically incompatible with, and hostile to, the state-sponsored personality cult surrounding Kim Il-sung and his descendants. Countless numbers of persons in the DPRK who attempt to practise their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death."*<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom concluded that it was necessary to write a report devoted to this particular aspect of the human rights abuses in the DPRK. The All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief was established in June 2012 and published its first report in May 2013. It is supported by groups from across the religion and belief spectrum, as well as interested individuals, and groups campaigning for human rights. The All Party Parliamentary Group aims to champion the right of all people across the world to enjoy the freedom bestowed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It was founded on the principle that it would direct its attention where the need is greatest and the possibility for change is highest.

This Report seeks to provide an overview of the situation facing religion in the DPRK, including the history of faith on the peninsula, the chronic abuse of followers of religion in the DPRK where Kim Il-sung is reported to have said that *"religious people should die to cure their habit"*,<sup>2</sup> possible signs of hope and suggestions of ways forward for the international community to address the seemingly implacable situation.

The DPRK is one of the most closed states in the world. Therefore, it presents an almost unique challenge in obtaining up-to-date and verifiable statistics and witness statements. Nevertheless, the inquiry was able to hear testimonies from DPRK refugees, NGOs, experts and academics, and believes that the evidence it received is credible. For security purposes, a number of these witnesses' identities have been withheld.

Furthermore, the majority of the evidence concerning religion in the DPRK details the situation of Christians in that country. This is partially because many of those who attempt to engage with the DPRK are Christians, but also because, as the COI reported, *"the spread of Christianity is considered by the DPRK a particularly serious threat"*<sup>3</sup> and therefore Christians are subjected to especially harsh treatment and warrant the particular interest of human rights groups. This is evident throughout the Report but, nonetheless, this Report aims to address the overall treatment of religions in the DPRK.

---

<sup>1</sup> Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2014 <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx> para, 258 [accessed 23.11.14]

<sup>2</sup> Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2014, para, 253

<sup>3</sup> Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 2014, para, 264,

## Executive Summary

Korea has a rich religious heritage. Buddhism, Confucianism and Shamanism have been practiced on the Korean peninsula for centuries with other religions, such as Christianity and Tonghak arriving much later – Christianity first in the 1600s and Tonghak in the 1800s. Such was the widespread adherence to Christianity in North Korea that, by the twentieth century, Pyongyang was known as “*the Jerusalem of the East.*” Pope John Paul II said that the Korean church was “*unique in the story of the Church*”

Since the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 religion has been restricted and then systematically suppressed in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Before the Korean War of 1950-1953, Kim Il-sung’s policies squeezed religious organisations, annexing their sources of finance and restricting their ability to meet. Increasingly, those who refused to collaborate with the regime were banished to remote, hostile parts of the country, imprisoned in labour or prison camps, or killed. Those who could fled South to the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Atrocities were committed against religious groups during the Korean War, particularly against Christians, such as massacres, torture and forced death marches. Bishops, ministers, priests, nuns and lay people were routinely murdered. Atrocities were also reported by self-styled Christian groups, and the predominant religion of the ROK’s Western allies completed the creation of religious and political associations during the war.

After 1953 the DPRK retreated into isolationism and Kim Il-sung focussed on consolidating his rule by wiping out opposition, including religious groups. From 1953 to the early 1970s it appeared as if religion had been completely wiped from the DPRK. “*(We) cannot carry such religiously active people along our march toward a communist society. Therefore, we have tried and executed all religious leaders higher than a deacon in the Protestant and Catholic churches. Among other religiously active people, those deemed malignant were all put to trial. Among ordinary religious believers, those who recanted were given jobs while those who did not were held in prison camps.*” – Kim Il-sung, 1962.

During this time, the *songbun* system was introduced to the DPRK. This categorised citizens into three groups, with an additional 51 sub-groups. These groups were ‘core class, wavering class and hostile class’. Followers of religion were assigned to the lower rungs of the ‘hostile class’ and banished to remote areas, labour or prison camps. Religion was forced underground with followers meeting secretly and at great risk. One refugee described how he and his wife hid under a blanket to sing hymns, whereas another reported how their friend was taken to one of the most notorious prison camps in the DPRK after being seen saying grace over dinner.

Furthermore, a system of three-generational guilt was introduced, meaning that if one person were found to be religious, three generations of their family would suffer as a result. As in the cases of Ms Seo Keum Ok and Ms Ryi Hyuk Ok. Ms Seo Keum Ok was arrested in 2009 for distributing Bibles and suffered ‘indescribable torture’. Her husband was also imprisoned and her children went missing. Also in 2009, Ms Ryi Hyuk Ok was executed for distributing Bibles. Her husband, children and parents were sent to a political prison camp.

When in a camp, religious followers and particularly Christians are subject to especially harsh treatment. One woman, arrested for her faith, was “*assigned to pull the cart used to remove excrement from the prison latrines. Several times the guards made her lick off excrement that had spilled over in order to humiliate and discipline her.*”

Persecution of religious groups is well-known. Of all the refugees interviewed by the Database Centre for North Korean Human Rights, 99.7% said that there is no religious freedom in North Korea. The interviewees' testimonies showed that victims of religious persecution were 45.5% Protestant, 0.2% Catholic, 1.3% Buddhist, 1.7% no religion, 1.1% 'others' and 50.3% unknown. Many religious people are discovered when forcibly repatriated to the DPRK after trying to flee. More often than not, they are repatriated from China, in violation of the international principle of *non-refoulement*.

The DPRK has instituted its own national ideology, *Juche*, which merged with what is known as 'Kimilsungism' in the 1970s to create a quasi-religious ideology. All DPRK citizens are demanded to adhere to *Juche*, which has no tolerance of separate belief systems, thereby providing further fodder for religious persecution. With the introduction of The Ten Principles in 1974, DPRK citizens were commanded to "*Accept the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung's revolutionary thought as your belief and take the Great Leader's instructions as your creed.*"

Despite this bleak outlook, there have been some visible displays of religion in the DPRK. In the early 1970s various national religious institutions appeared. Furthermore, from the late 1980s, state-sponsored churches were erected in Pyongyang and Buddhist temples were permitted to hold national celebrations. The language of the Constitution and also the dictionary definitions around religion have also changed, dropping many of the negative connotations therein.

The implication of these developments is hotly debated. Many argue that they are no more than Potemkin-style attempts to convince the international community that there is religious freedom in the DPRK in order to encourage investment and to appease international criticism. Indeed, there are reports of church congregations being bussed in for services or Buddhist guides hurriedly donning a tonsure when seeing a tourist group.

However, others suggest that these changes may point to a very slight opening for at least those historic religious followers in the DPRK and that it points to a comprehension of the importance of the right to freedom of religion or belief to the international community. Nonetheless, any understanding that this implies is directly at odds with the continued systemic oppression of religious groups within the DPRK.

The inquiry concluded that there is systemic oppression of religious freedom within the DPRK and that Christians in particular are targeted by the regime and subjected to crimes against humanity. Furthermore, the visible changes in policy in the 1970s-1990s, which could be developed, did not point to an overall relaxation of pressure on religious groups in the DPRK. Therefore, there is need for accountability and referral to the International Criminal Court. However, the inquiry unanimously agreed that accountability in itself was not enough. Therefore, the push for an ICC referral must also be coupled with long-term, strategic engagement with the DPRK – ranging from informal tribunals to fact-finding missions, educational and cultural exchanges, breaking of the information blockade, persistent critical engagement on human rights, the re-institution of The Six Party Talks, and the development of "off the tracks" approaches, especially by investing in the diaspora of around 30,000 North Korean escapees now living outside the DPRK. Foremost, it is vital that we maintain momentum and public pressure on the DPRK so that it can no longer perpetrate such abuses with impunity.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The inquiry concluded that the DPRK systemically oppresses freedom of religion or belief and that Christians in particular are targeted by the regime and subjected to chronic human rights abuses, amounting to crimes against humanity. Although there were some visible changes in policy in the 1970s-1990s, which could be further developed, this did not point to an overall relaxation of pressure on religious groups in the DPRK. Therefore, there is need for accountability. However, the inquiry unanimously agreed that accountability in itself was not enough, as any chosen route of accountability must also be coupled with long-term, strategic engagement with the DPRK. Only then will there be transition of the society away from one in which systemic abuses of human rights take place as a matter of course and to one where human rights, including the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief, are protected and upheld. **The inquiry recommends that the UK:**

- Pursue the UN Commission of Inquiry's recommendation of referral to the International Criminal Court;
- Pursue all other recommendations made by the UN Commission of Inquiry;
- The UK Government re-assesses its own "*soft power*" approach in North Korea and places more emphasis on developing and supporting the diaspora of escapees, developing and forming tomorrow's new leaders.
- Thoroughly consider and instigate appropriate alternative justice mechanisms to compliment the International Criminal Court process;
- Proactively support the re-instigation of the Six Party Talks and all other engagement with the ROK;
- Ensure that all discussions on the DPRK at the UN and the EU include human rights and especially the "*orphaned right*" of freedom of religion and belief: Article 18.
- Continue to critically engage with the DPRK bilaterally on human rights with the UK's Ambassador in Pyongyang elevating religious freedom to a high priority;
- Financially and administratively invest in the study of students from the DPRK in the UK, including providing solutions to insurmountable visa requirements;
- Invest in cultural exchanges with the DPRK and in the DPRK diaspora, especially those living in the UK, to equip them to be agents for change in their country;
- Urge the BBC World Service to establish a radio broadcast to the Korean Peninsula, in both Korean and English languages;
- Pursue creative ways of breaking the information blockade, for example through the use of DVDs, mobile phones and USBs;
- Fund or otherwise facilitate further research into the human rights situation in the DPRK, especially on the possibility that genocide has been perpetrated against Christians;
- Increase dialogue with China, encouraging them to end their policies of forcible repatriation and to abide by the principle of *non-refoulement*;
- Provide humanitarian assistance to the people of the DPRK, while insisting on satisfactory levels of independent monitoring.

## A New Day Will Dawn



A North Korean Christian who gave evidence in Parliament and whose wife and children died on the DPRK. He has regularly returned to help other escape.



Lee Hee-ho

Lee Hee-ho, a Methodist, who would become the first lady of the Republic of Korea, described how her Catholic husband, Kim Dae Jung, endured years of imprisonment, torture, assassination attempts and persecution, culminating in the overthrow of brutal military dictatorship and his election as President as: *“truly an Orwellian world of illegal brutality – acting as if they would never have to answer to history of God for their barbarity.”*

**She described the role of the churches in bringing about change and how supporters of democracy were** *“Deprived of any clothing they were mercilessly pummelled with wooden bats, deprived of sleep, and had water poured into their nostrils while hanging upside down like so much beef hanging from hooks in the slaughter house. Listening to these stories of horror, my body shuddered with indescribable indignation and sorrow.”* Kim Dae Jung said *“The intention was to make me go insane. I could hear someone moaning in a room next to me. I was stripped naked and forced to wear worn-out military fatigues. I was threatened with torture.”*

**In considering the testimonies given to our Inquiry we were struck that Christians and others in the DPRK are today enduring what Christians and others once experienced in the South – but that through their suffering, a new day has dawned.**



***"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter" – Dr Martin Luther King***

**With thanks to:**

Ahmadiyya Muslim Association  
Aid to the Church in Need  
British Humanist Association  
The Buddhist Society  
Christian Solidarity Worldwide  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
Coptic Orthodox Church Centre  
Hindu Forum of Great Britain  
Interserve  
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom  
Network of Sikh Organisations  
Open Doors UK & I  
Redeemed Christian Church of God  
Release International  
UK Coptic Organisations

**The All Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom or Belief**  
**Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose**  
**House of Lords**  
**Westminster**  
**London**  
**SW1P 3AD**  
[www.freedomdeclared.org](http://www.freedomdeclared.org)

**FREEDOM  
DECLARED**

December 2014