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## **NORTH KOREA | CSW Urges Pope Francis to Highlight North Koreans Suffering**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today urged Pope Francis to highlight the suffering of the people of North Korea during his Papal visit to South Korea next month and in particular, to speak out for freedom of religion and an end to the severe persecution of Christians living under Kim Jong-Un's regime.

Pope Francis will visit South Korea Aug. 14-18, where he will participate in the Asian Youth Day, a gathering of young Catholics from 29 countries in Asia, and preside over a ceremony for the beatification of 124 Korean martyrs. It's the first Papal visit to South Korea in 25 years, following Pope John Paul II's two visits in 1984 and 1989.

CSW encourages the Pope to take the opportunity to pray for peace on the Korean peninsula, urge respect for human rights, particularly freedom of religion, in North Korea, and to call for worldwide prayer for those suffering for their beliefs in North Korea.

In February, the UN Commission of Inquiry, chaired by Australian Justice Michael Kirby, published its report which states "the gravity, scale and nature" of the violations of human rights in North Korea "reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world." The 400-page report details crimes against humanity including "extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons and the inhumane act of knowingly causing prolonged starvation." It concludes that such crimes against humanity are continuing "because the policies, institutions and patterns of impunity that lie at their heart remain in place."

The inquiry also notes "there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association." It concludes that the regime "considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat" and as a result, "Christians are prohibited from practicing their religion and are persecuted." Severe punishments are inflicted on "people caught practicing Christianity."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We warmly welcome the fact that Pope Francis is visiting South Korea. As he beatifies many of Korea's martyrs from past decades, and brings a message of peace to a divided peninsula still at war, we hope he will also use the influence and goodwill which he has to call for prayer for an end to the desperate and dire suffering of the people of North Korea, and in particular prayer for those who are suffering for their faith in North Korea today. This is a 'carpe diem' moment to provide a voice for the voiceless, in the world's

most closed nation with the worst record of religious freedom, and we hope the Holy Father will seize this opportunity to pray for freedom.”