



9.23.16

NORTH KOREA | Report Finds Freedom of Religion or Belief “Largely Non-Existent”

A new report on freedom of religion or belief in North Korea, released Sept. 23 by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), provides further evidence that freedom of religion or belief is a human right that is “largely non-existent” in the country.

Total Denial: Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea details the persecution of Christians and discrimination against other religions and beliefs including Buddhism and Shamanism.

The report also explores the detention of North Korean refugees in China and the Chinese government’s policy of repatriating them to North Korea. September 23 marks Save North Koreans Day, a global day of action during which people around the world will deliver a letter to Chinese embassies to urge China to change its policy and allow North Koreans safe passage through China to sanctuary in South Korea or beyond.

In 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into human rights in North Korea found that “there is almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association” in North Korea, as well as possible crimes against humanity being perpetrated against the North Korean people. The Commission also noted that the regime in North Korea “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 new report states: “Christians usually practice their faith in secret. If discovered they are subject to detention and then likely taken to prison camps (kwanliso); crimes against them in these camps include extra-judicial killing, extermination, enslavement/forced labor, forcible

transfer of population, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, persecution, enforced disappearance, rape and sexual violence, and other humane acts. Documented incidents include Christians being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges and trampled under-foot.”

Practitioners of other religions, such as Buddhism, Shamanism and the native Korean Cheondoism, which combines elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taosim and Shamanism, also face restrictions and discrimination, but are treated more leniently. Christianity is repressed most harshly because it is viewed as a foreign religion, and Christians are suspected of being spies. In Pyongyang, there are four churches, two Protestant, one Catholic and one Russian Orthodox, but these are widely regarded as Potemkin-style show churches for the benefit of foreign visitors.

Among its recommendations, the report calls for the North Korean government to acknowledge and implement the recommendations of the UN Commission of Inquiry and to allow the UN Independent Experts unhindered access to visit the country. CSW continues to call for North Korea to be referred to the International Criminal Court on account of evidence that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated in the country, or the establishment of an ad-hoc tribunal to ensure accountability.

CSW’s East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, “North Korea is the world’s most closed, repressive State, where the regime is committing crimes against humanity. There is almost total denial of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion. To follow any belief other than total loyalty to the ruling Kim dynasty is to risk very grave punishment, and in some instances, death. Our report aims to shine a light on the darkest corner of the globe and to call on the international community to act. We also urge China to behave responsibly and to cease its policy of forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees, which is tantamount to a death sentence. The time for change is long overdue.”