

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in North Korea—also known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or DPRK—remained among the worst in the world. The North Korean constitution nominally grants freedom of religious belief, but it also prohibits the use of religion for “drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State.” The government treats religion as a threat to the state-propagated ideology known as *Juche*, which preaches “self-reliance and self-development.” Christians are especially vulnerable because the government views them as susceptible to foreign influence. Any expression of religion outside the limited number of state-sponsored houses of worship happens in secret. Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. The possession and distribution of religious texts remains a criminal offense under North Korean law. Due to fear of arrest or persecution, most North Korean underground Christians do not engage in proselytization. The [songbun system](#) classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state; religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class, which limits their access to educational and employment opportunities, as well as other state benefits. In 2019, there were also [reports](#) that the Falun Gong movement, which originated in China, was spreading to North Korea, prompting authorities to initiate a crackdown against Falun Gong practitioners. North Korea has a network of prison camps (*kyohwaso*) and labor training camps (*rodongdanryondaes*) to house an [estimated](#)

[80,000–120,000 prisoners](#) of conscience and other declared “enemies of the state.” Inmates are forced to provide hard labor and suffer poor living conditions, malnutrition, and other abuses. Some experts estimate that the camps hold tens of thousands of Christians. According to [defectors](#), the majority of Christians detained in prison camps were arrested by the Ministry of State Security because they possessed a Bible—which is treated as proof of a political crime. These prison camps do not provide access to religious services; detained Christians must pray silently inside washrooms in order to avoid surveillance.

Meanwhile, authorities on both sides of the Sino-Korean border have [increased monitoring](#) for North Korean refugees, in part to prevent “religious infiltration” from abroad. After the Hong Kong protests in June 2019, the Chinese government started scanning visitor identity cards and making it more difficult for South Korean missionaries and North Korean defectors to move around the border region. In addition, North Korean authorities monitor refugees and defectors deported from China for fear they were exposed to religion or foreign missionaries while outside the country.

There are no formally registered, independent houses of worship in North Korea. The government has established several state-sponsored religious organizations and permits five churches to operate in Pyongyang. However, human rights groups and defectors from the country allege that these institutions exist merely to provide the illusion of religious freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Fill the current vacancy and maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues as a fulltime, independent position at the U.S. Department of State and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
 - Urge the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country; and
 - Instruct the U.S. Agency for Global Media’s Open Technology Fund to prioritize projects related to the dissemination of information in North Korea, including projects that utilize legacy broadcast and nonnetworked digital technologies, which are more difficult for authorities to monitor.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Work with the administration to clarify the conditions under which Congress would approve the partial or complete lifting of certain sanctions under the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 in return for significant progress on denuclearization and commitments to improve religious freedom conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Disappointed UN Security Council Did Not Discuss Religious Freedom in North Korea](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Urges President Trump to Address Religious Freedom Abuses in North Korea](#)

Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. North Koreans had traditionally followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way), which currently are thought to account for an estimated 4 percent and 14 percent of the population, respectively. The country had a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War, with Pyongyang known as the “Jerusalem of the East.” Because of successive crackdowns, the Christian population has shrunk to an estimated less than 1 percent of the total population. Most remaining Christians in North Korea learned about the religion when they fled to China after a devastating famine during the mid-1990s. Although technically illegal, traditional superstitions, such as fortune telling, are widespread.

Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are one of the primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. However, in recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, 1,047 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea in 2019—the lowest number in 18 years. In addition, some human rights advocates have questioned the South Korean government’s commitment to protecting all North Korean defectors. In November, two North Korean fishermen suspected of killing their fellow crew members fled to South Korea. Although South Korean law recognizes North Korean defectors as South Korean citizens, the South Korean government deported them because they had committed “serious non-political crimes,” which some human rights groups [argued](#) set a dangerous precedent.

The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and deports them if discovered, without regard to whether or not they are at risk of persecution on return. This is in direct violation of China’s obligations under the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In early 2019, Chinese raids [rounded up](#) dozens of North Korean refugees and disrupted parts of the informal network of brokers, charities, and middlemen who have been dubbed the “Underground Railroad.” In addition, since 2017, Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries, some of who have helped North Korean refugees escape.

United Nations Activity

In March 2019, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a [resolution](#) calling on the Office of the High Commissioner to collect information and to develop strategies to be used in any future prosecution of North Korean officials responsible for crimes against humanity. In May, at North Korea’s third [Universal Periodic Review](#) before the Council, several country delegations, including the United States, condemned the country’s suppression of religion and belief. The North Korean government said it accepted [recommendations](#) urging

it to allow religious believers to exercise their faith independently, but dismissed others as “severely distorting” the human rights situation. In October, UN Special Rapporteur for human rights issues in the DPRK Tomás Ojea Quintana issued a [report](#) about the general human rights situation and recommended integrating human rights into the ongoing negotiations about denuclearization. The North Korean government continued to deny the Special Rapporteur’s requests to visit the country throughout 2019. In December, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) condemning the “ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations” of religious freedom and human rights in North Korea.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, U.S. President Donald J. Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un [met](#) in Hanoi, Vietnam, but the summit was cut short due to disagreements about sanctions relief. In June, the two leaders met—along with South Korean President Moon Jae-in—at the Korean Demilitarized Zone at Panmunjom. President Trump [stepped](#) across the border, marking the first time a sitting U.S. president had set foot on North Korean territory. However, by the end of the reporting period, relations between the United States and North Korea deteriorated due to a lack of progress on security-related negotiations. In December, Congress passed and the president signed the Otto Warmbier Banking Restrictions Involving North Korea Act ([S.667](#)), as incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 ([P.L. 116-92](#)). The act imposes secondary sanctions on financial entities doing business with North Korea.

Throughout 2019, U.S. government officials continued to [express](#) concern about the human rights situation in North Korea. In July, as part of the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by the State Department, President Trump [met](#) with [Illyong Ju](#), a North Korean Christian whose family defected to South Korea in 2012. In November, the U.S. Agency for Global Media launched the [Open Technology Fund \(OTF\)](#) to support the development and distribution of technologies to counter censorship in countries like North Korea. In December, Congress passed and the president signed a spending bill ([P.L. 116-94](#)) that included \$4 million in funding for organizations promoting human rights in North Korea. However, in December the Trump administration reportedly [blocked](#) efforts to put North Korea’s human rights record on the agenda of the UN Security Council after North Korea’s ambassador to the UN warned that such a discussion would constitute a “serious provocation.” On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action ongoing sanctions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974.