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NORTH KOREA: Religious freedom non-existent, but much still unknown

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Two recent reports based on testimony from North Korean refugees - one by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom - have confirmed earlier findings that religious freedom does not exist in North Korea, that local people are aware of state-sponsored acts of religious persecution and that the only state-approved religion is Juche, or self-reliance, which is closely allied to the cult of the deceased leader Kim Il-Sung. Some interviewees claimed they had witnessed or heard of extreme punishments, even death, meted out to religious believers, others recounted how some religious believers were spared such punishments. Christian organisation Open Doors has noted that North Koreans arriving in China are usually very opposed to religion in general and Christianity in particular as a result of the long-term and regular state indoctrination to which they had been subjected. Visitors to Pyongyang have told Forum 18 News Service that no regular worship takes place at the three official Christian churches in the city and that Buddhist monasteries elsewhere are neglected cultural relics.

Given the draconian restrictions on individual freedoms in North Korea, the most reliable knowledge available on religious freedom and other human rights in the country has to be based on insights garnered from North Korean nationals outside the country, interviews with refugees from North Korea - most recently those conducted by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom - and informed foreigners who have visited the country. Pooling these insights with Forum 18 News Service's own findings, what can be reliably known about the current state of religious freedom?

First, there is no religious freedom (see F18News 25 February 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261>). The personal accounts of interviewees suggest that organised religious life outside state control does not exist in North Korea. None of the interviewees had "experienced, seen, or known" of any authorised religious activity by North Koreans. Those who professed some awareness of religious activities, especially those of the three Christian churches in the North Korean capital Pyongyang, asserted that they involved only foreigners. Others who knew of the existence of other religious buildings, such as Buddhist temples, said they were perceived as cultural relics.

Second, and related to the first finding, all interviewees had apparently heard or witnessed state-sponsored acts of religious persecution. This finding is in keeping with the long-held understanding that the North Korean state sees religious believers as a threat to state security who therefore deserve the worst punishments.

Third, to the extent that there is approved religion in North Korea, it is the state ideology of Juche, or self-reliance, which is synonymous with the cult of the deceased North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, or Kimilsungism. According to the interviewees, all North Koreans are subjected to indoctrination sessions about Kim Il-Sung and the Juche ideology. In this regard, the North Korean totalitarian regime has similarities with a few other states which rely on a political ideology. For example, as is widely acknowledged, Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims under Chinese control are required to attend regular political sessions. But one crucial difference is that most people in China are no longer subjected to political indoctrination of the intensity that is imposed on North Koreans. The closest parallel with North Korea in this respect is undoubtedly Turkmenistan (see F18News 1 March 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=522>).

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in November 2005 released a lengthy report on the state of religious freedom in North Korea, known officially as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), <http://www.uscirf.gov/countries/region/east_asia/northkorea/NKwitnesses.pdf>. The report was based on the interview accounts of 40 former North Koreans who now live in South Korea. As USCIRF acknowledged in the report, the sample of interviewees was not randomly chosen. All the interviewees originated from the northern or north-eastern parts of the DPRK, but were of varying ages and occupations. Although each interviewee had left North Korea between 1998 and 2001, their backgrounds mean that the findings of the report should give us as good an estimate of the current conditions in North Korea as is possible to attain, given the extreme limitations in gaining reliable information.

The report confirmed a few long-held views about the state of religion in North Korea which have been reported by various nongovernmental organisations. For example, in December 2002, the UK-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) published a

report based on interviews with 50 North Koreans over a two-year period

<<http://www.csw.org.uk/Countries/NorthKorea/Resources/NKHumanRightsReport.pdf>>. The USCIRF report and the CSW report share many similar findings.

These scrupulously conducted interviews have yielded interesting and potentially new insights. First, if the opinions of the interviewees do indeed reflect those of the general North Korean population, it seems that the North Korean people are increasingly disenchanted with the Kim Jong-II regime. Naturally, this conclusion can only be tentative since one must take into account that the interviewees were those who wanted to leave North Korea and had been living for many years in South Korea, a country of considerable freedom and prosperity.

These defectors may have only become aware of concepts such as "repression", "freedom" and "human rights" after coming into contact with non-North Koreans. As the Christian organisation Open Doors <<http://www.od.org>> has noted, North Koreans arriving in China are usually very opposed to religion in general and Christianity in particular as a result of the long-term and regular state indoctrination to which they had been subjected. Nonetheless, as North Koreans continue to cross the border between China and the DPRK, one can be relatively certain that new ideas, including ideas about religious freedom and other human rights, will continue to trickle into North Korea. Completely unknown, though, is how far such ideas have spread and how much impact they have had on North Koreans' views of themselves and their country.

Second, the USCIRF interviews suggest that the intensity of religious persecution in North Korea varies from place to place. While some interviewees claimed that they had witnessed or heard of extreme punishments, even death, for religious believers, others recounted how some religious believers were spared such punishments. Particularly for those who were repatriated from China, it appears to be considered a much more serious political crime to associate with South Koreans than to associate with Korean-Chinese churches. This is important for, as one interviewee asserted, most North Koreans have sought refuge in those churches when in China. Yet, it is also clear from various reports that under increasing pressure from the Chinese authorities, some Korean-Chinese churches have "cooperated" with the Chinese government in apprehending North Korean refugees for later repatriation (see F18News 25 February 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261>).

In addition to these "positive" findings, the USCIRF report rightly notes that there is much about which we do not know about religious conditions in North Korea.

For one thing, we still have little wide confirmation as to whether the rumoured existence of an underground Protestant Christian community in North Korea is true. The interviewees for the USCIRF report certainly could not confirm its existence. However, this does not mean that such a community does not exist, merely that this set of interviewees was ignorant of its existence. This is quite plausible, given the totalitarian nature of North Korean society. Yet, one of the two lead South Korean researchers for the USCIRF report, Professor Philo Kim, in a 2003 analysis suggested that over 500 underground house churches existed in North Korea. It remains unclear whether these are the same as the 500 "family worship centres" that the North Korean government has claimed.

More recently, on 4 January 2006, the South Korea-based The Daily NK <<http://www.dailynk.com>>, which is affiliated with the South Korean organisation, the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights, published a press release by Open Doors about the state of Protestant Christianity in North Korea. The press release quoted a "Brother Peter", who stated that there are 200,000 to 400,000 Christians in North Korea. These numbers, if accurate, represent an increase of at least 100 percent on the numbers reported to Forum18 in early 2004 (see F18News 25 February 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261>). Brother Peter also claimed that 200,000 prisoners are incarcerated in North Korean concentration camps, approximately 50,000 to 75,000 of whom are Christians.

As the USCIRF report indicates, well-founded disagreement about these figures persists and they remain impossible to conclusively confirm or deny. While one source for the Forum 18 report in early 2004 indicated that there were 100,000 Protestant Christians in North Korea, other sources for a later Forum 18 report in 2004 asserted that there was no reliable estimate for the number of Christians in North Korea (see F18News 14 October 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=431>).

If we still know so little about the state of Protestant Christianity in North Korea, we remain even more ignorant of the activities of the other three state-recognised communities - Catholic Christianity, Buddhism and Chundokyo.

One visitor several years ago to a former Buddhist monastery close to the border with South Korea told Forum 18 that although it was open, it was dirty and empty and with "no monks and no sign of being used for religious practice". A sign in Korean on the wall noted that this had been a monastery and gave a little of the history, but the site is now a museum.

A Polish Catholic cleric visiting Pyongyang declined to say Mass in the government-controlled Catholic church and confined his services to the chapel of the Polish Embassy.

Orthodox Christian worship is held at some foreign embassies; indeed, the two Russian Orthodox seminarians sent on exchange to North Korea attended services in the Russian Embassy (see F18News 27 September 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=419>). The Russian Orthodox church being built at the Russian military cemetery

is still not complete.

One foreigner who has visited the three Pyongyang official Christian churches told Forum 18 that despite official claims, no regular worship takes place in them, even on Sunday mornings. "The people who run these churches just pretend to be believers," the foreigner claimed. The foreigner added that those arriving are always asked what embassy they are from. Diplomats, who live in complete isolation from the local population, are allowed to hold worship services undisturbed.

Although the USCIRF report indicates that traditional shamanism, or fortune telling, is on the rise in North Korea, based on what we know about this religious tradition this cannot on its own be taken as evidence of a religious revival. Its emergence may simply be a reflection of the dire living conditions of ordinary North Koreans - and to some extent of the elite.

Worth noting is that shamanism has not been incompatible with communist societies in Asia. In Vietnam, Laos, and even China, government officials are known to engage in regular fortune-telling activities, even if these are formally disapproved of by central authorities. If the USCIRF report is right to indicate that traditional shamanism is on the rise in North Korea, then this suggests that it has never been completely eradicated or controlled by the regime. However, in order to gauge the extent to which this rise in traditional shamanism is a significant phenomenon, we need to know far more than we can know at present about shamanism in North Korea.

A number of religious organisations exist in North Korea, such as the Christian League, the Buddhist League, the Catholic Association, the Chondokyo Central Guidance Committee and the Association of Religious Practitioners. However, as the South Korean government's Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) <<http://www.kinu.or.kr>> stated in its 2005 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea, "These religious organisations have been organised primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organisations or international aid agencies, rather than as instruments to guarantee and support free religious activities." According to KINU, religious buildings in North Korea such as churches, cathedrals, and temples also serve the state's "propaganda and political purposes". These are not new insights, but they do reflect the current informed consensus on the functions of these religious organisations.

Along the Chinese-North Korean border the Open Doors press release published by The Daily NK indicated that the situation is worsening. Under pressure from the Chinese government, many Chinese and Korean-Chinese churches have cooperated with the Chinese authorities to capture North Koreans who have entered China illegally (see F18News 25 February 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261>). There are also many North Korean agents who disguise themselves as North Korean refugees, in order to capture and repatriate real refugees.

One thing is regrettably certain: the North Korean regime is not loosening its stranglehold on religious freedom or other human rights. Last year, The Daily NK obtained an alleged 200-page North Korean document that included instructions on repressing and eliminating religion in that country. It used the Falun Gong movement in China as a negative example of superstition and cited with approval China's effectiveness in cracking down on the movement.

It is the informed consensus that widespread human rights violations continue in North Korea. But, even though securing reliable up-to-date information on religious freedom in the country is immensely difficult, there are at least two inter-related reasons why the search for the most reliable current information should be intensified.

Firstly, given the systematic state-driven decline of human rights and even access to basic human needs - such as food - in North Korea, better understanding of the state of human rights including religious freedom in the country will increase the effectiveness of outside efforts to help North Korea's people.

Secondly, accurately knowing the state of religious freedom in North Korea can enable an accurate estimate of the extent to which political and social changes can be initiated by North Korea's own people. Religious communities played a significant role in the political changes in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in South Africa, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They have also effected similar changes in other places, such as the Philippines during the 1980s. In places such as China and Vietnam, religious communities play an increasing role in meeting social needs and are potential vehicles for political and social change.

There is every incentive to devote considerable efforts to understanding the state of religious freedom and other human rights in North Korea, because this may materially influence the future of that country, its people, and even the peace of the world. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's survey of religion in North Korea at

<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261>

A printer-friendly map of North Korea is available at

<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=nkorea>>

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