

# — A PRISON — WITHOUT BARS

Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of  
Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



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Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of  
Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea

Update on Religious Freedom Conditions in North Korea  
and New Interviews with Former North Korean Security Agents

MARCH 2008

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# DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA



# PREFACE

## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**

In December 2005, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom published a report entitled *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of the Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea*. That report, based on extensive interviews with North Korean refugees who fled through China to South Korea from 1999 – 2003, was the first of its kind to draw on testimony from refugees to provide a much needed window on religious freedom conditions inside North Korea and the consequences for refugees who are forced to return. The North Koreans interviewed for that report provided compelling eyewitness accounts of public executions of religious believers and the torture and imprisonment of refugees repatriated from China, particularly those suspected of having converted to Christianity or having had contact with South Korean missionaries or aid workers.

In addition, the interviews provided information about the survival of both Christian and traditional religious practices, such as Shamanism, in North Korea despite over fifty years of intense repression. Before 1945, the Christian population in the northern regions of Korea was significant enough that the city of Pyongyang was termed the “Jerusalem of the East”; Chondokyo (the Religion of the Heavenly Way) and Buddhism also had many adherents. However, while religious life was flourishing in South Korea, Kim Il Sung was systemically eliminating virtually all public observance of religion, substituting the state’s own monolithic ideology in its place. What religious practice survived was either conducted clandestinely or under close supervision of the state. In the Commission’s report, refugees noted the existence of a Roman Catholic and two Protestant churches in Pyongyang, but testified that the state strictly controlled these

venues and used them to gain international prestige and foreign currency.

In place of North Korea’s once flourishing religious communities, the Kim family created and imposed a quasi-religious personality cult to venerate Kim Il Sung. *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* contains details about the rites, requirements, and rituals of this state ideology known as *Juche* or *Kim Il Sungism*. All North Koreans are required to attend weekly meetings and to keep pictures of the Kim family in their homes, and there are specific penalties for those who refuse to follow the required rituals. From those interviews it was learned that even the infamous “Yodok” prison camp has a special shrine where inmates, despite living in appalling conditions, are required to keep a special pair of socks for entry. *Kim Il Sungism* is not merely a method of social control, but the ideological basis of the Kim family’s political legitimacy. Independent religious practice is considered a direct political threat.

*Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* presented valuable information about religious freedom conditions in North Korea for the widest possible audience of policymakers, diplomats, journalists, religious leaders, and researchers on religious freedom and related human rights in North Korea. The findings from that report were conveyed to senior U.S. Administration officials, Members of Congress, relevant UN agencies including the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korea, and a variety of think tanks in Washington, New York, Rome, and Seoul. That report has been translated into Korean and is available on the Commission’s Web site, [http://www.uscifr.gov/countries/region/east\\_asia/northkorea/NKwitnesses.pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/countries/region/east_asia/northkorea/NKwitnesses.pdf).

## **Updating and Expanding Upon *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung***

The Commission asked a team of researchers to conduct additional interviews with North Korean refugees. The

team interviewed 32 refugees who fled to China from 2003 – 2007 and six former North Korean security agents who defected to South Korea during the past eight years. The purpose of these supplementary interviews was to determine if religious freedom conditions had changed, if repressive government policies uncovered in the first report remained in force, and if repatriated refugees continue to face harsh treatment at the border.<sup>1</sup> These new refugee interviews are the basis of this report entitled *A Prison Without Bars*.

### Targeting Christianity as a Security Threat

Interviews with former North Korean Security Agents provided unusual and valuable insight into police tactics aimed at curtailing clandestine religious activities. The Commission’s research team interviewed former National Security Agency (NSA, or *bowibu*) and Public Security Agency (PSA, or *anjeobu*) officers, whose testimony confirms that refugees are routinely subjected to extensive interrogation about their religious contacts and affiliations once they are repatriated from China. Their statements also acknowledge that there continues to be torture and ill-treatment of repatriated refugees, particularly those who confessed to having contact with South Korean humanitarian organizations or who were suspected of being religious believers.

The former North Korean security agents testify to increased police activity aimed at halting religious activities in the border regions with China. The agents told of infiltrating Korean-Chinese churches in China, posing as “pastors,” or setting up mock prayer meetings to gather information and entrap new converts in North Korea. The former agents believed the advance of “new” Protestantism to be an ideological competitor to the “one and only ideology—*KimIlSungism*.” They also were instructed to consider the spread of Protestantism as a specific security threat and to assume that “South Korean and American intelligence agencies” were behind its growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers were also asked to 1) interview a more geographically diverse sample of refugees to confirm previous findings; 2) ask additional questions about the practice of Buddhism in North Korea; and 3) seek more information about conditions for refugees repatriated from China.

The accounts presented by the former security agents suggests that the repression and ill-treatment of anyone suspected of conducting clandestine religious activity in North Korea is an officially approved policy, and thus, likely to continue, particularly as cross-border contact with China increases.

### The Plight of Forcibly Repatriated Refugees

Recent refugee testimony provides further evidence that North Koreans face a well-founded fear of persecution if repatriated from China and therefore require protection as refugees under the international 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The forcible repatriation of refugees from China remains an issue of special concern, particularly because those repatriated are singled out for harsher punishment if they are suspected of having had close and ongoing contact with South Koreans or religious groups. Refugee interviews confirm that repatriated North Koreans are interrogated repeatedly about their religious affiliations and associations in China. If it is discovered that they have either converted to Christianity while in China or had contact with South Koreans—both of which are considered to be political offenses—they reportedly suffer harsh interrogation, torture and ill-treatment, prolonged detention without trial, and imprisonment.

Policy towards North Korean refugees repatriated to China against their will clearly requires more urgent attention. North Korean refugees continue to testify to the sexual trafficking and other forms of exploitation they are subject to in China. Moreover, as documented by the Commission’s two reports, refugees forcibly repatriated from China face some form of persecution in North Korea, including long-term imprisonment, torture, or possibly execution if found to have converted to Christianity or had ongoing contact with South Korean churches. The international community can make a difference in preventing such abuse through concerted action to press China to stop repatriating North Korean refugees and provide increased protection for them as required by the Convention Relating to the Status of

Refugees and its 1967 Protocols, to which China is a party. Such action should begin immediately as China prepares to host the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

### **New and Surviving Religious Practices: Buddhism, Christianity, Shamanism**

The recent interviews indicate that despite decades of repression, anti-religious propaganda, and the promulgation of *KimIlSungism*, remnants of Buddhism, Christianity, and traditional folk beliefs such as Shamanism persist in North Korea. For example, there was substantial eyewitness testimony that Buddhist temples are preserved as “heritage” sites by so-called “monks” paid by the Korean Workers’ Party. However, despite the reported existence of Buddhist religious venues, only two refugees interviewed for this report witnessed any religious practice occurring there—and what they witnessed was conducted secretly. As with Christianity, Korea’s rich Buddhist history has been thoroughly repressed, reduced largely to clandestine worship at what are largely religious tourist attractions.

Refugees interviewed for this report provide additional details about clandestine Protestant activity, including information on surviving religious practices and “new” religious activity fueled by cross-border contacts with ethnic Korean churches in China. The refugees testified to the existence of, and their participation in, secret meetings and missionary activity occurring in the border regions. Although there is not enough data from these interviews to determine the size and scope of clandestine Protestant activity, it is nevertheless clearly perceived by the regime as a threat to North Korean security.

The persistence—and even popularity—of Shamanistic practice, particularly by exorcists and fortune-tellers, continues to be a key finding of the Commission’s research. Most refugees interviewed had visited, or knew of a family member who had visited, a fortune-teller. Despite ongoing bans on these practices, they are apparently tolerated in rural areas—and indeed, practitioners are even frequented by high ranking officials and military officers.

### **Continued Strength of KimIlSungism**

In interviews conducted for this report, refugees continued to testify to the strength and scope of *KimIlSungism*. Absolute reverence for the Kim family continues to be indoctrinated into every North Korean through schools, media, and the workplace. Enthusiastic veneration can advance careers and ensure access to daily necessities, while disinterest, “complaints,” or “wrong thoughts” can, in some cases, lead to the imprisonment of up to three generations of one’s family in the notorious political prison labor camps (*kwanliso*). The penalties for challenging *KimIlSungism* are well known, but new refugee testimony also provided some new information about individual private rebellions, lax enforcement of some rituals, and dissatisfaction with the personality cult’s requirements.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, religious freedom and other human rights conditions in North Korea remain among the world’s most repressive, as the testimony of interviewees confirms. There continues to be a pressing need on the international level for further, more effective action that addresses the ongoing repression of religious freedom and other human rights in North Korea and the problems of North Korean refugees in China. Refugees and religious adherents are particularly vulnerable, whether living in North Korea or the border regions in China. The international community’s understandable focus on nuclear security should not diminish diplomatic efforts to also address human security in North Korea.

The findings of this report are pertinent to both bilateral diplomacy and multilateral negotiations on these issues. Moreover, the eyewitness testimony provided in this and the Commission’s earlier report contributes to ongoing deliberations about whether North Korea’s harsh treatment of repatriated refugees and others for so-called “political offenses” may constitute such severe violations of international human rights treaties that, together with the political destabilization of the region and neighboring countries, North Korea’s systematic human rights abuses

constitute a threat to the peace that requires urgent action by the U.N. Security Council.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has worked actively since its inception to draw the world's attention to the ways that the internationally guaranteed right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is consistently and severely violated by the North Korean government. This is carried out through the Kim Jong Il regime's unyielding dominance over virtually every aspect of life, aided by the state-imposed veneration of the Kim family and enforced through an extensive government network of control that intrudes upon virtually every aspect of life in North Korea. For this reason, the Commission has recommended and continues to recommend that North Korea be designated by the U.S. Department of State as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for the government's systematic and egregious religious freedom abuses under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

The Commission has devoted considerable resources to helping voices that are heard all too rarely—the voices of North Koreans—to reach policymakers far beyond the DPRK's borders. The reality of life for the people of North Korea can perhaps best be summarized by the words of one former government official, "The only reason the North Korean system... still exists is because of the strict surveillance system... North Korea is a prison without bars."

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Vaclav Havel, et al, *Failure to Protect: A Call for the UN Security Council to Act in North Korea*, DLA Piper, 2006; David Hawk, *Concentrations of Inhumanity: An Analysis of the Phenomenon of Repression Associated With North Korea's Kwan-li-so Political Penal Labor Camps*, Freedom House, 2007; and *Christian Solidarity Worldwide: North Korea: a Case to Answer, a Call to Act*, March 2007.

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# Kwan-li-so No. 18 Bukchang 4th and 5th Divisions



2

- FEATURE**
- 1. Housing for Former Ranking Officials  
Currently Sentenced for Three Years Imprisonment for Disloyalty
  - 2. Bong Chang Gang Mine Entrance Tunnel
  - 3. Bob Bul Gang (Tiger Creek) Mine Entrance
  - 4. Prisoner Housing
  - 5. Prisoner Housing

4

3

5

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Satellite Image: Space Imaging Asia  
Photographed January 8, 2003



A satellite image of the Kwanli-so Number 18 Bukchang prisoner camp in North Korea (AP Images)

# INTRODUCTION

**By David Hawk**

Author and Lead Researcher, *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*

**A** *Prison Without Bars: Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea* continues the efforts of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to measure and report on the enormous gulf between North Korea's claims to the UN Human Rights Committee that freedom of religion or belief is respected in that country and the realities on the ground as experienced in the daily lives of the Korean people. *A Prison Without Bars* follows up the publication in November 2005 of the Commission's first report describing religious freedom conditions in North Korea, entitled *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Violations of Freedoms of Thought, Conscience and Belief in North Korea*.

*Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* was based on some 40 interviews conducted in 2004–2005 with former North Koreans who fled the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to reside in the Republic of Korea (ROK) or South Korea. Additional interviews were conducted with South Korean, European, and North American religious adherents who had visited North Korea and were familiar with the religious organizations existing in Pyongyang at the turn of the millennium.<sup>3</sup>

The interviewees were asked a series of questions about their awareness, if any, of religious practice in North Korea. They were then asked questions about

<sup>3</sup> None of the original North Korean interviewees were natives of Pyongyang, and few had ever visited the DPRK's capital city, as it is largely restricted to North Korean political elites. Thus, none of the North Korean interviewees knew of the three (now four) churches that operate in Pyongyang (and only in Pyongyang).

freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in the DPRK as they knew and experienced it. They were also questioned about the pervasive state-sponsored ideology system,<sup>4</sup> termed variously “*Juche* thought” or “*Kim Il Sungism*,” that in the late 1960s and 1970s was substituted for virtually all other systems of thought or belief, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity, that had existed on the Korean peninsula prior to the Korean War (1950–1953).

*Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* (the title is taken from an invocation that North Korean youngsters are taught to make before a meal) analyzes the responses and experiences of the former North Koreans. With the exception of a revival of fortune-telling and divination, a remnant of the primordial pan-Asian religion of Shamanism or spirit worship, the North Korean interviewees encountered no practice of religion or freedom of belief. In fact, they thought all religion was strictly prohibited, and several had witnessed extreme persecution of prohibited or unauthorized religious practice, including the public execution of religious believers. In addition, all interviewees provided detailed information on the mandatory veneration of the late Great Leader, General Kim Il Sung, which is carried out to such an extent that *Juche Sasang* (*Juche* thought) has clearly become virtually a religious cult in which Kim Il Sung, described as the savior and messiah of the Korean people, has acquired miraculous and semi-divine status.

*Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* described the stages in which all other religions and belief systems were sup-

<sup>4</sup> The North Koreans call this *Yuil Sasang Chegye*, which is translated as “the one and only ideology system,” or the “monolithic ideology system.”

pressed following the Korean War. It also examined the extremely circumscribed and controlled revival of the “religious federations” system in the 1970s, including the contemporary policies and practices that the DPRK government cites when formally and officially claiming that North Koreans enjoy the right to freedom of religion or belief.

In 2007, a second round of approximately 40 interviews was conducted, in part to obtain additional information and also to determine if data gathered in 2004 and 2005 could be used as a base-line in uncovering whether there had been any modifications in North Korean policies and practices regarding religious freedom. In particular, supplementary information was sought on contemporary Buddhism in North Korea (which, prior to the Choson dynasty, had been the official Korean state religion for hundreds of years). Additional information was also sought on the practice of *Juche* among the North Korean people and the policies of the regime in propagating *Juche*, as well as on the reemergence of unauthorized belief systems and/or religious or semi-religious practices. There was also an attempt to determine whether there had been any changes in the treatment of North Koreans who are forcibly repatriated from China, as previous interviews had clearly established that North Koreans who met South Koreans or were introduced to Protestant Christianity while in China were punished severely when forcibly repatriated to the DPRK.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, while *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* had an interview with one former North Korean police official previously involved in the persecution of North Korean religious believers,<sup>6</sup> additional interviews were sought with former North Korean police and other security officials who had defected to South Korea in order to obtain added insight into official policies and practices toward religious freedom in the DPRK.

The present report, *Prison Without Bars: Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion*

or *Belief in North Korea*, contains an assessment of these additional interviews.

### Highlights from the Second Round of Interviews

From among this second group, more interviewees were able to attest to the survival of Buddhist temples, although these temples are almost entirely bereft of Buddhist religious activity and maintained largely as cultural or architectural heritage sites. Some interviewees referred to “monks” (sometimes using a common North Korean pejorative slang for “monks” who, in most East Asian countries, are referred to honorifically) who gave lectures at the temples, but more interviewees referred to the personnel at the temple heritage sites as “caretakers.” Some cited seeing Buddhist-style prayer offerings taking place at these temples, but fur- tively, when it was thought that no one was looking.

More interviewees confirmed the widespread re-emergence of the Shamanistic remnant practice of divination or fortune-telling that, while not legal, reemerged during the famine crisis. Virtually everyone interviewed in both sets of interviews reported that fortune-tellers operated semi-openly almost everywhere outside of Pyongyang. Indeed, many reported that they or their family members visited fortune tellers, as did North Korean officials and police.

Several interviewees noted that Buddhist practice, as limited as it is, and Shamanistic fortune-telling, as widespread as it is, are both regarded as superstitions that do not threaten or rival *Kim Il Sungism* as an ideological system. Protestant Christianity, on the other hand, because of its historical connection to “American imperialism” and present-day connection to Koreans from south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, is seen as a direct ideological challenge to the Kim family ideology inasmuch as, in the recent words of an historian of Korea, “Kim Il Sung had virtually become a deity.”<sup>7</sup>

### Variations Over Time: Evolution Perhaps, But Little or No Basic Improvement

One of the aims in conducting a second round of interviews was to use the first round as a base-line to

<sup>5</sup> Such introductions occur in two ways. Many North Koreans go to Korean-Chinese churches upon arrival in China in search of food or other assistance. Secondly, many North Korean border-crossers in China are assisted by South Korean missionaries or the representatives of faith-based South Korean non-governmental organizations (Christian and Buddhist) who go to the China-North Korea border precisely to help the North Koreans fleeing to China in search of food, employment, or political asylum.

<sup>6</sup> See *Thank You Father*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Armstrong, *The Koreas*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 82.

determine if there had been changes or improvements in the situation over time, particularly in the treatment of repatriated North Koreans who had encountered religion or religious adherents while in China.<sup>8</sup> However, the data drawn from the second round of interviews, though showing a slight evolution in the situation, when reviewed together with other recent interviews and interview data, does not suggest any significant progress toward the protection of religious freedom in North Korea.

In 1999, the DPRK regime reportedly recognized that thousands of its citizens had gone to China in search of food during the mid-1990s famine crisis which the North Koreans called, in their fashion, “the arduous march.” These “food-seeking border-crossers” were distinguished from the North Korean “traitors” who were seeking to defect to South Korea. Punishment for those crossing the border in search of food, though the act is technically illegal, was limited to several months at hard labor in the *rodongdanryeondae* mobile labor brigades. However, contact in China with South Koreans or Korean-Americans, many of whom are associated with faith-based humanitarian relief efforts, is still deemed a more severely punishable political offense. North Korean security agents reportedly regularly employ torture and coercive interrogation techniques, including beatings and prolonged stress positions, in order to induce the repatriated North Koreans to admit to such meetings. Most of the interviewees for this present report believed that many who confessed under duress to meeting South Koreans or adopting a religious belief system from such contact were punished more severely. Nine of the former North Koreans interviewed for this report claim that following repatriation, their punishment was more severe on account of admitting during interrogation that they had contact with Christian believers while in China.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Improvement is not impossible. Interviews in 2007 with North Korean women refugees in China who had previously been imprisoned along with pregnant women before again fleeing the DPRK report that as far as they were aware, the previous practices of forced abortion and infanticide among women who became pregnant in China prior to forced repatriation to North Korea has been drastically curbed. For comparison, see David Hawk, *Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps*, U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Washington DC 2004, pp. 56-69, and Norma Kang Mucio, *Forced Labour in North Korean Prison Camps*, Anti-Slavery Society, London, 2007, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 3 below.

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*Protestant Christianity...because of its historical connection to “American imperialism” and present-day connection to Koreans from south of the 38th parallel, is seen as a direct ideological challenge to the Kim family ideology inasmuch as, in the recent words of an historian of Korea, “Kim Il Sung had virtually become a deity.”*

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Changes in the repressive conditions along the China-North Korea border, as described by the interviewees, have occurred in two areas. According to former North Korean police agents interviewed for this report, unlike in the past, the border agents now recognize that many of those crossing the border in search of food will go to Chinese-Korean churches for help immediately upon arrival in China. These former police agents did not believe that people were more harshly treated merely for having gone to a Korean-Chinese church for food or shelter. Second, the repatriated North Koreans themselves report that regardless of this purported development, many have learned not to admit to this contact with religion in China, denying, even under duress, having met any South Korean missionaries or aid workers, as such a confession does risk much more severe punishment, including the interviewees believed, potential execution or being sent to the *kwanliso*, political penal labor camps.

Other recent interviews conducted in 2006 and 2007 among North Koreans in China who had recently fled the DPRK present corresponding views. For example, Human Rights Watch (HRW) interviewed 16 previously imprisoned North Koreans who fled to China between July and December 2006. Following the 2004 South Korean airlift to Seoul of more than 400 North Korean refugees who had become stranded in Vietnam, and the passage several days later of the North Korea Human Rights Act in the United States in late 2004, HRW concluded that the DPRK increased

the severity of punishment for all border-crossers into China.<sup>10</sup>

In January 2007, the Anti-Slavery Society conducted 30 interviews with former North Koreans—all but five of whom were interviewed in China—who had also been previously forcibly repatriated from China and punished upon return to the DPRK. Their report also notes that in 1999, North Korean officials began to make a “clear distinction between those simply going to China for survival purposes and those who were more politically motivated (e.g. in contact with South Koreans or Christians, or caught *en route* to South Korea. In general, the former were sent to a labor training camp (*nodong danryundae*) or a re-education camp (*kyohwaso*), while the latter were incarcerated in a political prison camp (*kwanliso*).<sup>11</sup>

These interviews conducted by the Anti-Slavery Society confirm the finding of the interviews for the present report that the repatriated refugees have learned to avoid mentioning contact with religion while in China. “Many interviewees had some degree of contact with a church in China (because the church is active in assisting undocumented North Koreans), but most denied this during the interrogation process.”<sup>12</sup> Further, these interviews verify that many North Koreans had learned to deny any such contact and that if the prisoners consistently denied this to the very end of their interrogation, they could avoid further punishment.

For this second Commission report, virtually all of the North Korean refugees interviewed testify that between 2003 and 2006, they continued to be pressed during interrogation for details about attending church, meeting missionaries, watching South Korean television, and meeting South Koreans. Regrettably, recent data confirms that the

North Korean regime’s policy of penalizing North Koreans for coming into contact with religious institutions or persons, or for meeting with South Koreans, continues.

### DPRK Police Testimony: Breaking Up South Korean Spy Rings

In addition to interviews with some 30 North Korean refugees now residing in South Korea, a number of interviews were conducted with former North Korean police and other security officials who had defected to South Korea. The former North Korean police agents provided valuable insight into the way in which religious freedom is actively repressed in the DPRK. Three former *bowibu* State Security Agency police<sup>13</sup> interviewed separately for this report specified that the interrogation-detention facilities along the North Korea-China border where North Koreans forcibly repatriated from China are held and brutally interrogated are run by the counter-intelligence department of *bowibu*. What the former agents describe themselves to be doing is conducting counter-intelligence work. Their claim is that the State Security Agency’s concern is spy networks run by the South Korean intelligence agency along the China-North Korea border, using South Korean Christian missionaries and would-be North Korean Christian converts as a cover for espionage. Thus, the repatriated North Koreans who are thought to have met South Koreans or attended Korean-Chinese churches are initially interviewed by regular police agents from *anjeonbu*<sup>14</sup> and then turned over to *bowibu* or secret police for more coercive interrogations. This latter effort is designed to uncover and “neutralize” the South Korean

<sup>10</sup> According to HRW’s findings, “Those [North Koreans] arrested [in China] between 2000 and late 2004 were either released after questioning or served a few months at labor re-education facilities, unless they were found to have had contact with South Koreans, missionaries, or aid workers. Such contact was a factor that would result in worse punishment...” Those interviewees, coming from eight different locations in North Korea, stated that DPRK authorities announced that all repatriated border-crossers would be imprisoned. Significantly, HRW found that “The principle of heavier punishment for those who have had contact with missionaries or converted to Christianity while in China appears to have been retained under the new policy.” *North Korea: Harsher Policies Against Border-Crossers*, Human Rights Watch, March 2007, pp 4 and 7.

<sup>11</sup> Norma Kang Mucio, *Forced Labor in North Korean Prison Camps*, Anti-Slavery Society, London, 2007, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Kukgabowibu* is the formal name of North Korea’s powerful political police, generally referred to by North Koreans as *bowibu*. It is usually translated in South Korea as the National Security Agency (NSA). For American audiences, State Security Agency would be a better translation, as this police agency is more akin to the FBI and intelligence and counter-intelligence operations of the CIA than to the National Security Council (the foreign policy coordination unit within the White House), or the National Security Agency (the satellite reconnaissance and radio/telephone intercept agency). In North Korea, the *bowibu* runs the infamous political prison camps as well as the detention/interrogation facilities throughout the country.

<sup>14</sup> *Anjeonbu* is the name commonly used by North Koreans for the regular criminal police. It is a colloquial shorthand for *Sahoeanjeonbu*, the Social Safety Agency, the formal name of which was changed in 1998 to *Inminboanseong*, the People’s Safety Agency. North Koreans have retained the short hand abbreviations *bowibu* for the political police and *anjeonbu* for the regular police.

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*Regrettably, recent data provides little evidence to conclude that the North Korean regime's policy of penalizing North Koreans for coming into contact with religious institutions or persons, or for meeting with South Koreans, has lessened in any meaningful way.*

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intelligence networks believed to be operating along the border with China.

Two of the *bowibu* agents interviewed for this report were themselves from the counter-intelligence department. The third former *bowibu* agent worked for the intelligence department of the State Security Agency, whose task was to run North Korean spy rings into South Korea. One former agent stated that the South Korean spy operations along the Chinese border dated back to the Chun Doo Hwan presidency, 1980 – 1988. Another noted that the *bowibu* counter-intelligence agents themselves posed as Christian converts in order to penetrate the prayer or Bible study meetings run in China by South Korean missionary aid workers. Another claimed that they were not against religion *per se*, but were actually trying to catch the spies pretending to be religious converts. Also mentioned was the attempt to catch North Koreans in China who were not in search of food or employment but were there to make the connections necessary to defect to South Korea, something that is considered a traitorous action against the North Korean state.

However, it is equally clear from the testimony of the former North Korean agents that spying for South Korea is conflated with “cultural aggression” by “American imperialism” through the infiltration into North Korea of “poisonous ideology” with the aim of “liquidating socialism.” In explaining the North Korean view, the former police agents explicitly cited the long-standing government attack on Protestant Christianity, detailed in *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*, which points to one of the

earliest attempts to break open the “hermit kingdom” in 1866 by the ill-fated American ship, the USS General Sherman, as suspect because it had a missionary Bible Society agent as one of the passengers.<sup>15</sup> The government also refers to other, subsequent attempts by Protestant Christian missionaries to “poison the minds”<sup>16</sup> and “steal the body parts”<sup>17</sup> of Korean people. Explaining the North Korean police viewpoint, a former State Security agent explained that currently, the United States had one-half of the [Korean] peninsula, and was using religion to get the other half. Religion is seen as the “advance guard” of aggression, said another interviewee, the purpose of which is to “liquidate socialism.”

Several other comments by the former security agents regarding violations of religious freedom along the Korean-Chinese border are worthy of note.

- Mention was made of the practice of secret executions of religious believers, but none claimed to have personally witnessed such executions. Thus, unlike the public executions of religious believers described in *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*, it is not possible to provide details of these executions. Secret executions are, by their nature, unconfirmable unless it is the executioners themselves or their closest police associates who provide the direct evidence.
- The former police agents contend that North Koreans in China are being paid by South Korean missionaries to carry Bibles back into North Korea on their return, and that the North Koreans take the money and the Bibles but discard the latter shortly after they cross the border into North Korea. This might well account for the stories of North Koreans who, when arrested by the North Korean police for possession of Bibles, claim, apparently successfully, that they just found the books

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<sup>15</sup> See chapters six and seven of *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*. The DPRK government officially contends that the execution of the sailors and passengers of the USS General Sherman by Korean patriots led by Kim Il Sung's great-grandfather was, as the first great defeat of American imperialism, the turning point of modern Korean history.

<sup>16</sup> The missionaries introduced practical education in the Korean language to the sons and daughters of Korean common people, whereas in the Choson dynasty, formal education was restricted to the sons of the aristocracy, who studied classic Confucian texts in the Chinese language.

<sup>17</sup> A reference to rumors spread among the population after the introduction into Korea of modern surgery by medical missionaries.

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*There is no basis in international human rights treaties for treating one group of religious adherents differently from another, merely on the basis of when they acquired their religious beliefs.*

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along the road and picked them up not knowing what they were. Previously the punishment for being found in possession of religious literature was, by most accounts, much more certain and severe.

- One former police agent said that while it was possible to speak of “underground believers” in North Korea, referring to North Koreans who carried their newfound belief system back with them when they returned to North Korea, it was still much too dangerous for there to be “underground churches,” where North Koreans (other than immediate family members) meet and worship together.
- Another former police agent testified that the regime drew a distinction between the family members of “old believers,” or the children or grandchildren of Koreans who acquired a new belief system at the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the twentieth century, and those more recent believers who acquired their new belief system from contacts in China. This is entirely consistent with, and confirms the testimony of, the former North Korean citizens and others interviewed for *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion: Severe Religious Freedom Violations**

The first Commission report, *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*, detailed the significant limitations on religious practice applied to those religious adherents—and their family members—who acquired their religious belief prior to the establishment of the DPRK. Also detailed

in that report, and confirmed by the current round of interviews summarized in *Prison Without Bars*, are the more serious religious freedom and other human rights violations committed by DRPK authorities against those North Koreans who have acquired a religious belief system more recently, often while residing in China. These are severe violations based on religious belief or practice. There is no basis in international human rights treaties for treating one group of religious adherents differently from another, merely on the basis of when they acquired their religious beliefs.

North Koreans who meet South Koreans in China or who adopt a belief system while in China can be identified by North Korean security agencies as a group or collectivity on national, political, or religious grounds. It is clear from the testimony of both sets of interviewees that North Koreans suspected of such attributes are, upon repatriation, deprived of their liberty, interrogated, often under torture or cruel, inhumane, and degrading circumstances, and subjected to forced labor in the *danryoendae* mobile labor brigades, *jibkyolso* provincial detention facilities, or *kyohwaso* penitentiaries. Those sent to the revolutionizing zones of the *kwanliso* political penal labor colonies are additionally subjected to “enforced disappearances.” Moreover, after the repatriated North Koreans are released from prison or labor camps for having met South Koreans in China, many of those North Koreans fear that they are forever “marked” and, as a result, will continue to face surveillance, discrimination, and persecution. This leads many from among this group to attempt to flee again across the border to China, this time not in search of food or employment, but as *bona fide* refugees—persons who have fled their country of origin out of a well-founded fear of persecution.

Clearly, all of these actions on the part of the DPRK government amount to severe violations of international human rights standards. Persecuting and punishing North Koreans for meeting South Koreans or Korean-Americans while in China, or penalizing North Koreans for adopting a different belief system while in China, is not consistent with the DPRK government’s legal obligations as a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international human rights treaties. These obligations include

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<sup>18</sup> See *Thank You Father*, pp. 86-95, for a description of the contemporary DPRK religious federation arrangements for the children and grandchildren of “old religious believers.”

respect for citizens' right to life, their right to liberty and personal security, their right not to be held in slavery or compelled to perform forced labor, their right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, their right not to be arbitrarily arrested or detained and the right of those detained to be treated humanely and with dignity. Nor is such repression consistent with the people-to-people exchanges explicitly outlined in the 1991 Basic Agreement between North and South Korea,<sup>19</sup> or the current inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation process. Such clear human rights abuses, including violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief as described in *Thank You Father* and *A Prison Without Bars*, should be placed squarely on the agenda of future bilateral and multilateral discussions with North Korean leaders.

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<sup>19</sup>The 1991 Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation.



*The Tower of Juche Idea, opposite Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang*

# TESTIMONY ON THE STATE OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN NORTH KOREA

## I. The State of Religious Freedom

Over the past three years, the Commission has compiled 75 interviews with North Korean refugees. Those who fled North Korea after 2003 confirmed what was learned from those interviewed for the Commission's earlier study, *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*: that freedom of religion or belief does not exist in North Korea. The testimony from the additional interviews strongly defies claims made by North Korean officials that this internationally guaranteed freedom is in fact protected in practice in their country.

Consistent with the findings of the earlier study, refugees continue to cite three mutually reinforcing reasons for the lack of religious freedom in North Korea. First, anti-religious propaganda is ubiquitous and reinforced through the educational system, mass media, and the workplace. Second, it is widely known that there are severe penalties meted out against those discovered practicing banned religions. Many interviewees testified that they had heard about or witnessed severe persecution of persons caught engaging in religious activity. Third, all understood that veneration of the Kim family, or *KimIl-Sungism*, was the official state ideology, and the only belief system allowed to exist in North Korea. Those interviewed continued to provide rich detail about the scope and practices of *KimIlSungism*.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, one of the most significant factors impacting the responses of refugees was whether they had spent any time in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.<sup>21</sup> Those living in Pyongyang are considered to be among North Korea's elite and are often the country's most educated. Among those interviewed who had been to Pyongyang, several knew of the existence of Christian, Buddhist, or Chondokyo religious venues in the capital, but all contended that they were not for the North Korean people but were showplaces for foreigners and not "real churches like those in China and South Korea." None of the interviewees who knew about the churches had ever visited or attended services there.

Among those who had lived or were educated in Pyongyang, there was knowledge that North Korean legal codes contained rights protections, but all believed that they were included for international consumption, and did not reflect domestic practice.<sup>22</sup> Several recounted how they had been taught by university professors or superiors that such provisions existed to create the appearance of compliance with international norms, but were not something they would expect the government to follow. As one individual recounted, "we...learned in college about [legal] statutes regarding freedom of religion. [However] the professors told us that it was only to show outsiders and that we should not believe in any religions."

<sup>20</sup> For a larger description of *KimIlSungism* as a quasi-religious cult of personality venerating the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung and the "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il, see the description in *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of the Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea*, pp. 38-42.

<sup>21</sup> Internal travel in North Korea is restricted, and residence in the capital Pyongyang is reserved for political elites and privileged workers.

<sup>22</sup> Articles 67 and 68 of the DPRK Constitution confer rights to "freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, demonstration and association, and freedom of religious belief."

### *Specific Responses on the Overall State of Religious Freedom in North Korea*

**Interviewee 1:** “Even though North Korean law guarantees freedom, it’s only a slogan. People in North Korea are not familiar with the concept of religion, even though Kim Il Sung University has a religion department. God is interpreted according to Communist standards.”

**Interviewee 3:** “Religion? Not at all. You cannot say a word about it [or] three generations of your family can be killed. People who lived before the Korean War knew [about religion.] But religion was eradicated. We can only serve one person in North Korea [Kim Jong Il].”

**Interviewee 5:** “The constitution of North Korea... mentions freedom of belief or freedom of religion a lot. Generally, [the charter of] any organization indicates that a person can have right[s]. It’s quite different in reality. If you say the word ‘religion’ you could face consequences.”

**Interviewee 9:** “Although there is freedom of religion [guaranteed by law], in reality, it is considered as a threat to the system, a hotbed of security problems, and opium [of the people].”

**Interviewee 16:** “If one says [anything about religion], one immediately gets jailed or killed. There is no freedom of speech. In North Korea, if someone says ‘Kim Jong Il is a [bad person],’ he or she gets arrested instantly.”

**Interviewee 20:** “One cannot even say the word ‘religion.’ North Korea does have Christians and Catholics. They have buildings but they are all fake. These groups exist to falsely show the world that North Korea has freedom of religion. But [the government] does not allow religion or [independent] religious organizations because it is worried about the possibility that Kim Jong Il’s regime would be in danger [because] religion erodes society.”

**Interviewee 23:** “Worshipping God or [contact with foreign religious groups or leaders] would make one a political criminal. Christianity is not allowed...some people go to fortune-tellers. The Christian church is the last thing that the North Korean government would permit. The government believes that the Christian church is an anti-national organization.”

**Interviewee 24:** “There is no freedom of belief or religion. In North Korea we are educated and taught since childhood [that] you can never believe in religion. Even if we go to China on business, it is unforgivable to attend a church. [We are taught] that if one is involved in religion, one cannot survive. If you don’t [believe] in Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, you are an unacceptable person. If you are caught, then you are imprisoned.”

**Interviewee 27:** “The constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, assembly and so on. In reality, there is no freedom of religion at all. Not even 0.1 percent. For example, recently, many North Korean refugees have Bibles with them when they are repatriated. If they are caught carrying a Bible they are punished. In North Korea, you can get away with murder if you have good connections. However, if you get caught carrying a Bible, there is no way to save your life.”

**Interviewee 31:** “I heard stories from my mom and dad about religion in North Korea. We also learned in college about [North Korean legal] statutes regarding freedom of religion. [However] the professors told us that it was only to show outsiders and that we should not believe in religions.”

## **II. Awareness of or Participation in Religious Activities**

In its 2002 response to the UN’s questions regarding religious activities inside the DPRK, North Korea claimed that there were 37,000 individuals practicing some form of Buddhism, Chondokyo, Catholicism, or Protestantism in the DPRK. Churches and temples have been built in Pyongyang and the government states that 512 “house churches” exist in the country. Refugees were asked if they had ever witnessed or encountered any religious activity, religious leader, or religious literature in the cities and towns where they grew up or worked. If the interviewee indicated that (s)he had some experience with religion, (s)he was asked to explain how that knowledge came about.

As in previous interviews, most North Korean refugees responded that they had little exposure to religious activity, places of worship, religious leaders, or religious

literature before seeking asylum in China. Most of what they knew about religion came from negative images in the mass media or anti-religious propaganda learned in school, or from witnessing or hearing about the arrest or execution of believers.

Some of those interviewed had visited Buddhist religious venues in the form of preserved temple buildings or seen Christian churches in Pyongyang. However, they uniformly described these venues as either “heritage” sites where no religious worship occurred, or as structures for “foreigners” to show that North Korea had “religious freedom.” None of those interviewed had visited a Christian church or Protestant “house church.”

Those refugees who had encountered Christian or Buddhist religious literature knew that it was banned and considered dangerous. Several of those interviewed told stories of grandparents or parents hiding a Bible or other religious literature. Many refugees discussed the wide availability of Shamanistic books on exorcism that were said to be available for purchase on the black market. However, the consequences of owning such material were well-known, and if the religious material was associated with Protestant Christianity, punishment could include execution and the imprisonment of “three generations” of the owner’s family. Several of those interviewed, including former security agency officers, believed that U.S. or South Korean intelligence agencies distributed Bibles as part of their plot to destabilize North Korea.

Recent interviews confirm that religious freedom conditions have not improved much overall in North Korea. However, there are four important insights gained from the post-2003 refugees about religious activity in the DPRK. First, the latest interviews provide more geographically diverse testimony about religious repression, whereas previous interviews conducted by the Commission were, generally, with refugees from North Hamgyeong Province only. From these more recent, diverse interviews, it is possible to affirm that the policies used to repress religious freedom are uniform throughout the DPRK. Second, there is ample testimony that awareness of ongoing religious activity stems from cross-border contact with China—including the importation of religious literature, videos, and documentaries, as well as the activities of missionaries. Refugees recount stories of religious

or shamanistic literature being available at the border and the existence of some clandestine religious activity in the border regions or rural areas. Third, similar to what was learned from the previous set of refugees, there is telling testimony from the second group about the existence of Buddhist temples and shrines, preserved as “cultural heritage sites,” in many provinces of the DPRK. Fourth, there continues to be evidence that illegal or clandestine religious activity—mostly the Shamanistic practice of divination and Protestant Christianity—has grown in the past decade, particularly since the famine of the 1990s (see Chapter 3 for more detailed information).

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*“In North Korea, you can get away with murder if you have good connections.*

*However, if you get caught carrying a Bible, there is no way to save your life.”*

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### *Specific Responses on the Awareness of or Participation in Religious Activity*

**Interviewee 1:** “I have never seen any Buddhist temples, Christian churches, or Chondokyo temples in Wonsan, South Gangwon Province. My mother was the chief of our neighborhood [political] unit...so I did hear from her about one old [Christian] lady.”

**Interviewee 2:** “I never saw any Buddhist temples, Christian churches, or Chondokyo temples in Cheongjin. However, I saw the Bongsu and Chilgol churches in Pyongyang. When the church was under construction, I saw two old people kneel down at the construction site, praying ‘Thank you God. Finally, we can have a church in North Korea.’ At that time, they were not taken right away because foreigners were recording the scene. But nobody knows what happened to them later.”

**Interview 3:** “There are no Buddhist temples, Christian churches, or Chondokyo temples in Gyeongseong, North Hamgyeong province. My grandmother used to keep [a Bible.] If you hide [religious books] well during the

house searches, you won't be in trouble. If not, nobody can tell where you will be taken away at night."

**Interviewee 4:** "In Pyongyang there is Bongsu Church, the Korean Chondokyo Young Friends Party and a building for worship as well. If you go to Bohyeon temple at Mt. Myohyang, you can see Buddhist monks. They are North Koreans with their heads shaved. They get married, take care of the temple, and give [tours] of the temple as a cultural heritage. They do not speak about the spread of Confucianism and Buddhism in Korea."

**Interviewee 7:** "We had a Buddhist temple in our village. We hike [there] when we go to temple. I was a lower ranked officer of the women's union. We [hold] meetings whenever we need to give the government's or the Party's policy. We [were taught] not to believe in God or pray. In one town people prayed in a garage. [These] believers got reported...an 80-year old lady was arrested."

**Interviewee 9:** "It is unimaginable, no one can even say a word about churches or temples in Hambeung, South Hamgyeong Province. Those who believe in God [are thought to] invade other countries. I was taught that the U.S. penetrated culture first by sending missionaries. Evidence of this is exhibited in a museum in Simcheon, South Hamgyeong Province."

**Interviewee 10:** "I have never seen any religious buildings in Hoeryeong Daedeock, North Hamgyeong Province or Sariwon, South Hwanghae Province. There was a 44-year-old man who lived in Secheon, Hoeryeong who had lived in China for two years. He became a believer there...and [later] he was said to preach salvation by Jesus. He escaped to China after being reported [to the authorities.] I thought he was crazy...possessed by the devil...and was going out of his mind."

**Interviewee 11:** "There is a Buddhist temple in Doheung, South Hamgyeong Province. I have never seen any religious building except [that] temple."

**Interviewee 12:** "There is nothing like religious buildings in Hamheung, South Hamgyeong Province."

**Interviewee 14:** "In Bakcheon, North Pyeongan Province, there was an old site of a church. Part of it

remained...but it is [now] a house. There is Bongsu Church in Pyongyang and many Buddhist heritage [temples]. There are monks. They can't practice, but have temples at Mt. Myohyang. I had a Buddhist scripture written in Chinese characters, which is called *Myeongdang gyeong* (Buddhist scriptures). I got it from someone who visited from China. There were fortune and marital harmony books...traded in secret...some were very expensive..."

**Interviewee 16:** "There are churches and Buddhist temples in Pyongyang...built only for...foreigners to attend. When foreigners visit Pyongyang they would go to churches and temples to pray and bow. I never heard of religious books until I came to China."

**Interviewee 17:** "In Musan, North Hamgyeong Province, there are many temples as scenic spots. I have not met any monks. I learned about Christmas holidays and about [Buddhism] from South Korean films and foreign movies [on video]. A friend of mine who lived near the Tumen River [owned] a Bible. I read a little because it was interesting...and asked my friend [about it]. He told me not to read the book. I [did not] report my friend [to the authorities]."

**Interviewee 20:** "There was an old Buddhist temple in Hoeryeong, North Hamgyeong Province. There were no monks or worship there, but it was preserved as a national treasure. I have traveled to many places in North Korea...temples are located elsewhere but again, they are nothing more than historical remains."

**Interviewee 22:** "There are no churches or Chondokyo temples in Gilju, North Hamgyeong Province, but there is a Buddhist temple. Gaebo temple at Mt. Chilbo. North Korea has many temples. There are no monks, but there are people called *gwalliwon* (caretakers) at the temple."

**Interviewee 24:** "I have never witnessed any religious activity in Yeonan, South Hwanghae Province. When I was in Zhangbai, China on business, I heard about Bibles being smuggled into Hyesan, Yanggang Province. And when I went to China in 2004, I confirmed that Bibles were circulating among North Koreans in China."

**Interviewee 26:** “There are no churches or temples in Bukcheong, South Hamgyeong Province. If you take a bus 60ri (24km) there is Mt. Daedeok. It is really famous and there are lots of historical sites. I visited the Kim Il Sung [Anti-Japanese Struggle Museum] and saw Buddhist temples.”

### III. The Propagation and Practice of *KimIlSungism*

All North Korean refugees interviewed by the Commission confirmed, through detailed accounts, the quasi-religious cult of personality surrounding the Great Leader Kim Il Sung and the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il. They provided consistent testimony to the way this cult of personality dominates their daily lives and the penalties associated with questioning or challenging its mandatory rites and requirements.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kim Il Sung constructed an “official ideology” called *Juche* or Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Thought (*Kimilsung Hyukmyeong Sasang*). Kim’s aim was to fill the spiritual and intellectual void created by the repression of existing religious practice and to promote himself as a leading revolutionary thinker among communist and non-aligned nations. *Juche* ideology emerged as a largely secular theory of socialist revolution and social construction. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the *Juche* philosophy was transformed into a highly elaborate and structured belief system based on the semi-deification of Kim Il Sung and his family. Kim Jong Il himself coined the term “*KimIlSungism*” and is responsible for many of its requirements and rituals.<sup>23</sup> By the time he assumed power in the early-1990s, Kim Jong Il himself was added to the pantheon of revered revolutionary heroes.

As described in the Commission’s previous study, *KimIlSungism* has developed into an elaborate system of belief and social control that begins when children learn to say “Thank you Father Kim Il Sung” as they learn to talk, and continues with ongoing, mandatory adult education classes held in the workplace or in shrine-like buildings called “Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Idea Institutes,” “Study

Halls,” or “Research Rooms.” There are reportedly such venues in every locality, and often these institutes are the most prominent and best maintained buildings.<sup>24</sup> In addition to weekly meetings, interviewees spoke of additional “Self-Criticism Meetings” and study sessions held by students, workers, and women. In some areas, North Koreans are expected to attend three meetings per week for study and veneration of the Kim family.

The recent refugee interviews provide more expansive information about the propagation, requirements, scope, and strength of *KimIlSungism*. Refugees testified to the requirement of hanging portraits of the Kim family (including, in some cases, Kim Jong Il’s mother Kim Jeong Suk) in every home, office, school, public venue, and “deepest tunnel.” Some also discussed the fashion requirement of wearing pins and badges bearing the image of Kim Il Sung at all times.

One interesting piece of information provided by refugees was the fact of the existence of local committees organized to enforce the requirement that North Koreans hang and maintain the Kim family portraits (called *chosanghwa jeongseongsaeop*). These committees are tasked with conducting spot inspections and handing out fines to families or businesses whose portraits are not properly maintained. Blatant disregard for the portraiture requirement could lead to imprisonment. According to some accounts, however, rigid enforcement of this policy varies. Said one interviewee, “every day, every family [is supposed] to stand before the portraits dressed in nice clothes and keep the pictures clean. We don’t do that anymore because there has been no inspection since 2001. Now they make announcements before inspections to tell us to clean the pictures.”

Recent interviewees suggest that faith in *KimIlSungism* was shaken by the famine of the 1990s. Every North Korean interviewed attested to the strength and persistence of the “official ideology”; however, several interviewees indicated that few people voluntarily take part in study sessions and others offer testimony to instances of private dissent and disinterest, public complaints, lax enforcement, and even disregard for the requirements of *KimIlSungism*.

<sup>23</sup> For a broader description of the transition from the secular Marxist theory of *Juche* to the quasi-religious cult of personality called *KimIlSungism*, see *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*, pp. 78-85.

<sup>24</sup> The testimony of the scope and requirements of *KimIlSungism* are similar to those provided by previously interviewed refugees. See *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*, pp. 38-42.

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*Many interviewees pointed out the paradox of thanking the Kim family for their sustenance when sustenance was so hard to come by.*

*One refugee who served on a committee that organized weekly study sessions claimed that in her province, “eight out of 10 people had complaints” about the requirements of KimIlSungism “when there wasn’t anything to eat.”*

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The new interviews provide some interesting evidence that better connected or wealthier North Koreans can ignore or “pass” on some of the requirements of weekly attendance at “mutual criticism meetings.”<sup>25</sup> Many interviewees pointed out the paradox of thanking the Kim family for their sustenance when sustenance was so hard to come by. One refugee who served on a committee that organized weekly study sessions claimed that in her province, “eight out of 10 people had complaints” about the requirements of *KimIlSungism* “when there wasn’t anything to eat.”

Several refugees, including former soldiers and intelligence officers, claimed that support for *KimIlSungism* varied geographically. According to one interviewee, “there is a remarkable contrast. . . .between the border and inland areas. The border area is ruled by capitalism and the inland area is ruled by socialism. Inland people still believe Kim Jong Il is the best.” Another refugee claimed that “people living in North Hamgyeong Province, along the border with China. . .know the gap in living standards between North Korea and China. . .the only people who believe in [*KimIlSungism*] live in Pyongyang.”

Despite this testimony, there is not enough first-hand evidence to substantiate the contention that the institutions supporting *KimIlSungism* are crumbling. The

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<sup>25</sup> Interviewees described “mutual criticism meetings” as sessions which they were required to attend, along with others in a given village, work place, or other social unit, where all were encouraged publicly to admit their failures to fulfill the state’s or the Party’s expectations.

overwhelming picture emerging from refugee testimony is that of a political ideology that remains potent not least through its ability to endow strict devotees with social privileges, while identifying malcontents with ease, and punishing them if necessary. As one refugee stated, “North Koreans still believe in Kim Jong Il. They didn’t betray Kim Jong Il [when they defected], but ran away because they were hungry.”

### ***Specific Responses on the Practice of KimIlSungism***

**Interviewee 1:** “We call it the Kim Il Sung Institute of Revolutionary Ideas. Attendance is mandatory. If you go to the Institute, the history of Kim Il Sung’s life is displayed on the wall with his pictures. They use chapters and verses like the Christian Bible. History books about Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jeong-suk are available. Along with a portrait on the wall, there are slogans on the right and left sides of the wall and educational materials explaining the main achievements of the Kim Il Sung family. One teacher and a section leader (student president) are supposed to lead the meeting. They lead the meeting, check the date and attendance, and explain the materials. I used to be a section leader. We [used to] burn our own clothes that we were wearing [in order to keep meeting because there were not enough candles.]”

**Interviewee 2:** “I used to go to the Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Institute once a week and had the ‘Revolutionary Ideas’ class every day. Attendance. . . .is mandatory. Meetings like these are everywhere in small groups or organizations. We often spend some [of our own] money for that. . . .we decorate rooms with red-colored wallpaper and pictures. We hang the Kim family portraits all the time, which is mandatory; it doesn’t matter whether the place is a shabby house. . . .or inside a tunnel. When I was young, I used to wear my best dress and bow my head in prayer before the portraits on occasions such as national holidays. Even though nobody is watching you, your family members force you to do that. It’s like your religion. When people jump into a burning house or a flooding coal mine to save the portrait of Kim Il Sung, they shout a slogan, ‘For the Great General Kim Il Sung.’ When people experience miraculous happenings. . . .they come first

in a race or don't get hurt from a fall, we...say 'thank the General Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.'"

**Interviewee 4:** "It's the Kim Il Sung Institute of Revolutionary History or the Revolutionary History Institute. If you are absent...[there are] political consequences. At every district and village [we have] '*Chosanghwa Jeongseongsaeop*' (the policy to check whether Kim family portraits are well taken care of). North Koreans are evaluated by *Chosanghwa Jeongseongsaeop*. Who takes care of the portraits hung in the office first? Who presents a flower basket in front of the statue [of Kim Il Sung] on New Year's Day? Who can show respect for *chosanghwijang* (Badge of Kim Il Sung) by wearing it on the chest all the time?"

**Interviewee 5:** "Kim Il Sung Institute of Revolutionary History is everywhere in middle schools, universities, and villages. It's mandatory...[you go] or your ideology will be questioned. However, nobody will go there voluntarily. We don't do it at home though. It's ridiculous."

**Interviewee 6:** "We call it the Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea, which is located in the best place [in every village]. Also, there is the Kim Jeong Suk and Kim Il Sung *Sajeokgwon* (history hall). It is compulsory to attend at the given time. From birth North Koreans are educated to think that they owe Kim Il Sung...their lives and existence. They have donated rabbits or pigs and rice to the army [though they have little food themselves]. By doing so, the person can win the commendation and honors and receive kind treatment. Above all, the person might be able to join the Party."

**Interviewee 7:** "There is the Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea. It is compulsory to attend at your given time, and every Wednesday from 8 to 12 p.m. North Koreans go there to study the [life story] and virtues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. If a person does not attend, then the person will be criticized at the 'Self-Criticism Meeting.' The [Institutes] are often the best buildings in North Korea and there is electricity. Even the managers who clean the place are treated very well. To show loyalty and respect, those who go there should be neatly attired. North Koreans still believe in Kim Jong Il. They didn't betray Kim Jong Il, but ran away because they were hungry."

**Interviewee 8:** "There is a Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea [where I lived]. Anyone who goes there should be neatly attired. People are educated on what Kim Il Sung did in his childhood. Also, those who are classified according to workplace or school raise azaleas and bring the azaleas in front of the statue of Kim Il Sung on his birthday and New Year's Day. One is not allowed to think about the reason why people have to obey."

**Interviewee 9:** "There is the Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea. It is compulsory to attend. There is no one who goes there voluntarily. It looks like a religious place of worship, where there are pictures hanging detailing the Kim family's ancestry, their revolutionary exploits, and there are *dorokpan* (notes under the pictures). In any building where people are gathered, the pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il must be hung, otherwise the person will be classified with a different ideology [and lose certain privileges or status]. Everyone wears the Kim Il Sung badge on their chest. Otherwise, the person is a political offender. Even saying a word about the difficulties of [practicing *KimIlSungism*] can make the person a political offender. To show loyalty, North Koreans participate in study meetings, Repentance (self criticism) Meetings, and lectures as well as various other meetings. Otherwise, the person has to write and present a self-criticism, and he (or she) is supposed to be criticized by others [in the group]."

**Interviewee 10:** "Hanging pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il on the wall is an obligation. The purpose of hanging the pictures is to worship Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. There is a ritual done before the pictures. [We] worship Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader who saved us from death and emancipated us from slavery. If a fire breaks out, people would show their loyalty by running into the fire to save the portraits. Anyone who gets burned doing this would win commendation."

**Interviewee 11:** "The Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea—every village has one. I go there out of obligation. If you don't attend, you are considered to have deviated from the right ideology. [Not attending] was unimaginable before 1997, but because of the

difficult living conditions now, those who are well-off do not receive criticism. They just pass.”

**Interviewee 12:** “Living conditions are harsh and studying *Juche* doesn’t give you rice or anything. The children of officials study in order to enter the university because it will exempt them from labor. Workers like us go to study because we are told to. We can’t go to college. We have lectures every six months and take tests. In factories, we were told to read several books and quote them during ‘Self-Criticism Meetings.’ If not insane, who would read these books? We just extract one sentence from the book and tell the story as if we have read the whole book. No one sits and studies and reads. People who are determined to enter the Party contribute pigs or whatever they can raise. Some people contribute money that they worked so hard to earn and when the officials say, ‘Since our nation is in difficulty, people of the nation should support,’ some give all of their property. If some say, ‘I myself can hardly survive and how can I pay?, then people go around and forcefully take 100 won or at least 50 won if you are really poor. Some people demand loyalty, some demand flattery of the organization.”

**Interviewee 14:** “We don’t go there voluntarily. We are dragged. We don’t want to go because we study and sing the same thing. Every day, every family [is supposed] to stand before the [Kim family portraits] dressed in nice clothes and keep the pictures clean. We don’t do that anymore because there has been no inspection since 2000. Now they make announcements before inspections to tell us to clean the pictures. When I was a child, I was taught that [he was] a ‘god of the sun’ so I thought he really was a sun. Now, even students think about how to make money. They are not interested in Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.”

**Interviewee 15:** “Everybody’s busy surviving, but we attended the Self Criticism meetings because we had to. However, there were some complaints. People follow outwardly, but eight out of 10 people have complaints. If a person openly complains, then that person disappears the next day. Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are god. They are deified and they should be considered as an ultimate. You have to stand up and say everything’s good even though you have nothing to eat. When there’s a fire in the

house, we are told to take the pictures out first rather than other property.”

**Interviewee 16:** “We are forced to study *KimIlSungism* and *Juche* in school. Even after we graduated from school, they kept forcing us to study at work by making us attend study sessions at the Kim Il Sung Institute. [Hanging the portraits] is mandatory even if we don’t want to. If we hang our family picture, they order us to take it down and we can’t hang anything bigger than Kim Jong Il’s portrait. When there is an event, people say “thank you, General Kim Jong Il,” but at home, saying thanks before a meal is rare.”

**Interviewee 17:** “[Before] people went to a place like the ‘Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea and History’ both voluntarily and for mandatory reasons. However, people don’t really go voluntarily anymore because their life is very difficult nowadays. People are forced to go. If they don’t go, they are accused of political offenses. It is the same as declaring that one will not follow Kim Il Sung.”

**Interviewee 18:** “Once a week, either on Wednesdays or Saturdays, there is a seminar-type lecture done by the military and the [Party] organization. In the military... they take attendance and check how many times you were absent. Because not following means death, you have no choice but to follow. Suppose the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il Research Center in the military catches fire. You must first take care of the portraits and remove them. It is regarded as loyalty, to save Kim-related paintings and books first in case of emergency and then save the *guhonamu* (a tree with the words of Kim Il Sung written on it, usually such phrases as ‘Defeat Japan and liberate the nation,’ etc.).”

**Interviewee 19:** “There is a Kim Il Sung Research Institute located in every town. There are portraits and we were forced to go there once a week. Perhaps, because life is so difficult, people, only in their homes, sometimes talk about things like how North Korea’s politics are wrong. In the past, [people] used to bow before the portraits when they received the gifts. Today, they do not bow because life is difficult.”

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*“You have to stand up and say everything’s good even though you have nothing to eat. When there’s a fire in the house, we are told to take the [Kim family] pictures out first rather than other property.”*

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Kim Jong Il and they continue studying them for about three times a week after graduation. There is a lecture session on Tuesday. On Friday, [people] go to the Kim Il Sung Institute of the Revolutionary Idea and History and study things like how to follow Kim Jeong-suk and also memorize things like a New Year’s greeting. On Saturday, we have a Life-Reflect meeting. Young people do it at the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League and we (workers) do it at the company. There are different places for farmers and members of the Party and others.”

**Interviewee 20:** “There is a place called ‘Juche Research Institute’ in every district. You must attend once every week and if you are absent, the organization that you are in criticizes you. If you are absent three times, you are called by the KWP Central Committee and will be criticized there [and put] on their watch list. And if you make a wrong statement in addition to that, you will be instantly arrested. [North Koreans] might not like it in their minds but [they] cannot express it.”

**Interviewee 21:** “We go there out of obligation. Even managing to survive is difficult in North Korea. So who would want to go there voluntarily? It’s all mandatory. I went there once a week. Attendance is checked. At workplaces, the study is held on every Saturday. The study [schedule] is strictly kept despite the extreme food shortages.”

**Interviewee 27:** “Ninety-nine percent of people go there out of duty. People are fed up with that. Who would want to go there voluntarily? Generally we go there once or twice a week. People in an elite class like me make countless visits. For example, when prominent individuals such as...Hwang Jang-yeop or Kim Man-cheol sought asylum in South Korea, the consequences for us came right away. [The government said] ‘Intellectuals are the source of the problems. The government educates them, but they betray the nation.’ For three to four weeks, we [elites] have to write combative and critical reports intensively in the Institutes and cannot go home.”

**Interviewee 30:** “In school, students learn about revolutionary history and the childhoods of Kim Il Sung and



*The Arirang Mass Games, Pyongyang*

## RELIGIOUS LIFE IN NORTH KOREA: CONTINUED REPRESSION, CLANDESTINE EXISTENCE, AND THE GROWTH OF SHAMANISM

As reported in the Commission's previous study, any religious activity held outside of the official religious venues in Pyongyang and the approximately 500 "house churches" listed as functioning by the government remains illegal, a consequence of the strict repression of religion that began in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, there continues to be notable evidence of "remnant" forms of Buddhism, Christianity, and religious folk practices, such as fortune-telling and exorcism, that are practiced privately.

In general, the recent interviews describe the continued repression of religious life in North Korea. There is testimony about what seems to be a network of quasi-functioning Buddhist temples preserved as "cultural heritage sites"; otherwise, public religious practice, apart from that controlled by the state, remains circumscribed and largely prohibited. The collapse of the economy and the famine of the 1990s led to a substantial revival of the practice of Shamanistic divination, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, in the border regions with China there is evidence of clandestine Protestant activity that is actively combated and repressed by the regime, which views the existence of such activity as an ideological and security threat. However, the full extent of this activity cannot be ascertained.

### I. Buddhism in North Korea

Initial interviews for the first edition of *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung* conveyed little information about Buddhism or evidence of its suppression or continued existence in North Korea. The DPRK claims that there are approximately 15,000 Buddhists in the country, but few researchers can confirm if or how Buddhism survives in the DPRK. Through this second set of interviews, additional information was sought about the existence of Buddhism in North Korea. The findings hold several points of interest and raise a number of important questions for future research.

A Buddhist presence continues to survive in North Korea. There is ample eyewitness testimony that quasi-functioning Buddhist shrines and temples are maintained as cultural heritage sites by caretakers (*gwalliwon*) who do not perform any religious functions. There is some testimony to the role of government-employed "monks" who give lectures, lead tours, and meet foreign dignitaries. Unlike Christian churches, most of which were destroyed over the past 50 years, refugees spoke of the preservation of Buddhist temples, including the government's refurbishing of an existing site at Anbul, South Hamgyeong Province, in 2000.

While a Buddhist material culture survives above ground, the refugees interviewed for this project did not provide much evidence of "underground" Buddhist activity. Several offered testimonies that indicate some level of this kind of informal Buddhist practice. One refugee claimed to see families worshipping and offering food at the Anbul Temple restoration project in 2000 or 2001 in Geumya, South Hamgyeong Province. Thus, although the

<sup>26</sup> South Korean academics and aid workers who were allowed to visit a "house church" in Pyongyang said they doubt that all of the meeting points listed by the government actually function as working religious venues.

evidence is scarce, it does raise the possibility of the survival of Buddhist practice in North Korea.

### *Specific Responses on the Existence of Buddhist Life and Practice*

**Interviewee 1:** “We have Buddhist temples and monks who usually have long hair and get married [contrary to the ordinary image of a Buddhist monk with a shaved head]. For example, Mt. Geumgang and Mt. Myohyang each have temples. University students would take a field trip to Mt. Myohyang. Priests at Bohyeon Temple were called “*Jung*” [which is a vulgarized term for the Buddhist monk]. My uncle and his wife were believers of Buddhism. They saved one room as a worshipping place.”

**Interviewee 2:** “There is a temple called Bohyeon Temple in Mt. Myohyang. My friend’s father is the chief monk of Bohyeon Temple. Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung’s villa is also located in Mt. Myohyang. The temple was restored. The chief monk has taken many pictures with Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Il adored him. The chief monk was, of course, a member of the Party. He grew his hair and wore a suit, but when foreign visitors came, he received the guests. He has studied much on Buddhism, but his ideology was *KimIlSungism*, not Buddhism. Monks and temples are all for propaganda purposes only.”

**Interviewee 3:** “Access to temples is limited. There are Buddhist monks in Pyongyang though they are just nominal ones prepared for diplomatic business. I saw Bibles. There are some. As far as I know, there were Bibles and Buddhist scriptures that were being circulated among people until the early ’60s. They were completely destroyed by the government.”

**Interviewee 4:** “If you go to the Bohyeon Temple, you can see Buddhist monks. They are North Korean with their heads shaved. They get married, take care of the temple, and give explanations about the temple as a cultural legacy, rather than spreading the history of Confucianism and Buddhism in Korea. People go there like on a field trip. A monk from Myohyang might have studied folk beliefs at the ‘Ancient Folk Beliefs Study Department’ (Kim Il Sung University) instead of Buddhism. I’ve heard of Buddhist scriptures and the Bible. I’ve never

seen them but heard that they are displayed at Bohyeon Temple and Bongsu Church respectively. The North Korean government invites many foreigners from European countries, Russia, China, and so on at its own expense on the occasion of the ‘April Spring Art Festival’ (April 15, Kim Jong Il’s Birthday). During this event, the Catholic priest’s dress was so exotic that it caught my eye.”

**Interviewee 7:** “I have been to a temple in North Korea. The monks’ heads were not shaven and the monks were lecturers. They introduced the temple and gave a lecture. Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung visited a Buddhist temple.”

**Interviewee 11:** “There are no monks, only guardians. It is impossible to find monks with shaved heads. There was renovation work for Anbul Temple in Doheung, Geumya South Hamgyeong Province in 2000 or 2001 because the building had begun to tilt as time passed. One electrician, a temporary manager, went there to do a wiring job. He was in charge of the electricity and when he came back after he had finished the work, he told me that an old man had come there with his son and performed a religious service in front of an image of Buddha with the things he brought. He was a very brave man. We ignored this incident rather than reporting it to the police. He said that there were many people who were afraid to come inside; therefore, he performed the religious service outside the temple area. The food was well served. During the three-month stay, we were served quality food several times. People have only heard about such stories, but no one has ever seen this. The government manages the temple because they consider it a cultural heritage site. There are Buddhist statues here and there, but not all of them are managed by the government. Only the ones inside the temples are managed.”

**Interviewee 15:** “Religion is for [diplomatic reasons] for upper-class people, [put on] by the Workers’ Party Central Committee to communicate with people from outside, including Buddhists or people from South Korea who visit.”

**Interviewee 16:** “When foreigners visit Pyongyang, they go to temples that were built perfunctorily and pray and bow. They are for foreigners only. North Korean people can never go to churches or temples for worship. I haven’t met

any Buddhists. What used to be temples, they are now just memorial halls and historic sites. They don't exist now."

**Interviewee 20:** "A friend of mine encountered Buddhism in China and when he came back to North Korea, he kept begging me to go to temple with him. So I asked him what a monk was. He said the monks are good people who speak good words and harm no one. He didn't practice religion in North Korea."

**Interviewee 22:** "North Korea has many temples like South Korea. There are no monks but there are people called *gwalliwon* (caretakers) in the temple. I never saw any monk at Gaesim Temple in Mt. Chilbo nearby [my place]. But I've heard about the Bible and the Buddhist scriptures. I thought these were books that contained unreliable stuff. I've never seen the contents."

**Interviewee 24:** "I knew Buddha's birthday through common knowledge. [I've seen] Buddhism in films. Monks appear in classic movies. However, they are always criticized in the movie. Religion is a frequent subject in movies. [I] learned about Christmas or Buddha's birthday in school. However, they don't tell us how these days became such a day and what they mean. It only appears in one line that Christmas is the 25th of December and Buddha's birthday is a certain date. We have no [understanding of] the concepts because they don't explain further in detail."

**Interviewee 30:** "I have seen a Buddhist book once at a temple. It had a strap with Chinese letters and months written on it. There are temples but people are not allowed to believe in them. There are books at the temple. I've seen that at the temple that was located at Mt. Chilbo."

**Interviewee 31:** "I have heard from my school teacher about the history of Buddhism and Confucianism and the teacher said that they were used to maintain the power of the monarchy. I have met a Buddhist woman in the embassy. She met a Buddhist when she came to China and became a Buddhist. Most people meet Christians and go to church so this was a particular case. I have seen only one such person."

**Interviewee 32:** "At the university, [we] learn that there are the religions of Jesus [Christianity], which is the big-

gest kind, Buddhism, Islam, and Confucianism. There are no official courses on religion. However, it is taught as part of a philosophy course. Because people don't know about religion at all, it is just taught for common knowledge."

## II. The Existence of Clandestine Protestant Activity: An Inconclusive Picture

It remains difficult to corroborate assertions of the existence of a substantial clandestine Protestant movement in North Korea reportedly fueled by missionaries operating along the North Korea-China border. Only five refugees interviewed for this study testified to attending clandestine Protestant meetings in North Korea and two more recalled meeting missionaries who had come from China to evangelize. When asked about the existence of an underground movement, most refugees said they had never encountered unauthorized, unofficial, or underground religious practice of any sort, and then recounted stories of arrests and executions of individuals who had engaged in banned religious activities. Former North Korean police officials interviewed for this report claimed that the bulk of clandestine religious activity they encountered consisted of gatherings of families or relatives trying to maintain "old religious traditions," referring to religious affiliations that predate the establishment of the DPRK.

Though refugees cannot confirm the size or scope of clandestine religious activity, they can confirm its existence. There was more eyewitness evidence of this gleaned from the recent interviews than from those used in the previous study. One refugee told of learning about and participating in Protestant prayer meetings in North Hamgyeong Province. Another recounted attending a prayer meeting with other refugees repatriated with him from China. Yet another told a story of meeting and praying at the home of a border guard whom she had met during her interrogation.

Ironically, another indicator of the existence of clandestine Protestant religious activity came from the testimony of former security agents tasked with curtailing it. There is testimony of police operations to set up a "false underground church" to attract repatriated refugees who had converted in China and also to infiltrate religious groups in China. In addition, security agents told of

interrogations used at the border to determine whether repatriated refugees had close and ongoing contact with South Korean or other foreign religious groups in China.

Interviews support the belief that, despite severe repression and the constant fear of discovery, some measure of clandestine Protestant religious activity takes place in North Korea, both among families seeking to maintain old traditions and among new converts who encounter Protestantism while in China.

### *Specific Responses on Clandestine Religious Activity*

**Interviewee 5:** “In 2003, an underground church called ‘Yuseon’ was uncovered. Ten to 14 people were said to be the church members. I had one friend who prayed at a secret church. Church members got together once a week for prayer. In around 1999 or 2000, one lady went to China to earn some money and returned to North Korea carrying two Bibles with her. She was arrested and sent to the National Security Agency (NSA). Then, her whole family disappeared.”

**Interviewee 7:** “North Koreans pray for healing to God rather than Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il. My mother-in-law was also one of them.”

**Interview 8:** “My younger sister/brother heard from my mother in 2004. There was a popcorn shop in which a daughter was told the Gospel in China, and then she preached the Gospel to the poor as well as her parents. She also gave out popcorn while preaching. There was Ms. Cho who told the Gospel, and prayed in secret, but it was found out. At that time, I also believed in God. I cried out for God because I was caught on the way to South Korea. My heart was palpitating with fear of death while I was being interrogated in Onseong by the NSA.”

**Interviewee 13:** “I know many people who pray. There is no organization. When I traveled to the rural area as an oriental doctor, I went to my friend’s house in Hamheung to treat someone and my friend showed me a Bible (in 2004). It was a book with a red cover. [My friend said] ‘Everything will be all right if you believe in God.’ That friend was a teacher in an elementary school. I didn’t read it thoroughly. [My friend told me,] when something goes wrong, ‘I pray to God. [You] believe in Kim Il Sung

throughout your life, but I believe in God.’ I told my friend that ‘You should be careful because the NSA officials said that people who have or saw the Bible should confess. It seemed that she had gotten it from a relative, not an acquaintance, from China. My friend said ‘Since the police talk about it, I’m assuming many people have one because even I have one.’”

**Interviewee 16:** “No, I haven’t. I did not encounter any underground church in China.”

**Interviewee 19:** “Yes, in Hoeyang. My relative by marriage was caught while giving away a Bible, so the entire family was taken to Prison 22 [in Hoeyang]. They were taken there under the category of religious spy.”

**Interviewee 20:** “My first wife’s parents used to have a religion. They also said that they were Christians. My first wife’s father said this [before he died.] When her mother died, she said the same thing.”

**Interviewee 23:** “Hoeyang. Mr. Han preached the Gospel to my husband and me in 1997. My husband prayed alone. I prayed with Mr. Han who was evangelized by Mr. Park. There was one underground church which was a decoy, and I heard about it from my husband since he worked for the National Security Agency (NSA). This church was started by the NSA to host all those people who came back from China after becoming believers who wanted to pray. There was no underground church that was led by believers.”

**Interviewee 25:** “When I was repatriated to North Korea, there were many defectors and people who lived near the border who sometimes prayed. They gathered in a group of family members and carefully prayed. I prayed with them too.”

**Interviewee 27:** “There are underground churches. I heard about spying activities regarding the underground churches at a drinking meeting, from my relatives who were executive Party members. [They said] three to five people got together to worship.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Among this respondent’s relatives, there was a high official in the NSA who even helped her escape North Korea.

**Interviewee 28:** “When I visited a high-ranking official’s house, there was another official there and we worshipped together in his house with the curtains drawn. They told me to read the Bible so I read a verse from Genesis 12:2 and that’s when I first decided to study theology. They also prayed for Kim Jong Il. They told me that there are many underground churches in North Korea. They said that it was a heartbreaking job to catch Christians while they, too, were Christians, but they had to stay in their positions because their situation could turn even worse if an evil-minded person was in that position to ferret out believers. So they keep their positions and sometimes advise people to run away.”<sup>28</sup>

**Interviewee 29:** “[Worshipping God] is possible only among relatives and families and no one can meet with other people in a regular place. It is impossible for 20 or 30 people to gather together. A collective farm vice-manager in Eundeok believed in God and worshiped with 20 people in his house in secret including colliers and farm workers in 1994, but they were caught.”

**Interviewee 30:** “The underground church began when China opened its doors in the 1990s. I’ve seen a trial and a public execution [of religious believers.]. They weren’t executed for believing in God. Instead, they were executed for not following the One and Only Guidance System. It was in 1991 and five people were executed. Five out of 12 people were executed for religious reasons and the rest were executed for stealing a cow. Notice for the public execution was posted in the market.”

**Interviewee 34:** “‘Underground believers’ would be a more appropriate term than ‘underground church.’ Church would be something like a place where people can gather and listen to a sermon, but it’s impossible to exist for long. Instead, underground believers can exist. There is a chance that two people pair up and hold their hands together to pray. However, a gathering of three or more is dangerous.”

**Interviewee 37:** “It is said that there are underground churches in North Korea, but I have not seen them with my own eyes, and it is unbelievable.”

**Interviewee 38:** “If underground churches really do exist, then it would be between individuals, like husband and wife.”

### III. The Widespread Re-emergence of Shamanism and Fortune-Telling

The survival, and even flourishing, of traditional Korean Shamanism and folk beliefs, including the widespread use of fortune-tellers and exorcists, was one of the most surprising findings from the previous interviews.<sup>29</sup> Many interviewees associated the re-emergence of fortune-telling with the onset of the famine and the severe deterioration in social conditions in the mid-1990s. The North Korean refugees interviewed for this update confirmed these conclusions and provided additional information about the extent and scope of Shamanistic practice.

Many of the refugees spoke of visiting a fortune-teller before leaving for China or to ascertain marital prospects. Because the practice is illegal, visiting a fortune-teller is not a casual thing and is reportedly very expensive. The fortune-telling sessions were often described as being conducted in rooms devoid of furniture except for a bowl of water. The fortune-teller would ask many questions about the person and his or her family, and sometimes shake and speak in unintelligible syllables before rendering the fortune. The fortune-teller would be paid in kind (e.g. animals or rice) or in cash, sometimes the equivalent of a month’s salary.

Of the refugees interviewed for this update, most had visited fortune-tellers whose services they had learned about from friends and relatives. Several noted that high-level officials also visit fortune-tellers and that high fees are paid for their services. All of the refugees knew that Shamanism was illegal, and some testified to taking part in political indoctrination sessions during which Shamanism was criticized. Two of those interviewed noted that books on fortune-telling can be purchased on the black market in North Korea.

<sup>28</sup> When this respondent was caught and sent to the NSA in North Korea, the NSA agent in charge of interrogating her was a Christian and helped her to avoid being killed.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 5 of *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*, pp. 56-7, for a brief description of Shamanism in Korea.

Several of the refugees stated that they knew of fortune-tellers being arrested and detained. Overall, however, the practice was tolerated because high-level officials and military officers frequented fortune-tellers. In analyzing the most recent interviews, it is difficult to determine any regional or provincial trends. However, it seems that fortune-tellers are tolerated as long as their practice continues to occur on a one-to-one basis and does not involve public assembly or open advertising.

The continuing proliferation of fortune-tellers and the apparent toleration of Shamanistic practice by North Korean security agencies may demonstrate an area where corruption and, to a smaller degree, spiritual or social needs trump political ideology. Fortune-tellers are criticized by government propaganda, and the practice's illegality is widely known. At the same time, large numbers of North Koreans consult with fortune-tellers in making major decisions and fortune-tellers are reportedly earning so much money for their services that bribing security officials is a common way to avoid arrest.

### *Specific Responses on the Existence of Folk Beliefs and Shamanism*

**Interviewee 1:** “Yes, there were many of them. Fortune-tellers do palm reading or face reading. They run their business at their own houses, running the risk of an arrest. Still, people recommend them to each other and they make money out of it. Fortune-telling is pretty popular there.”

**Interviewee 2:** “Yes, there are many. Unlike Christians...when [fortune-tellers] get caught doing their business, they are just put under investigation or receive light sentences.”

**Interviewee 3:** “The government tries to keep it under control. Still, because it's like a traditional custom, people go [to fortune-telling places] when they face difficulties. My grandmother and mother went to those places.”

**Interviewee 4:** “Yes, there are many places. However, it is rare in Pyongyang. They are found in rural areas. People go in secret.”

**Interviewee 5:** “Yes, there are many places. They are illegal. People do it in secret. Many old ladies who live there with their daughters run fortune-telling businesses. They are like shamans in South Korea. [People ask questions like] ‘Can I succeed if I open my business?’ ‘Won't I get caught if I smuggle myself into China through the river?’ ‘Is it all right if I live with this man/woman?’ My mother goes. [She] used to prepare a small table with a bowl of water and some food near the chimney and secretly prayed by rubbing her hands together. People bring pieces of cloth or something else when they don't have money.”

**Interviewee 6:** “Many people go to a fortune-teller. I also have been to one. The fortune-teller predicted that I would meet my husband. People still do it in secret even though the state made a movie, *Seonghwangdang*, in order to make people believe in Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il as the absolute power and the only ideology. Fortune-tellers are supposed to be arrested.”

**Interviewee 7:** “The government instructs us not to believe in fortune-telling or other superstitions. However, about 80 percent of the people believe in such things. Government officers also go. A fortune-teller told me that I would not get caught on my way to South Korea.”

**Interviewee 9:** “There are many places [for] exorcism, to tell a fortune, and to read a person's palm. Many people go in secret. Anyone who is found out may be sent to prison as a political offender. The pressure was relieved lately because state officials also visit fortune-tellers. The officials ask the fortune-tellers whether there would be difficulties in business or business trips. They also ask regarding their contracts. People do not know which house is a fortune-teller's. If strangers go to a fortune-teller, they cannot get their fortunes told [for fear of arrest]. There is a fixed price...depending on the number of persons who get their fortune told. If I want to know the fortune for my wife and children, I have to pay money for all members.”

**Interviewee 11:** “Yes, you can find them everywhere throughout the country. This is not done in public, but secretly done through introductions of acquaintances. Members of the Party [go]. They do it in secret. I have

done it several times whenever I faced difficulties in my business or whenever I was making plans for the future.”

**Interviewee 12:** “[In the Kim Il Sung Study Halls], they tell us not to believe in fortune-telling.”

**Interviewee 13:** “There are lots of places that do such services. I’ve done it...[for] business. If fortune-tellers receive money, the government will catch them. They don’t tell how much we should pay. We [decide the price] on our own—100 won, 500 won.”

**Interviewee 14:** “There are many. For example, our family provided the service too. Some people fall into a trance or some [use books]. My father also cured people for free. We also performed exorcisms. However, everybody knows. Even police, members of the NSA, and people who are well-off. Old fortune-tellers are allowed, but young ones cannot do it openly. I didn’t reveal myself in public that I do fortune-telling. They don’t [usually arrest] fortune-tellers.”

**Interviewee 15:** “The fortune-teller gives his services in secret. A fortune-teller will only tell fortunes [with a referral]. If they don’t know you, they don’t provide their services. Many Party members come in secret, too.”

**Interviewee 16:** “They don’t get arrested unless they get paid too much [and their predictions are wrong]. Then they get arrested under the charge of ‘fraud.’”

**Interviewee 17:** “There were a lot. All of them were illegal. My mom was very into that kind of stuff [fortune-telling]. She visited many places here and there so I told her not to do it because there was a risk of my identity being revealed. I once arrested a fortune-teller’s granddaughter, so she was very wary of me. When I visited her I had to keep telling her to relax.”

**Interviewee 18:** “There are many fortune-telling places. People go there often...soldiers go...every time when we had a chance. I used to ask [the fortune-teller] what would happen to me in the future. Members of the National Security Agency and police, they say they regulate them, but they also go and ask about their fortune. There are regulations but [superstition] is growing too fast to catch all of them. It is not allowed but they just let it be.”

**Interviewee 19:** “There are many fortune-telling books. In the past, there weren’t many [fortune-telling places], but as North Korea’s economy got worse, it became more popular. Nowadays, even police just go [to fortune-tellers] and ask questions.”

**Interviewee 20:** “Once a week, there is a policy seminar held at our company. There, they tell you not to believe in such superstitious things. They strongly lecture on the issue.”

**Interviewee 21:** “Fortune-telling service is not freely allowed. So, you get punishment if caught. The punishment is not that severe. Just confiscating some books.”

**Interviewee 22:** “Although it’s not legal, other executive members of the [Korean Workers] Party and their wives go there. My wife often went there.”

**Interviewee 24:** “They are illegal. They are more allowed than before. The government doesn’t control them as long as they do it quietly. They do it a lot in Pyongyang too. Older people go more often. Officials with position and power go there a lot. It costs [them] about 30,000 to 50,000 won [in South Korean currency]. Because my mother had heightened interests in those, we visited there many times. One time, the fortune-teller actually came to my house.”

**Interviewee 27:** “There are many places. On a New Year’s Day or on big holidays, people wait in line to see famous fortune-tellers. Because the fortune-telling service is not legally permitted, most fortune-telling houses are located in the mountains. When the sun goes down, a lot of cars [of high-ranking officials] go up the hill in lines.”

**Interviewee 28:** “I went to see a famous fortune-teller in Seonbong, North Hamgyeong Province when I was getting married. I gave her 450 won. At the time [a sack of] rice was 30 won. There was a time when the police blocked the area and caught people who came [to see the fortune-teller]. But since many officials came to see her and because she was good [in fortune-telling, the police] didn’t take her away.”

**Interviewee 29:** “[People] do it in secret, but they are suppressed. I know a fortune-teller who went to prison.”



*The interior of the Parliament, Pyongyang*

## EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF THE PERSECUTION OF MEMBERS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND REPATRIATED REFUGEES

This chapter presents interviewee testimony on the severe human rights violations of persons caught or presumed to be engaging in religious activity outside of the party-state sponsored religious federations. It also looks at the treatment of and punishments meted out to North Koreans who encountered religious believers while in China, including brutal interrogations, torture, inhumane conditions in detention, and executions.

Refugees consistently report that any religious activity is deemed illegal by the regime and practitioners can be arrested, sent to political prison camp (*kwanliso*), or executed. Unlike the last group of interviewees, refugees interviewed for this update did not provide direct testimony of public executions of those accused of engaging in religious activity.<sup>30</sup> Several said they had witnessed public executions for crimes that were not religious in nature, most dating back to the 1997-1999 period. There was also one account of a public execution in Chongin in 2003 for the sale of South Korean videos and DVDs.

Refugees interviewed for this report provided evidence of the arrest and disappearance of relatives for owning Bibles. There was also an eyewitness account of the public humiliation of a boy who memorized large parts of the Bible while in China. He and his family were arrested and disappeared. Refugees continued to provide testimony of other harsh penalties, including torture, mistreatment, and the disappearances of those suspected of religious activity.

### *Specific Responses on the Repression of Individuals on Account of their Religious Belief, Affiliation, or Practice*

**Interviewee 19:** “[My relative] brought a Bible from China and gave it to some close friends. But the rumor spread....the police heard [about it.] His entire family was taken to the prison camps (*kwanliso*)....I don’t think they will ever be released.”

**Interviewee 20:** “There was even a case of a child (16 years old). That kid was the same age as my kid. They made that kid stand on the platform, in front of gathered parents. They declared that it is a big problem how teenagers cross the river too often and how they spread rumors about God. There, the kid’s entire family was arrested in order to show an example. It happened in 2003 at Yuseon boys’ middle school. According to the rumor, that kid had learnt whole Bible scriptures by heart and that was the reason he was arrested. He stayed in China for eight months and got caught. And because of religion, he and his family were all arrested.”

**Interviewee 39:** “A person was shot to death on a riverside in Hoeryeong when I came out of the prison after repatriation. I asked why the person was shot and [they] said, “A person from Musan took the Bible from South Korean priests. But as soon as he came to North Korea, one of his relatives informed [the PSA] against

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter Four of *Thank you Father Kim Il Sung* for more on this subject.

him, so he got arrested yesterday and he is going to be shot to death.”<sup>31</sup>

### I. Persecution of Refugees along the North Korean-Chinese Border

Based upon the evidence from this study and the Commission’s previous study, as well as other prominent studies that utilize refugee interviews to analyze conditions in North Korea<sup>32</sup>, there is sufficient evidence to make the case that North Koreans in China should qualify as refugees under the relevant international standards. Either they are persons who have a well-founded fear of persecution had they remained in North Korea, or they are refugees because of the place to which they fled, persons who may not have fled persecution in the first place but who nonetheless risk persecution upon return to their country of origin. The Chinese government continues to forcibly repatriate North Koreans who have entered China without proper authorization back to North Korea, where they face brutal interrogations, detentions, forced labor, and disappearance into the infamous *kwanliso*, or political penal labor colonies. Such acts violate Article 33 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

The freedom to leave one’s country of origin is a right protected by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The DPRK is a party to the ICCPR.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, leaving North Korea without authorization is a violation of the North Korean penal code. In fact, in the 1980s and even the early 1990s, leaving North Korea was considered by the North Korean authorities as an intended “defection” to South Korea. During the height of the North Korean famine crisis of the mid to late 1990s, scores of thousands of North Koreans fled to China searching for food or employment to send money back to their families. Afraid of the consequences of this migra-

<sup>31</sup> This interviewee was a former director of the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League (called *sarochung*) and her husband was a Workers’ Party official.

<sup>32</sup> See Norma Kang Mucio, *Forced Labour in North Korean Prison Camps*, Anti-Slavery Society, London, 2007, and *North Korea: Harsher Policies Against Border Crossers*, Human Rights Watch, March 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights Art. 13; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Art. 12.2.

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*The Chinese government continues to forcibly repatriate North Koreans who have entered China without proper authorization back to North Korea, where they face brutal interrogations, detentions, forced labor, and disappearance into the infamous kwanliso, or political penal labor colonies. Such acts violate Article 33 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.*

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tion, the Chinese government repatriated thousands of North Koreans, resulting in intensified punishment of these deportees by North Korean authorities. In 2000, Kim Jong Il issued a decree declaring that North Koreans who crossed the border into China in search of food or a feasible livelihood would be treated “mercifully,” and penalties against them would decrease.<sup>34</sup> However, according to the direct testimony of interviewees who were forcibly repatriated, North Korean border police routinely torture refugees during interrogation to determine their intentions for leaving; if border guards uncover that any deportee met with South Koreans or had ongoing contacts with Protestant Christian organizations, their departure is deemed a political offense. According to this policy, many of those repatriated from China were sent to the penal labor colonies or to the *gyohwaso* (felony-level penitentiaries).

The number of North Koreans seeking refuge in China has decreased in the past several years as famine conditions have abated. However, there continue to be

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<sup>34</sup> Prior to the decree, anyone who was forcibly repatriated was automatically assumed guilty of treason and sentenced to a term in the *kyohwaso* criminal penitentiaries or the *kwanliso* political prisoner labor camps. Following the decree, once at the border, refugees were interrogated—in ways that included torture—to determine if they had crossed only for economic reasons. If so, after interrogation, they would be returned to their locality for approximately a month in a local detention center and then released. If guards determined they had left the country trying to defect, they would be sent to the *kyohwaso* or the *kwanliso*. For more information on recent changes in North Korea’s policy toward deported refugees, see *North Korea: Harsher Policies Against Border Crossers*, Human Rights Watch, March 2007.

those seeking asylum or economic survival in China, though both the North Korean and Chinese authorities forcefully discourage such activity. North Koreans hide among the large Korean-Chinese community in Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, where they are assisted by a network of religious and humanitarian organizations and Korean-Chinese churches. Conditions in China are often very difficult, particularly for women. A considerable number of them are sold as brides to Chinese widowers or Korean-Chinese bachelors in farming villages, whether voluntarily or under the threat of exposure to the Chinese police or the NSA agents of North Korea. Cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of women, including trafficking and forced labor, is pervasive. Because they are often indentured or married, North Korean women are not repatriated in the same numbers as men. In addition, Chinese police view North Korean males as a threat in terms of espionage and public security and thus place a higher priority on their capture and return.

Refugees continue to provide consistent testimony that North Korean police conduct intense interrogations at the border regarding their contacts and activities in China. Most testify that large numbers of repatriated North Koreans are sent to border detention centers or provincial incarceration facilities, including small, mobile labor detention facilities known as “Labor Training Camps.” North Koreans who are repatriated and punished by post-interrogation detention often conclude that they are “marked” as politically unreliable and have no future in North Korea. Thus, they sometimes flee a second or third time to China, often with the goal of reaching South Korea.<sup>35</sup>

### *Specific Responses on Refugee Lives in China after Fleeing North Korea*

**Interviewee 4:** “Religious groups provide a channel to South Korea by connecting North Korean [refugees] with a broker. However, if you have a pretty face, the broker

might want to sell you [as a bride instead.] It’s scary... you don’t have any choice since he can decide your life... unless you should spend a night with him. I was so scared of it that I asked for help from a guy from North Korea and was able to avoid that risk.”

**Interviewee 27:** “Most women [refugees] I met in the Korean-Chinese church told me that they had that kind of experience [sexual trafficking], except for those who had relatives in China. Pimps in China do their business in cahoots with the Chinese police. For male North Korean defectors, trafficking cannot be an option because so many of them are ferreted out and are repatriated to North Korea. In the case of male North Korean defectors, they conceal their identities and work in farms or coal mines, or at construction sites. Even so, finding that kind of work is not that easy.”

**Interviewee 28:** “Many young North Korean women [like me] who marry old Chinese men are so abused that they run away leaving their children behind.”

**Interviewee 29:** “I know a case where a North Korean sold five North Korean women in cooperation with the North Korean army. Chinese people were waiting on the border. However, male [refugees] have more difficulties. Chinese police treat male defectors more severely because they think they are more threatening to Chinese public security. If a male defector says that he served in the army, then he is immediately shackled.

I stayed on a mountain in China, but Chinese police find North Koreans even deep in the mountains. North Koreans get caught because they cannot speak Chinese and they don’t have an ID card. [Because of police efforts] even Korean-Chinese churches do not much help North Korean refugees; they just give the defectors one or two meals and a [bus] fare, but never provide them with accommodations.”

**Interviewee 30:** “North Korean women are usually sold to Chinese people. [Once a woman is sold], they guard the woman so that she can’t go anywhere. There are also many cases where women actually wish to be sold of their own desire because their situation is so difficult. A 20-year-old woman is sold to a 70-year-old man. I once witnessed in Heilongjiang Province that a

<sup>35</sup> For further information on the situation of North Korean refugees in China and their treatment upon repatriation see *Invisible Exodus: North Koreans in the People’s Republic of China*, Human Rights Watch, 2002; *Hidden Gulag*, US Committee on Human Rights in North Korea, 2003; and most recently, *Acts of Betrayal: The Challenge of Protecting North Koreans in China*, Refugees International, 2005.

Korean-Chinese woman was selling seven North Korean women. The seven were seated and [buyers] chose from among them. [Women] are not sold to rich people but to very poor people or handicapped people. They are sent to rural towns. Prices vary depending on the age [of the woman]. It is just like trading goods. Because [North Korean women] don't speak Chinese, they are sold and treated like slaves.”

**Interviewee 31:** “I entered China when the situation was not good. I was in a Korean town in Wangqing and Chinese police came in to search at night, which made me nervous. Sixty people were caught at the time and they were all executed in North Korea because they were all apparently heading to South Korea.”

## II. Treatment of North Korean Refugees After Repatriation From China

Over two-thirds of the North Koreans interviewed for this report had fled to China, were caught by Chinese police, and subsequently were forcibly repatriated to North Korea, where they were detained and interrogated by North Korean police. From their testimony it is clear that religion was an important factor in determining the length and severity of their punishment. Virtually all interviewees reported that after being asked preliminary questions about how they had fled to China, where they had crossed the border, where they went, and what they did in China, they were specifically asked (1) if they had attended Korean-Chinese churches,<sup>36</sup> and (2) if they had had any contact with South Koreans in China, including representatives of religious organizations doing charitable or humanitarian work in the border area.<sup>37</sup> Contact with South Koreans is considered a political offense, as is suspicion of close and continuing contact with religious believers in China.

<sup>36</sup> There is considerable religious activity in the area of Northeast China populated by ethnic Koreans. Korean-Chinese churches are plainly evident in many cities and towns, and the North Koreans fleeing to China go to these churches for help.

<sup>37</sup> There are large numbers of South Korean businessmen, students, and tourists in Northeast China. Additionally, there are faith-based South Korean NGOs that go to Northeast China precisely to help the North Koreans looking for food and/or refuge. There are also South Korean missionaries who travel to this part of China to evangelize both Korean-Chinese and North Koreans who have fled to China.

Among the respondents who had been forcibly repatriated to North Korea and re-escaped after 2003, nine claimed that their contact with Christians in China increased the severity of their punishment.<sup>38</sup> However, at least one refugee testified that he was repatriated four times and was surprised that during his last interrogation, no torture was conducted despite his confession of having taken part in a Bible study in China.<sup>39</sup> One revealing piece of evidence that emerges from the interviews is that most recent refugees knew to avoid admitting contact with South Koreans or having any religious affiliation. Information about border interrogations is shared among refugees in China. In addition, former security agents testified that it was well-known that Korean-Chinese churches provided food and aid for refugees. Thus, in recent years, police have been less harsh with refugees who admitted to attending churches only for shelter or food.

### *Specific Interviewee Descriptions of and Responses on the Treatment of Refugees Who Have Had Contact with Religious Groups and Organizations in China*

Interviewee 3 was sent with his older brother to the NSA prison in North Hamgyeong Province for one year and three months. His older brother killed himself while in prison. He was asked by NSA interrogators what he did in China, whether he had ever contacted South Koreans and whether he had contacted any church. He was told that if he answered “yes” to these questions, his status would change and he would be treated differently. He described his treatment in prison as follows: “Just like animals. An animal without a name. It’s up to the condition of the guards. Because killing a prisoner will do no harm for them... When they feel stretched out or to hide some undesirable motives from a prisoner, they beat him/her up.”

Interviewee 7 testified about how she was treated at the PSA detention center when she was repatriated. She was asked why she went to China and whether she had contact with a church or missionary. She was forced to kneel for a whole day; if she moved the guards beat her. The guard asked the prisoners to hit each other. If they

<sup>38</sup> Interviewees 3, 7, 8, 14, 16, 23, 25, 28, 30, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Interviewee 29.

did not obey, the guard would hit them. Her brother was sent to jail for 10 years because he admitted to having made contact with Christians in China.

Interviewee 8 was sent to Saetbyeol, the PSA detention center in North Hamgyong Province, and later was sent to the NSA's prison at Onseong. She described her interrogations as follows: "They didn't ask whether I had encountered Buddhists but asked whether I had contact with Christians. I was kicked and struck severely. I had to stand all day long and I was not permitted to move or speak. It was impermissible to raise my hand or to walk. If I went to the bathroom, a guard followed me. When they asked again whether I had heard of Christianity, I admitted that I had."

At the detention center, prisoners had to follow the regulations by being seated and were not permitted to talk to anyone else. There seemed to be about 200 prisoners. Two compartments were for men. A fistful of corn powder and five spoonfuls of thin porridge were distributed three times a day. There was a hallway on both sides [of the detention center], and there were three partitions so prisoners could sit in the middle. There were almost 50 persons in a small partition with a small iron door. They beat me whenever I had difficulties breathing due to my weak heart."

Interviewee 16 was put in the PSA detention center in Saetbyeol, North Hamgyeong Province for three months. The prisoners were forced to sit on the floor and could not speak or make eye contact with other prisoners. About 20 people were held in a cell. Prisoners were given 10 minutes to exercise, but then had to return to the floor. They were given heated corn husks in water for food. The refugee added that she was told directly "that if she had carried the Bible of God into North Korea, she would be sent to the *kwanliso* and they would kill her there."

Interviewee 23 was in prison for three years following 2000 in Hamheung and Cheongjin and she describes the situation as follows: "I was beaten up and ate nothing for three days after being detained for the first time on 10 January 2000. They knocked my head with an iron hook. I was hung head down from the prison bars with shackles on my legs and I was beaten with an iron hook. My shoulder was also beaten. Those sufferings resulted in the rupture of a capillary. I had to sit and could not make

even a motion all day long from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m., which continued for six months from February to July."

Interviewee 25 is a 30-year-old female who testified that she had been repatriated to North Korea in 2005 and put in Onseong because of her admitted contact with South Korean religious groups in China. She said there was no torture except she had to sit on the floor without moving.

Interviewee 29 escaped North Korea four times and was sent to an NSA political labor camp four times. He describes the moment he entered the prison as follows: "When I was sent to Onseong, the NSA officer said to me 'Damn you! I'll beat your face!' and they poured cold water on me and kicked me. There were about 50 – 60 people in a cell, so we had to sleep in a seated position because there was no room to lie down. There was one toilet in the cell, so the entire cell was like a dung tub. Many people died of colitis because of the polluted water. There were so many lice. We got a mouthful of overcooked noodles three times a day." During his fourth repatriation, he revealed that he had joined a Bible study group in China. In his words, "the NSA officer told me, 'You are a stranger and you have a child! So you should be clever! In these days most people agree that God is good, don't they?' And they sent me to Hamheung (short-term detention center) instead of putting me in Political Offense Concentration Camp."

Interviewee 30 escaped and was repatriated three times before reaching South Korea in 2003. She describes her detention at Onseong as follows: "It was a small room and I was there for about eight days. About 80 people were in that small room. [In the room, people] must be seated with their heads bowed down. If you raise your head, you would get beaten. People who were beaten had bruises all over their bodies. We were put to bed at 10 o'clock and I really thought that dying would be better. There was a woman who gave birth in the cell, but the guards took the baby away. It seemed like in my cell about 10 people out of 80 were believers. [They] kept praying. So I started to pray with them."



*A South Korean soldier facing the North side at Panmunjeom in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Korea*

## THE POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF REPRESSION: TESTIMONIES OF FORMER SECURITY AGENCY OFFICIALS

This chapter includes interviews with six North Koreans who worked for police or surveillance agencies, including the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Public Security Agency (PSA), and one former official with the Korean Workers' Party. The information provided by these officials offers unusual insight into the DPRK's repressive policies and practices. In addition, the testimony of the former security agents supplements previous research, as most evidence on religious freedom and other human rights in North Korea stems from refugees who left North Korea because of food shortages and other severe hardships.<sup>40</sup>

The role and tactics of North Korean security agencies may already be known to those familiar with the repressive tactics of totalitarian societies. However, the information provided by the former security agents illustrates the constant surveillance, the arbitrary power, and the extent to which North Koreans are recruited to inform on each other. As one former official said, "North Korea is a prison without bars. . . . The reason why the North Korean system still exists is because of the strict surveillance system."

Former security agents testified to executions of political offenders, including eyewitness accounts of a specially trained officer with the job of executing prisoners with one blow from a hammer. Such officers are reportedly referred to as man-butchers (*baekjeong*). One agent who worked for 20 years in the Political Offense

Concentration Camp said he witnessed secret executions where "the [accused] digs the hole to be buried and then the *baekjeong* strikes him just one time with a two-knuckle-sized hammer." Former security agents also testified that public executions of political offenders and criminals were curtailed in recent years because of negative public attention to the practice.

The interviews also provided information about the way security agencies view the threat from religious adherents, how they organize and train to suppress religious activity, and the incentives that are provided to those who uncover clandestine activity. As one former agent said, "because religious people are classified as political offenders, there is a great reward [in promotions and decorations]." Conversely, security agents are often "desperate because if they don't catch two or more cases, they cannot get promoted and they might get kicked out [of the NSA]." The former police agents also told of being trained in religion in order to infiltrate prayer meetings or pose as "pastors." Some told of going to China to attend Protestant churches and to collect information on the sources of support available to refugees there.<sup>41</sup> Another described the NSA's efforts to set up false underground religious meetings to attract North Koreans who had become Christians before returning to the DPRK.

<sup>40</sup> Four respondents were from the NSA (Interviewees 33-36), two from the PSA (Interviewees 37, 38), and one was from the Workers' Party (Interviewee 39).

<sup>41</sup> For additional accounts of North Korean security agents entering China to infiltrate the North Korean refugee community on the border area and reporting back to the North Korean NSA, see *Perilous Journeys: The Plight of North Korean Refugees in China and Beyond*, International Crisis Group, October 2006.

The former security agents are particularly interested in halting new Protestant religious activity inside North Korea that is spread by North Koreans who convert while in China. This activity is considered both a security and an ideological threat; the latter because the agents all believed that South Korean and American intelligence agencies are behind the spread of Protestantism and the former because Protestantism is a “leading element” challenging the “One and Only Ideology—*KimIlSungism*.” According to one former security agent, “In a way....all threats are related to religion.”<sup>42</sup>

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*Said one former NSA agent, “North Korea isn’t interested in people who escape North Korea because of the shortage of food; we target those who escape in order to go to South Korea or [become] religious believers.”*

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### I. The Roles and Methods of the PSA and NSA

The NSA coordinates efforts to uncover “reactionary elements” and “anti-government forces” within the DPRK. According to those interviewed, the NSA’s Counterintelligence Department (*bantamgwa*) is in charge of identifying, arresting, and incarcerating political offenders, ideological dissidents, foreign spies, and illegal religious adherents. Religious activity can be considered a political crime if an individual is suspected of having close and continuing contact with Protestant religious groups in China or of intending to worship outside of the government-approved federations. Said one former NSA agent, “North Korea isn’t interested in people who escape North Korea because of the shortage of food; we target those who escape in order to go to South Korea or [become] religious believers.”<sup>43</sup>

The People’s Safety Agency (PSA) network is the national police force whose primary concern is conven-

tional criminal activity. However, the PSA is also involved in the process of religious repression, mostly because its extensive network of informants provides information on clandestine religious activity, according to interviewees. For the most part, the PSA is responsible for North Korean defectors who cross the border into China. PSA agents will question repatriated refugees, seeking to identify those who became Christians or had contact with foreign humanitarian organizations in China. The PSA usually hands over those suspected of “political offenses” to the NSA. However, according to those interviewed, as the two agencies compete for resources and prestige there are organizational rivalries.

In their efforts to uncover “anti-government” and “reactionary elements,” the NSA and PSA utilize a network of “informants” and the “resident registration dossier,”<sup>44</sup> which contains information on family backgrounds, past religious activities, and political propensities. Each North Korean citizen has such a dossier. The PSA’s Department of Resident Registration compiles the dossiers through secret investigations. The resident registration dossiers are used for identifying, monitoring, and punishing those accused of political offenses, including engaging in unauthorized religious activity.

Agents reportedly run networks of informants to create the resident registration dossiers and to provide information on clandestine activities and “political offenses,” including religious activities. Agents are given considerable rewards for identifying and arresting “political offenders,” including religious adherents. Rewards are usually given in the form of medals, pay, or promotion. Informants are also “rewarded” by having unfavorable family information (*songbun*)<sup>45</sup> deleted or changed, or sometimes they are given permission to move to a more desirable place.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The interviewee who gave this information, whose relative was a NSA agent, testified that in the late 1980s, there were instructions requiring every agent to operate 30 informants.

<sup>45</sup> *Songbun* refers to the DPRK system that stratifies society on the basis of family background and perceived loyalty to the regime. For additional information, see the chapter on North Korea in *Annual Report 2007*, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 2007.

<sup>46</sup> According to Interviewee 42, membership in the Party, admission to university, and enrollment in the NSA are other ways of rewarding informants.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewee 38.

<sup>43</sup> Interviewee 34.

### *Specific Responses on Surveillance Methods of the PSA and NSA*

**Interviewee 33:** “The NSA officers in charge of a district have all official documents regarding the residents, so they know everything about an individual’s [life and family history.] We find this out by informants. We [use] this information to decide whether to arrest a person. We have many informants. There are [risks and rewards] of being an informant. If an [investigation fails or the NSA officer defects] his informants can be executed. When an informant finds something useful, that person will be compensated for his service with a mark of honor rather than money; he could be exempted from his bad family background, get a better job, or he could even be moved to Pyongyang for his safety.

“The officer picks a person with [a poor family] background or...some other flaw. The NSA officer takes the [potential informant] to his office, and beats him severely without mercy because even if the person dies, no one would even know or care about it. After the severe beatings, the officer...asks him to write down any misdemeanors he committed. [When he is done writing,] the officer yells, ‘Why did you skip over [your crimes]?’ When the officer threatens to send the person over to the PSA and says that he will receive a three to four-year sentence, then the person begs for his life and says, ‘Save me just this once, please.’ Then the officer says to him, ‘Ok, I’ll forgive you if you do something for me.’”

**Interviewee 34:** “We arrest political offenders after securing evidence by using all our informants. In the past, there was a group called the Northwest Youth Association. I was in charge of tracing...that group. They were all executed. Things like possessing religious books, sharing one’s faith with others, or preaching cannot exist because they undermine the Kim Jong Il regime. All we need [to arrest someone] is one bit of evidence such as the Bible with someone’s name on it. If the Bible is found, [the NSA] leaves it until the real owner shows up.”

**Interviewee 37:** “I joined the Department of Resident Registration in the Public Security Agency (PSA) and created [official] documents on residents through secret investigations. The documents still exist and play an im-

portant role in oppressing [North Korean] human rights. I was in charge of one village and I investigated residents secretly in that village. Then I made a document called a ‘residents’ register’ after investigating what people did in the past and what their parents did in the old times. When someone wants to go to college, join the Party, or get a job, the executive [of the Party] first studies the document and if the executive decides that this person cannot work for them in the future, then that person cannot go to college. North Koreans are classified according to their background in the residents’ register. Families of POWs [prisoners of war] are listed as Number 43, families that have been exiled and were brought back are listed as Number 49, people who committed a flagrant offense during the war or before independence are a hostile group and they are listed as Number 149. Religious people are not classified because they were supposed to have been liquidated after the revolution. A Ms. Kim has a mother who was a Protestant evangelist. Her husband had an important post in the Party and she wanted to join the Party, but because of her background, she could not. She visited me to eliminate the record of her mother, so I took her name off the list. Confirmation of seven people is required to make a document that a person’s ancestor was a Christian.”

**Interviewee 38:** “There are always four groups of surveillance teams and they are the NSA, the PSA, the Party, and the neighborhood unit. [We] give instructions to the neighborhood unit and the Primary Party Committee to

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*“Things like possessing religious books, sharing one’s faith with others, or preaching cannot exist because they undermine the Kim Jong Il regime. All we need [to arrest someone] is one bit of evidence such as the Bible with someone’s name on it. If the Bible is found, [the NSA] leaves it until the real owner shows up.”*

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*“When we provide the information like ‘this family believes in a religion from their grandfather’s generation,’ the NSA will arrest each family member. That is why entire families are scared of one another. Everyone is supposed to be watching one another like this.”*

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watch [certain] people. We tell them to watch them closely and report [the list of] people who visit them. We are to be informed once every 15 days. There were lots of religious people in Jeongju, Gwaksan, Unjeon, and Namsinuiju, so people in that area are still prohibited from moving to other places and no executive party members are selected from that area. People there are closely watched [by the PSA] throughout their entire lives. If an informant does a good job, we sometimes write an official letter from the PSA [to that person’s workplace] saying, ‘this person has ferretted out a religious believer at his workplace and is not comfortable in this company, please transfer this person to another company’ and in this way, we find a better job for that person. That is how we make people watch one another.”

**Interviewee 39:** “North Korea is a prison without bars. The reason why the North Korean system still exists is because of the strict surveillance system. When we provide the information like ‘this family believes in a religion from their grandfather’s generation,’ the NSA will arrest each family member. That is why entire families are scared of one another. Everyone is supposed to be watching one another like this. All organizations, the Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League, and the Women’s League are [gathering information].”

### *Specific Responses on Training Given to Uncover Clandestine Religious Activity*

**Interviewee 34:** “In North Korea, there is a school called the National University of Security and Defense.

In principle, students can enter after graduating from university and receive special education for four to five years. There is no special education on religious issues. However, [some] study about religion in order to ferret out religious people. There are samples of Bibles in all languages in the NSA.”

**Interviewee 35:** “There are courses for religion in Kim Il Sung University and most graduates [or religion majors] go abroad or work for the domestic [religious groups], but most of them are recruited by the NSA. [Sometimes,] the NSA selects a person and then asks Kim Il Sung University to educate him on religion. There are courses on...theology now [because] there are missionaries and pastors in North Korea. NSA officers also learn skills and techniques for interrogating [religious people]. The officer who investigated me knew Christian terms and...seemed to have read the Bible. When I went to China last May (2006), I met a person who was an NSA informant. He said that he was being trained to uncover religious people [according to] special directions from the NSA. [He was supposed to look for things] such as a person who remains silent with closed eyes and meditates or when habitual smokers or drinkers quit smoking or drinking all of the sudden. [These people] should be targets to be watched closely.”<sup>47</sup>

**Interviewee 36:** “Agents are educated in the National University of Security and Defense, but sometimes professors come and teach them secretly. An agent is told to have a religion, but it is for infiltrating the enemy.”<sup>48</sup>

**Interviewee 37:** “We just learn that ‘because a religion is a drug, it can be spread in a second, and [that is how] Gorbachev of Russia fell because imperialism penetrated through religion.’ In this way, [all threats] are related to religion.”

<sup>47</sup> This interviewee was sent undercover to China as a false escapee.

<sup>48</sup> This interviewee was trained as a spy in the NSA.

## II. Uncovering Clandestine Religious Activity: the Training and Tactics of Security Agencies in the DPRK

Some North Korean security officials are trained to understand religions, identify religious literature, and interrogate those suspected of clandestine religious activity. They are trained to ask questions to determine if a repatriated refugee intends to practice Christianity in the DPRK. According to those interviewed, questions on Buddhism are not asked. The NSA both recruits students from the religion department of Kim Il Sung University and sends security agents there for training.

The interviewees also told of the tactics used to uncover clandestine religious activity or missionary activity, including infiltrating religious communities, recruiting informants among Chinese-Korean pastors, and posing as “pastors” or “elders.” Most of this activity took place in China, in the Protestant churches of Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture. However, the wife of a former security officer also testified that her husband set up “fake prayer meetings” in North Korea to try and attract Christian converts who had been repatriated from China.

### *Specific Responses on Tactics Used to Uncover Clandestine Religious Activity*

**Interviewee 34:** “Research [on religious groups] is conducted in two ways. First, North Korea trains pastors and sends them out on a mission. Second, there are cases where [the NSA recruits] real pastors as informants in China. Members of the church do not know that their pastor is our informant or spy. That’s how we can capture [religious believers]. Otherwise, we can’t capture them.”

**Interviewee 35:** “As large numbers of North Koreans... started to escape and information [about North Korea] started to leak, the NSA created the 8th Division to stop the leaks. I was recruited in this new division and went to China as an undercover North Korean defector. My boss gave me a mission [to find out if] political defectors received help from religious groups or Christian groups. The NSA still sends spies posing as Christians in order to uncover [missionaries] among the North Korean refugees.”

## III. NSA and PSA Operations Along the China-North Korea Border

Former security agents interviewed for this report confirm the testimony of refugees about harsh interrogation, torture, and detention, including incarceration in political prison camps, if it is discovered that a refugee had contact with South Korean groups or converted to Protestant Christianity while in China.

According to former agents, repatriated refugees are asked questions to determine if they have had contact with South Koreans in China and whether or not they have close and continuing contact with religious groups. The security agents state that beatings, threats, and other forms of mistreatment regularly occur during the interrogation. If the interrogator is convinced a refugee had little or insignificant contact with religious groups in China, he or she is turned over to the PSA for short-term detention. However, if it is determined that a refugee has had extensive contact with religious activity and foreign religious groups in China, he or she is handed over to the NSA, and can be sent to the *kwanliso*, where the person experiences inhumane conditions, including torture and hard labor.

There is evidence, however, that North Korean security agents are distinguishing between the humanitarian and religious roles played by Korean-Chinese churches. According to the agents, simple attendance at a Korean Christian church in China may not be considered a “political” crime. This corroborates the testimony of some recently repatriated refugees who claim that they found leniency when insisting that their affiliation with South Korean groups or churches was temporary and needs-based. Said one former NSA agent, “(I)f a [repatriated refugee insists] that they went to church because they were hungry... we let them pass and tell them not to tell anyone that they went to church.”

The overall picture provided by former security officers is of the inhumane and cruel conditions faced by repatriated refugees during interrogation and detention. It also confirms the argument that North Korean refugees in China should be given international protection because of the torture and imprisonment they face upon return.

### *Specific Responses on Interrogation by the NSA and PSA*

**Interviewee 33:** “There are no preliminary hearings when religious people get caught. [We] regard them as anti-revolutionary elements. When such an offender is caught in North Korea, the NSA officers surround the person and kick and beat the person severely before interrogating. When repatriated refugees are interrogated, they are first asked whether they had gone to a church in China. North Korea is very concerned about religion. However, no question is asked on Buddhism. Most of those repatriated say they went to church [to receive] food, but that they stayed in the mountains. They pretend to know nothing of religion. If it works, then they are sent to the PSA. Many of those who are repatriated know to avoid discussing religion. However, if they get caught [during the interrogation], they are turned over to the NSA. North Koreans in China cannot speak ill of Kim Jong Il because no one knows who [is an informant] or who will be repatriated. A repatriated refugee may confess everything [they know]. The NSA will have a document.”

**Interviewee 34:** “We usually just ask them general questions like ‘did any [South Koreans] give you money?’ and ‘Is God good?’ to test them. If we find out that this person is untrustworthy we bring in a professional investigator. I have witnessed many cases where investigators [either let a person go free] or send them to *kwanliso*. [When refugees are held in detention] there can’t be secrets because when a group of people is repatriated or captured, [they know each other] from the church in China, etc. But [interrogations are more difficult] now since too many refugees have been to church in China. If a [repatriated refugee insists] that they went to church because they were hungry... we let them pass.”

**Interviewee 38:** “The most important question asked to the repatriated is whether they have met South Korean missionaries or evangelists or encountered or experienced religion. If they confess that they have met missionaries or deacons... then without any further questions, they will be sent to the NSA and they are as good as dead. However, only a small number of cases involve religions.

“[In order to find out the truth] we interrogate seven – eight times. We compare all the interrogations... when

a prisoner forgets to include [information in written confessions] we find out what is really true. This way we find out that the prisoner really believed in a religion. [If we don’t find out what we want during interrogations] we let people go hungry for about three months, [then they inform] on each other naturally. [In prison], we give two big spoonfuls of bean-mixed rice and it is comprised of 20 percent beans, 70 percent corn, and 10 percent rice. If they behave well, then [we give] a full cup of soup and they can at least fill their stomach with water. We don’t give enough water. Also because the place is cramped, [the prisoners] are seated in two rows and are not even allowed to raise their heads.”

### **IV. Religion as a Security and Ideological Threat**

According to former security agents, refugees who left North Korea for food or jobs are no longer considered enemies of the state or defectors who should be “publicly executed for having a capitalist ideology.” Repatriated refugees who are determined to have left North Korea solely for economic motivations are detained for relatively short periods of time. However, refugees who confess to religious belief, or are suspected of spreading Christianity, are viewed as “political offenders” or “foreign spies.” They are subject to the harshest penalties, including hard labor and lengthy imprisonment. The potential spread of Protestantism particularly is viewed as a destabilizing force, a “poison that could affect other people,” because it presents an ideological alternative to *KimIlSungism*.<sup>49</sup>

The North Korean government views Buddhism and Shamanism as types of “superstitions,” the security agents said, but not as political or ideological threats. These religious traditions “do not spread.” Nevertheless, Buddhism and Shamanism remain illegal. As noted above, the practice of Shamanism is now widespread and unofficially tolerated by government authorities, as long as the practice is not overt and occurs between or among individuals. Buddhism continues to be officially recognized through the preservation of temples as cultural heritage sites; however, unhindered religious practice does not occur openly at these sites. Protestant

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee 38.

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*The North Korean government views Buddhism and Shamanism as types of “superstitions,” the security agents said, but not as political or ideological threats. These religious traditions “do not spread.”*

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Christianity, in contrast, is implicitly viewed as a dangerous security threat. All the former security agents interviewed for this report stated that they believed Protestantism was spread by South Korean and American intelligence agencies to undermine Pyongyang’s interests and to gather information on North Korea. North Koreans who return from China to evangelize are considered “pawns of infiltration and spies.”

The threat of Protestant Christianity is directly related to its origins. Thus, according to some of those interviewed, a family of believers practicing “remnant” forms of Protestantism or Catholicism, i.e., religious adherence that predates the establishment of the DPRK, will receive lighter punishment than those who were converted in China or in the DPRK through the efforts of missionaries from South Korea or China.

### *Specific Responses of Former North Korean Security Agents*

**Interviewee 33:** “The punishment of religious people varies according to that person’s current activity—whether he was active or in hiding. The fact that a person keeps a Bible means that this person plans to believe in a religion in the future. Those who have had faith for generations are punished only to the extent that the NSA agent can find out about it, but the punishment is light. The most severe punishment is applied to those who are engaged in the [new religious] activity: those who carry the Bible from China and those Christians who help North Korean refugees in China.

“North Korean authorities do not care about Buddhism. When they mention a religion, it is mainly Prot-

estantism rather than Catholicism or Buddhism. I went to a fortune-teller many times. There are many old fortune-telling ladies in North Korea. While I was in North Korea, there were no executions of Catholics or Buddhists. There are many temples, Confucian temples, and the shrines of a tutelary deity. If someone puts rice cakes or something inside, then it was considered as a superstition and the person got beaten. Even Buddhist temples were regarded as superstitions. Therefore, North Koreans consider Buddhism as a different thing from religion.

“The target of the search is Protestantism. None of the North Korean defectors are asked, ‘Did you go to a Buddhist temple?’ when repatriated. This is the thinking process of the NSA officers because I myself was never [concerned] with Buddhists while I was in the NSA. Protestantism is the only religion that is so persecuted because basically, it is related to the United States... and is considered spying. Since Americans conveyed Christianity and since they are the ones who attempted to invade our country, those who are Christians are spies. Spies are executed.

“The level of punishment for Christians is different from that of fortune-tellers. Although [the authorities] regulate and interrogate fortune-tellers, they just ask, ‘How many times did you provide your service? What did you receive as payments?’ and send them to a lockup for a few days. They are not even handed over to the PSA. Some get acquainted and visit a fortune-telling service. The executives of the Party would go together in secret.”

**Interviewee 34:** “We are not interested in people who escape North Korea because they are hungry. The targets are those who escape in order to go to South Korea and those who become religious believers and come back to North Korea. Protestant religious organizations are considered political offenders and traitors attempting to [overthrow] the government.

“Buddhism has nothing to do with politics. Buddhist organizations don’t spread religion and are considered to be superstitions, so, if we find them, they...do forced labor for about six months. We just consider this a superstition.

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*“Kim Jong Il is more afraid of his own people than the United States. The great god of North Korea is Kim Jong Il and if that changes to a real god, it can stir up people.”*

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“Regarding Buddhism, monks are actually members of the Party. They practice how to pray to Buddha and they are enthusiastic because they are well paid when they complete their missions well. When I visit my [monk] friend and ask him to go out to drink with me, he declines. However, after foreign visitors are gone and events are over, he runs to the pub and drinks. There are also some cases where people start to believe sincerely. Even the NSA can’t say anything about them because when foreigners and South Koreans visit, they give some money to [monks] and some of that money comes to us. Since it costs money to buy foreign cigarettes and so on, we just report as nothing special is going on.

“You know, first of all, Chondokyo has its origin in the independence of Korea and also Kim Il Sung had received many benefits from it. In the times of the anti-Japanese movement, Kim Il Sung had received financial support from Chondokyo and he also knew that Chondokyo won’t spread its influence much within the society. The idea is that, at least Chondokyo doctrines are patriotic and they teach us to value our own culture so why would one want to believe something that has come from the West such as Christianity and Catholicism.”

**Interviewee 35:** “In 2001, there was Kim Jong Il’s ‘generous politics policy’ which said, ‘people who went to China are not traitors if they went because of hunger. [After repatriation] they should be set free after several months of investigation and detention.’ This was because there were great numbers of people who escaped North Korea. I knew of Christians who were detained for two months in 2003. They were about to be set free when [someone from] the group informed [the authorities].

They were taken away by the NSA from the detention center in Cheongjin, North Hamgyeong Province.

“Christians are regarded as spies. If you meet a Christian, it is considered the same as meeting a South Korean intelligence officer. Spies and Christians are sent to the *kwanliso*. They are treated equally. Most people who are Christians or who met Christians are sent to Yodok to serve sentences of between four years and life. People who spread Protestantism—instead of just believing—are sentenced to life sentences.

“There was an incident in Xian, where about 70 North Korean refugees were living. A Korean-Chinese informed the Chinese police and they were arrested. The North Korean border police called the Ujin military unit in Yanbian. They took the Christians by train to North Korea. The arrestees kept praying even as they were beaten. The group leaders and the most faithful ones were sent to *kwanliso*.”

**Interviewee 36:** “Christianity was suppressed more than Buddhism because it is against the One and Only Ideology. Kim Il Sung is god; a real God [cannot] replace him. Believing in [Protestantism] is an act of espionage... Religion is a poison that can be spread to other people.

“Regarding Buddhism, there are temples in North Korea. Many people pray in front of a candle and a bowl of water in their homes, and no one cares about it. [The authorities] crack down on superstitions temporarily, but do not maintain their policy, and many even are going to the fortune-teller. Many refugees carry the Bible with them back to North Korea because they would do anything for the money. If caught, they are sent to *kwanliso*. The authorities have rarely executed political offenders lately because human rights in North Korea became an issue worldwide...but now they are sent to inland mountain areas where living is difficult.”

**Interviewee 37:** “Everything except Christianity is fine. When a person is caught carrying the Bible, he will be punished severely because he has brought an external influence to North Korea. A person caught carrying the Bible is doomed. When a person is caught [worshipping], he will be sent to *kwanliso*...and the whole family may disappear.”

**Interviewee 38:** “Buddhism is tolerated a little. Buddhists tend to keep their religion to themselves, but Christianity spreads fast unlike Buddhism. [Christians] don’t pray alone, but try to get together in numbers and also they spread fast. Kim Jong Il is more afraid of his own people than the United States. The great god of North Korea is Kim Jong Il and if that changes to a real god, it can stir up people.”



*A North Korean temple near Baekdu Mountain, close to the Chinese border*

# METHODOLOGY FOR AND INFORMATION ON THE NORTH KOREAN REFUGEE INTERVIEWS

## I. The Interview Questions

During the course of the Commission's project, 72 former North Koreans were asked a series of questions designed to elicit information on several aspects of respect for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in North Korea. The first question was short but open-ended: Does freedom of religion or belief exist in North Korea? And second, why or why not?

Another series of questions asked the interviewees if they had ever encountered or seen any (1) authorized or permitted religious venues, worship places, or activities; (2) religious literature such as texts from the Buddhist Tripitika or the Christian Bible; or (3) religious personnel such as priests, pastors, or monks. They were also asked about their awareness of the holy days of various religions, and whether they knew about religion before they had gone to China and South Korea. In the second round of interviews, several questions were asked regarding the North Korean government's dissemination of anti-religion propaganda, including through its educational system, mass media such as television or radio broadcasting, or other ways.

The North Korean Constitution proclaims *Juche*, or *KimIlSungism*, as the country's official ideology, and virtually all observers note that this state ideology is itself highly religious in nature. Thus, a series of questions were asked about the implementation and propagation of *Juche/KimIlSungism* as the official "belief system." Questions were also asked about alternative systems of thought and belief. Interviewees were asked if they had

ever encountered "underground," illegal, secret, or unauthorized religious activity, and if so, what kind.

Finally, interviewees were asked about any encounters they might have had with religion while residing without formal government approval in China. They were also asked whether there were any consequences to such encounters when they were caught by Chinese police and forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

## II. Overviews of the First and Second Series of Interviews (72 North Koreans)

*The First Round of Interviews of 40 North Koreans who Fled the DPRK Before 2003*

The 40 persons questioned in the first round of interviews were split almost evenly between men and women. However, there was no discernable correlation of responses by gender. The interviewees included former housewives, traders or sellers (small business operators), teachers, students, factory workers, soldiers, policemen, construction workers, office workers, and low-level state officials. As was the case with gender, the responses of the interviewees to questions of interest for the Commission's first report did not correlate with previous occupation and/or profession.

One respondent was 73 years old, four were in their 60s, and one was 20 years old, but the bulk of interviewees were in their early to mid-30s. One of the interviewees fled North Korea in 1989, two left in 1996, three in 1997, and three in 2003. The rest of the interviewees left North Korea between 1998 and 2001. Once again, the answers provided to the interview questions showed

little or no variation by age or the year of departure from North Korea.<sup>50</sup>

It should be noted that the viewpoints of the approximately 40 North Koreans are based on experiences inside North Korea prior to 2003. Although the North Korean government undertook economic adjustments in 2002 and in 2004 made a revision to its Criminal Code, it is not apparent that these or any other changes have made a difference in the government's policy regarding the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. In any case, North Korean authorities have been making the same assertions about religious freedom and religious observance in North Korea for the last decade.

One of the most significant factors in which an interviewee's life experience appears to have had a substantial impact on his or her answers is whether or not the interviewee had spent time in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.<sup>51</sup> Few knew of the existence of the three official churches in Pyongyang, and of those who did, one thought they were exclusively for foreigners, another thought they were for liaison with foreigners, and a third, despite never having attended services at the churches, assumed that they could not be "real churches" like those in China and South Korea.

### *Second Round of Interviews of Former North Koreans Who Fleed the DPRK after 2003*

The second round of interviews was conducted with North Koreans who fled North Korea, for the most part, after 2003. The questionnaires were very similar to those used in the first round, with several questions added on the practice of Buddhism, the interrogation of repatriated refugees, and how the North Korean government conducted its anti-religion propaganda through its educational system and mass media such as television or radio broadcasting.

All of those interviewed in the second round left North Korea after 2003, except for two who fled in

1999. Two interviewees left North Korea in 2006, five in 2005, 16 in 2004, and seven in 2003. Four respondents were in their 50s, five in their 40s, and five in their 20s. The rest were in their 30s.

The interviewees were split almost evenly between men and women. However, as with the first group, there was no discernable correlation of responses to gender. The interviewees included former housewives, teachers, college students, high school students, office workers, transporters, drivers, soldiers, carpenters, vocational trainees, construction workers, and several who were unemployed. As with the first round of interviews, the responses of the interviewees to questions of interest for the second report did not correlate with previous occupation and/or profession. Similarly, the answers provided showed little or no discernable variation by age or year of departure from North Korea. Four respondents (Interviewees 43, 48, 65, 69) had fled North Korea before 2003 but were repatriated back to North Korea before fleeing again after 2003.

The interviewees in the second round have one thing in common: the length of their stay in China was very short. It has been estimated that North Korean escapees stay in China usually for three or four years. This second group of interviewees, however, stayed in China for a relatively short period before successfully gaining entry into South Korea.

Apparently, the length of stay in China has shortened because the more recent escapees leave North Korea better prepared than previous refugees, as the necessary information for reaching South Korea is provided to them in advance by relatives and friends. Ten respondents were forcibly repatriated from China (Interviewees 43, 47, 48, 54, 56, 63, 65, 68, 69, 70) and two fled in 1999; the rest of the interviewees were "directly imported" to the South. These "directly imported" escapees refer to those who escape into third countries for the purpose of going to South Korea after they cross the border into China. Their stay in China is normally short, sometimes less than a few months, before they head to third countries. Relatives and friends who have already successfully entered South Korea provide financial support and information.

<sup>50</sup> Several interviewees fled North Korea more than once. These people were caught by the Chinese police and forcibly repatriated. Their treatment by North Korean police authorities upon their forced return is described in Chapter 4 of the Commission's first report. The present calculations are based on their subsequent departure from North Korea prior to obtaining de facto asylum in Seoul.

<sup>51</sup> Internal travel in North Korea is restricted, and residence in the capital Pyongyang is reserved for political elites and privileged workers.

## RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHIES

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Jae-Chun Won is a professor of law at Handong International Law School in South Korea and a scholar at the forefront of international advocacy on North Korean human rights issues. He teaches U.S. Criminal Law and Procedure, International Humanitarian Law, and North Korean and International Human Rights Law. Prior to his academic career, he was an international law officer in the Office of the General Counsel at the Korean Ministry of National Defense, and then Assistant District Attorney in the King's County District Attorney's Office in Brooklyn, New York, specializing in domestic violence prosecution. He is a member of the New York and New Jersey Bars.

Professor Won serves as Board Member and Director of the International Campaign of Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights. He made oral interventions regarding various Asian human rights issues at the UN Human Rights Commission, and currently serves as Director of Human Rights Education at the Asia Center for Human Rights in Seoul, South Korea. He advised the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on North Korean refugee issues. He advises the Korean Supreme Prosecutor's Office on criminal procedure reform. He is a member of the International Criminal Law Advisory Committee of the Korean Ministry of Justice, and is a member of the International Association of Prosecutors.

### **Byoung Lo (Philo) Kim**

Byoung Lo (Philo) Kim is an Associate Research Professor at the Institute for Unification Studies at Seoul National University in South Korea and a leading scholar on North Korea and Korean Religious Studies. Professor Kim received his Bachelor of Arts Degree from Sung Kyun Kwan University in Seoul, his Master's Degree from Indiana State University, and his Ph.D. from Rutgers University, all in sociology. From 1993 to 2003, Professor Kim was Senior Research Fellow and Director of North Korean Studies at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). He then served as Director of North Korean Studies at Ashin University in South Korea. He has visited Pyongyang, North Korea, several times and conducted extensive research on North Korean refugees in China.



*A monument in Pyongyang*

## ABOUT THE COMMISSION

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) to monitor violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in IRFA and set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

The Commission is the first government commission in the world with the sole mission of reviewing and making policy recommendations on the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom globally. The Commission's impact and success in accomplishing its mission is achieved through its efforts to bring advice and accountability to U.S. foreign policy in the promotion of religious freedom abroad. By providing reliable information and analysis, and careful and specific policy recommendations, the Commission gives the U.S. government and the American public the tools necessary to promote this fundamental freedom throughout the world.

In the words of a key drafter of IRFA, the Commission was established for the purpose of ensuring "that the President and the Congress receive independent recommendations and, where necessary, criticism of American policy that does not promote international religious freedom."<sup>52</sup>

The Commission, which began its work in May 1999, is not a part of the State Department and is independent from the Executive Branch.

The Commission is composed of 10 members. Three are appointed by the President. Three are appointed by the President *pro tempore* of the Senate, of which two are appointed upon the recommendation of the Senate Minority Leader. Three are appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, of which two are appointed upon the recommendation of the House Minority Leader. The system of appointments thus provides that leaders of the party in the White House appoint five voting members, and leaders of the other party appoint four. The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom serves *ex officio* as a non-voting member.

Commissioners bring a wealth of expertise and experience in foreign affairs, human rights, religious freedom, and international law; the membership also reflects the religious diversity of the United States.

In carrying out its mandate, the Commission reviews information on violations of religious freedom as presented in the Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* and its *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*. The Commission also consults regularly with State Department and National Security Council officials, U.S. Ambassadors, and officials of foreign governments, as well as with representatives of religious communities and institutions, human rights groups, other non-governmental organizations, academics, and other policy experts. It visits foreign countries to examine religious freedom conditions firsthand. The Commission also holds public hearings, briefings and roundtables.

<sup>52</sup> Congressional Record, S12999, November 12, 1998.

The Commission has met with President George W. Bush and senior members of his Administration, including the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor, to discuss its findings and recommendations. The Commission also briefs Members of Congress, U.S. Ambassadors, and officials from international organizations. In addition, the Commission testifies before Congress, participates with U.S. delegations to international meetings and conferences, helps provide training to Foreign Service officers and other U.S. officials, and advises the Administration and Members of Congress and their staff on executive and legislative initiatives.

The Commission raises issues and brings its findings and recommendations to the American public through its public speaking activities, press conferences, other public events such as roundtables and briefings, its publications, Web site, and media outreach.

Commissioners reside throughout the United States, and the Commission has traveled around the country to hold public hearings, public meetings, and other activities to inform the American people of its work. While the work of the Commission is conducted year round, the Commission compiles an annual report of its policy recommendations in May to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.







UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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