

'Pinpricks' of Truth Making Way into North Korea

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✖ As refugees

from North Korea and activists from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gather in Seoul, South Korea, this week to highlight human rights violations in the hermit kingdom, there are signs that North Korean citizens are accessing more truth than was previously thought.

A recent survey by the Peterson Institute found that a startling 60 percent of North Koreans now have access to information outside of government propaganda.

"North Koreans are increasingly finding out that their misery is a direct result of the Kim Jong-Il regime, not South Korea and America as we were brainwashed from birth to believe," Kim Seung Min of Free North Korea Radio said in a press statement. The radio station is a partner in the North Korea Freedom Coalition (NKFC), which is holding its annual North Korea Freedom Week (NKFW) in Seoul rather than Washington, D.C., for the first time in the seven-year history of the event.

"We set out to double the radio listenership of 8 percent or 9 percent, and we've

seen a dramatic increase in the number of people who have access to information," said NKFC co-chair Suzanne Scholte. She described the flow of information as "pinpricks in a dark veil over North Korea. Now those pinpricks are becoming huge holes."

The radio station now air-drops radios into North Korea and broadcasts into the country for five hours a day, adding to information gleaned by refugees and merchants who cross the border regularly to buy Chinese goods.

(Read "China Complicit in Suffering of North Korean Refugees")

In recent years the government has been forced to allow a limited market economy, but trade has brought with it illegal technology such as VCR machines, televisions, radios and cell phones that can detect signals from across the border. Previously all televisions and radios available in North Korea could only receive official frequencies.

"The government hasn't been able to stamp out the markets, so they begrudgingly allow them to continue," Scholte confirmed. "This means North Koreans aren't relying solely on the regime anymore."

Holding the annual event in Seoul this year sends a significant message, Scholte told Compass.

“This is a spiritual conflict as well as a physical one – some people didn’t want us to call it freedom week,” she said. “But we’re making a statement ... God gives us freedom by the very nature of being human and North Koreans are entitled to that too.”

All people say they would never allow the World War II holocaust to be repeated, Scholte said, “but this is a holocaust, a genocide. I firmly believe we will be judged if we fail to intervene.”

The coalition hopes this week’s event will empower the 17,000 strong North Korean defectors in South Korea, awaken the consciousness of the world about human rights conditions in North Korea, and inform all who are suffering in North Korea that others will “work together until the day their freedom, human rights and dignity are realized,” Scholte said in the press statement.

As part of the week’s activities, the coalition will send leaflets into North Korea via balloon stating in part, “In the same year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed, Kim Il-Sung was ensuring that you wouldn’t have any of those rights.”

Religious freedom in particular is almost non-existent. The only accepted belief

is *Juche* – an ideology
that strictly enforces worship of the country's leaders.

"The regime is a
perversion of Christianity," Scholte told Compass.
Juche has a holy trinity just as Christianity does, with
Father Kim Il-Sung, son Kim Jong-Il, and the spirit of
Juche said to give strength to the people.

"Kim Il-Sung is God; a
real God can't replace him," a former North Korean security
agent confirmed in
David Hawke's 2005 report, "A Prison Without Bars."

While four churches
exist in the capital, Pyongyang, experts believe these are
largely showpieces
for foreign visitors.

The government has
allowed token visits from high-profile foreign Christians such
as Franklin
Graham, president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic
Association, who preached at
Bongsu Protestant church in Pyongyang in August 2008; and two
U.S. Christian
bands, Casting Crowns and Annie Moses, attended and won awards
at the Spring
Friendship Arts Festival in April 2009.

Worship outside limited
official venues is simply not tolerated, giving North Korea
first place on
Christian support organization Open Doors' 2010 World Watch
List for persecution
of Christians.

Ordinary citizens
caught with a Bible or in a clandestine prayer meeting are

immediately labeled
members of the hostile class and either executed or placed in
prison labor
camps, along with three generations of their immediate family.
Every North
Korean belongs to either the “hostile,” “wavering” or “core”
class, affecting
privileges from food and housing to education and physical
freedom, according to
Hawke’s report.

There are no churches
outside the capital, but the regime in 2001 estimated there
were 12,000
Protestants and 800 Catholics in North Korea. In July 2002 the
government also
reported the existence of 500 vaguely-defined “family worship
centers” catering
to a population of approximately 22.7 million, according to a
September 2009
International Religious Freedom report issued by the U.S.
State Department.

By contrast, South
Korea’s *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper in July 2009 put the estimate at
30,000
Christians, some NGOs and academics estimate there may be up
to several hundred
thousand underground Christians.

Uncertain Future

As North Korea celebrated the birthday
of Kim Jong-Il on Feb. 16, rumors spread that the elderly
leader, currently
battling heart problems, had chosen third son Kim Jong-Eun as

his
successor.

Documents extolling the virtues of Kim Jong-Eun began circulating as early as November, according to the Daily NK online news agency. An official "education" campaign for elite officials began in January and was extended to lesser officials in March. One document obtained by the agency described the "Youth Captain" as being "the embodiment of Kim Il-Sung's appearance and ideology."

"Kim picked this son because he's ruthless and evil," Scholte said, "but I don't think they're quite ready to hand over to him yet. There is an uncertainty, a vulnerability."

Scholte believes this is the ideal time to "reach out, get information in there and push every possible way."

"There are many double-thinkers among the elite," she explained. "They know the regime is wrong, but they have the Mercedes, the education for their kids and so on, so they have no incentive to leave."

The coalition is trying to persuade South Korea to establish a criminal tribunal, she said.

"North Koreans are actually citizens of South Korea by law," she said. "We have to let these guys

know there's going to be a reckoning, to create a good reason for them not to cooperate [with authorities]."

Those in other countries have an obligation too, Scholte concluded. "When people walk out of the camps, it will haunt us. They'll want to know, 'What were you doing?' We *will* be held accountable."

Article 26 of North Korea's constitution declares that the people have freedom of religion. The organizers of this year's freedom week fervently hope that this declaration will soon become a reality.