

BREAKING: North Korea Releases Beloved Megachurch Pastor on 'Sick Bail'

Hyeon-soo Lim, the Korean Canadian church leader sentenced to life in prison with hard labor, has been freed today, Aug. 9, "on sick bail," says a North Korean state news agency. Convicted in Dec. 2015 by the country's Supreme Court of numerous charges, including an attempt to overthrow the government, he had been detained in North Korea since February 2015.

His release comes weeks after 22-year-old American student Otto Warmbier died at home, a week after he had been belatedly freed after his 15-month detention for stealing a small flag from his Pyongyang hotel.

This still leaves three Korean-Americans detained in North Korea, two of whom taught at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology—Tony Kim and Kim Hak Song. Tony Kim, like Hyeun-Soo Lim, was involved with work in orphanages, and it was for this he was apparently detained, not his teaching at the university.

The third, Kim Dong Chul, a South Korea-born businessman and naturalized U.S. citizen, is serving a sentence of 10 years of hard labor for "espionage".

Meanwhile, a North Korean man, Kim Seung-mo, 61, was arrested in early June on "spying" charges after meeting Christian relatives in China.

Hyeun-Soo Lim, head pastor at the Light Presbyterian Church in Toronto, had visited North Korea more than 100 times to distribute humanitarian aid for nursing homes, daycare centers and orphanages.

Lim's family had been disappointed in 2015 when Canada's newly elected government failed in attempts to secure his release.

But his release now comes one day after a special envoy of the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, had arrived in Pyongyang.

Background

Lim's church lost contact with him in Jan. 2015; it was thought that he had been quarantined as part of the government's attempt to prevent the spread of Ebola. In Feb. 2015, it was revealed that Lim had been arrested and charged with slandering the North Korean leadership and its system of government. He was accused of trying to overthrow the country and establish a religious state.

During a press conference in July 2015, Lim was forced to read out a public confession. Usually North Korea pronounces a sentence within weeks after such a "confession," but this time it took five months.

"Most likely, diplomatic efforts to secure Lim's release failed," World Watch Monitor was told in December 2015. The source, who cannot be named for security reasons, said North Korea had probably hoped to get more out of the negotiations. "Whatever that 'more' is, we don't know. Pastors like Lim, who have seen so much of how North Korea treats its prisoners, cannot easily be released. Unless Canada makes an offer North Korea can't refuse, I don't see Lim returning home anytime soon," the source said at the time.

Lim was involved in humanitarian aid and not with the "underground" church. It is believed his arrest and sentence would have had no impact on this church network, "but a case like this does outrage the North Korean government", the source said. "North Korean Christians could be dealt with even more harshly if they are exposed."

Since Lim's arrest, North Korea has applied a stricter visa policy. Last month, after Warmbier's death, the U.S. ordered that no U.S. citizen is to be allowed to visit North Korea.

Previous Case of Life Sentence

In May 2014, North Korea sentenced South Korean pastor Kim Jong-Wook to a life of hard labor. As a missionary, Kim operated from the Chinese border city, Dandong, where he provided shelter, food and other aid to North Korean refugees who crossed the border seeking relief from the famine in their country. Kim also taught the refugees about the Bible.

North Korean agents infiltrated his network and convinced him to visit their country, which he did on Oct. 8, 2013. Kim was expecting to find out what had happened to some refugees with whom he had lost contact, but instead he was arrested, interrogated and possibly tortured.

In Feb. 2014, Kim told assembled North Korean television cameras he had spied for the South Korean government, had given money to North Koreans to set up 500 "underground" churches and attempted to overthrow the regime. After a trial in May 2014, North Korea's state media reported that prosecutors had sought the death penalty for Kim, but the court imposed the life sentence after the pastor had "sincerely repented".

Enemies of the State

To understand North Korea, it must be remembered that it links Christianity with South Korea and the United States, considered to be enemies of the state. Ever since North Korean Christians fled communist oppression and made a run for the South during the Korean War in the early 1950s, they have been seen as traitors. After the war, tens of thousands of Christians were arrested, forced into hard labor or put to death. A small remnant of the Christians who stayed went underground to live their faith in secret.

The successful arrests of Kim and other missionaries—such as Korean-American Kenneth Bae and Australian John Short, both of whom were later released—are part of the reason why North Korea has been extending its crackdown on Christian activities in its own country and the Chinese border area.

Observers believe that Christians make the North Korean authorities feel insecure by—allegedly—spying for the enemy, meeting in secret and not revering their government enough. Comparisons are sometimes made with the Jews and what they represented in Nazi Germany—the Christians in Kim Jong-Un’s regime are seen as disloyal, which is not just a transgression of the law, but also a sin of the gravest kind that deserves severe punishment.

Horrors of Camp 25

“I was locked up for years in Camp 25 near Chongjin [a camp for political prisoners where many Christians are thought to be held],” said one North Korean refugee. “I will never forget the prisoners who were too weak to continue their work. The guards would pick them up and put them on an automatic belt that threw them into a large oven while they were still alive.”

Despite all the arrests, the North Korean government has not won its “war” against Christianity. The church has survived almost 70 years of severe persecution. According to Open Doors, an expert source on North Korean Christianity, there are about 300,000 Christians in North Korea, which has for the last 11 years topped its World Watch List of the most repressive places to live if you are a Christian. {eo}

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