

North Korea's Leader Smiles, But Christians Suffer

Commonly known as one of the world's worst human rights violators, North Korea has spent more than half a century under the autocratic rule of a brutal and militaristic dictatorship.

However, from the recent publicity stunts performed by the country's new leader, Kim Jong Un, one might be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

In an ABC news report released last week, it was revealed that the Supreme Leader has announced the creation of a "children's heaven nation," promising the youngest generation of North Korean's an idyllic world of plenty in the future. To this end, bans have been lifted on Western foods like pizza and French fries, and limitations on the number of cell phones have been loosened. The new ruler has even been uncharacteristically shown on state television, smiling and visiting an amusement park.

Unfortunately for religious believers, including Christians, the regime's policies for maintaining totalitarian rule haven't changed. These policies include the near complete suppression of religious activity; especially religious activity viewed as a form of foreign influence.

This has led to the mass imprisonment of religious believers in North Korea's now infamous prison camps, known as kwan-li-so, or "total control camps." Of the more than 200,000 people imprisoned in these camps, some estimates believe that as many as 70,000 of them are Christians. Defectors who escape from these camps and eventually make their way to freedom in the West report that Christians in the camps are often treated more harshly than other prisoners and sometimes given the most

dangerous tasks.

For those who do manage the extremely hazardous escape across the northern border into China (the De-militarized zone between North and South Korea is practically impossible to cross) the danger of being caught by Chinese officials and forced back across the border is very real. “Defectors” who are forcibly repatriated often face harsh penalties, including life imprisonment or execution.

In a report released in March of 2012, the U.S Commission on International Religious Freedom stated that the North Korean regime is increasingly viewing refugees with religious beliefs or contacts as “potential security threats.” According to the report, the regime was also offering rewards to anyone providing information that led to the arrest of individuals involved in distributing Christian literature or participating in cross-border missionary activities.

Due to the fact that almost all of the information on religious persecution in North Korea comes from defectors, most reports of specific incidents are fairly dated. However a couple of known incidents are as follows:

- June, 2009: Ri Hyon Ok is publicly executed for distributing Bibles. Her family, including her parents, husband, and three children were reportedly sent to a prison camp the day after her execution
- May, 2010: 23 Christians are arrested for belonging to an underground church in Pyongsong City. Three are reportedly executed and the remainder sent to the Yoduk political prison camp.
- October, 2011: The Los Angeles Times reports that North Korean agents are suspected in several poison needle attacks against South Korean activists working to help North Korean defectors. One of the victims who did not survive the attacks was Pastor Patrick Kim.
- May, 2012: South Korean news sources report that a

crackdown is underway by Chinese officials against South Korean churches planted on the North Korea/China border to aid defectors.

- International Christian Concern is monitoring the situation in North Korea and continually seeking new methods for delivering aid to the Christian population