

One Week After the Summit, What's Happened to North Korea's 70,000 Imprisoned Christians?

Among the topics discussed between Donald President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in historic talks Tuesday (June 12) between the two countries was denuclearization. However, President Trump also said that the subject of Christians in North Korea had been discussed and indicated that he was hopeful of change, according to Open Doors UK & Ireland.

John Choi*, a Christian and a human rights advocate who has escaped from North Korea and now lives in the UK said: "I hope that if there is economic advancement it will pave the way for more freedom for the people of North Korea, freedom of thought, opportunity and religion. I think this is likely to take 25 to 30 years but I also hope in light of Trump's comments today it will be much quicker than that."

According to President Trump, North Korea's human rights record was discussed at the summit on Sentosa Island in Singapore.

John Choi commented: "This is the beginning of the process. The first steps have been taken. Trump hasn't clearly spoken about the human rights issues. But he has spoken about denuclearization. Hopefully denuclearization will lead to more money available to feed the everyday citizens of North Korea and provide them with a better life.

Choi added: "President Trump said that the human rights issues are a continuing process. I am glad it is now on the agenda. But Kim Jong-un has to be committed to it too. Kim Jong-un has

not yet referred to the prison camps or religious freedom. This is an ongoing process, and I will continue to advocate and pray for it.”

Zoe Smith, Head of Advocacy at Open Doors U.K. and Ireland, said: “Open Doors estimates that around 70,000 Christians are interred in prison and labor camps, facing unimaginable torture, inhumane and degrading treatment purely because of their faith.

“The systematic persecution of Christians is just one of many heinous human rights violations perpetrated by the North Korean regime.

“If true change is to come to that country—and we hope it will—any further negotiations must confront the desperate human rights situation.”

Open Doors supports the church in North Korea by supplying persecuted believers with emergency food, medicine and clothes, and distributing Bibles and other Christian materials, as well as providing shelter, aid, training and training materials to North Korean believers in China (who often travel back to North Korea). Training is also provided through radio broadcasting into North Korea.

Christians in North Korea

Speaking about his life in North Korea John Choi said, “I grew up believing Christians were evil and dangerous. We watched the government’s propaganda alongside public executions. It told us that Christians wanted to kidnap children and that the cross was evil.

“The first time I saw a man being executed it was because he had smuggled Christian things into the country and enticed people into the church. The whole village was told to come and watch, the children were allowed to sit at the front to get a good view. It enforced that belief that Christians were

dangerous.”

John Choi found faith after he escaped North Korea. He said, “When I fled North Korea, I went in a safe house run by a Christian man. He was saving me, but because he had a cross necklace ... I ran away from him. I was frightened of him. He told me to pray and say ‘Amen.’ Later, when I was in trouble, I said, ‘Please keep me safe, amen.’”

Then, after he was caught and thrown in an international Chinese prison, John Choi started to read the Bible. “In the Chinese prison, I met an ex-gangster from South Korea,” he said. “He had a Bible and told me to read it, so I did because I was bored and had read everything else. I didn’t understand it because it was written in the old-fashioned way. Proverbs was the only thing that resonated.”

Now, John Choi lives in the U.K. and is a human rights advocate. “My first escape from North Korea was for survival,” he said. “But my second was because I wanted democracy to come to North Korea. I hope to share ‘democratic light’ with oppressed people in North Korea. I want North Korean people to have the life that I have here in the U.K. I want the next generation to have freedom.

“When there is a church in my home town in North Korea, then my dreams will be realized. When North Korean people can go to church and talk freely about their faith and have freedom of expression and opportunity, then North Korea will be a free country.”

North Korea is No. 1 on the Open Doors 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Open Doors U.K. & Ireland says that all North Korean Christians know that one day they may have to die for their faith. Each year hundreds of Christians are exposed, tortured and sent to camps where they are worked or starved to death.

Persecution is led by the state, which sees Christians as hostile elements that have to be eradicated. Due to constant indoctrination, neighbors and family members, including children, are highly watchful and report anything suspicious to the authorities. If Christians are discovered they are usually deported to labor camps as political criminals or killed on the spot; their families share their fate. Meeting for Christian worship is almost impossible, so it is done in utmost secrecy.

Despite the constant surveillance and horrific punishments, Open Doors estimates that 200,000-400,000 Christians remain in North Korea today. Of those around 70,000 are believed to be in prison camps. Christians are treated worse than the other prisoners. They are made to perform the most dangerous tasks, given less food and beaten in the hope that they will denounce their faith. If a guard succeeds in making a prisoner recant their faith they are given a promotion. Guards who show compassion are punished. Most Christians will not survive their imprisonment.

Open Doors' goal has always been to "strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Rev. 3:2). This verse is especially relevant to the North Korean church. Without Open Doors support, many Christians would starve to death.

*Name changed for security reasons {eoa}

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