

Public Executions Highlight Religious Freedom Issues in North Korea

JoongAng Ilbo, a South Korean newspaper, says 80 North Koreans were executed by firing squad for watching smuggled foreign television broadcasts and possibly for owning Bibles.

Multiple newspapers published eyewitness reports that described everything from the circumstance of public execution before an audience of thousands to the manner in which it was carried out. Although the executions were reportedly carried out Nov. 3, the report highlights the ongoing struggles for freedom in that reclusive nation.

In North Korea, the practice of Christianity is illegal, even though Article 68 of the North Korean Constitution guarantees the freedom of religious practice. Owning a Bible is a crime, and any person caught with one is sent—along with three generations of his or her family—to prison. North Koreans are forced to embrace Juche ideology, a warped version of Christianity that mixes Marxism with worship of the late “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung and his family.

And yet, in spite of the risk, North Koreans are hungry for truth. Despite the persecution of all religions in North Korea, a covert church is growing. Converts cross secretly from China back into North Korea to plant clandestine congregations.

In an earlier interview with UPI, Todd Nettleton, a spokesman with the Voice of the Martyrs USA (VOM), acknowledged the difficulty in keeping track of who makes up the body of believers. However, he said, “To our knowledge, its members are either old people who had already been Christians before the Communist takeover and kept the faith, or very young ones

who have been converted as refugees in China.”

Distribution of unapproved literature is a capital offense. Distribution via land couriers is highly dangerous, and the liability for those caught doing so often results in death or forced labor. It’s worse for those carrying Christian literature like tracts or Bibles.

“It’s not a country where you can really smuggle Bibles in, but it is a country where you can launch balloons,” Nettleton says. “Voice of the Martyrs has worked with our partners to actually attach not just a gospel tract, but a complete New Testament.”

Balloon launches take place in the countryside areas near the border between South Korea and North Korea, where the wind current is favorable. VOM partners have it down to a science, Nettleton explains. They coordinate weather patterns and calculate weight, wind speed and more to ensure balloons float in the right direction and land where intended inside North Korea.

“How much helium you put into the balloons is how far it will float into North Korea, and we have attached some GPS devices to some of those balloons so that we really can track where they go into North Korea,” he says.

Through multiple launch points, VOM can drop materials on areas that are largely unpenetrated by the gospel. That’s not to say the materials the balloons carry always arrive at their intended destination.

“We have heard stories from inside the country of military units being mobilized when we do a balloon launch,” Nettleton notes. “The soldiers are ordered to pick up the balloons, pick up everything attached to the balloons. Do not read any of it, do not keep it, but turn every piece of it back in to their commanding officers, where it can be destroyed.”

To the question of why anyone would risk harsh punishment to keep the material attached, he says, "Anything they get from the outside world is a curiosity to them; they want to read it, and they want to know what it says. But obviously, the security is very tight."

During the most recent balloon launch, the launch party prepared packages containing lightweight Korean New Testaments and attached them to hydrogen-filled balloons.

"Our goal for 2013 is to get 48,000 New Testaments into North Korea on these balloons," Nettleton says. "At our last launch, we lacked only 675 of reaching that goal. The last launch was able to get 3,600 into the air."

As winter approaches, fewer days will provide weather conditions suitable for balloon launches. Discipleship takes over. How does that happen in a country where you can be shot for being a Christian? Through radio ministry, explains Nettleton.

"Some of that radio ministry is discipleship teaching, some of it is the stories of persecuted Christians, and some of it is just simply reading the Bible very slowly in a way for people to be able to write it down," he says.

Given the challenges facing North Korean Christians, Nettleton pleads, "Pray for the delivery of God's Word into North Korea. We know there is a church, but it is a severely persecuted church. So pray that God will sustain them, that He will encourage them, and pray that He'll open doors for them to be a witness for Him."

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