

Religious Rights Watchers Expect Little Change in North Korea

North Korea sent off its “dear leader” Kim Jong-Il in a massive ceremonial farewell Tuesday. At the same time, North Korea moved to strengthen a new personality cult around Kim’s son and successor, Kim Jong-Un.

It’s usually the unknown that has people on edge, wondering what changes will be coming with a successor. However, there’s good and bad news on that front, according to Todd Nettleton, a spokesman for The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) USA.

“I spoke the night after the announcement of Kim Jong-Il’s death with one of our VOM workers who works on the Korean peninsula, and his message was, ‘Don’t look for any significant changes, at least in the short term,’” Nettleton says.

It’s widely thought that Kim Jong-Il had been ill for some time, so the likelihood that whoever was running the country in his absence will continue to do so under the name of Kim Jong-Un.

“There were people who were making the decisions and keeping things going on his behalf,” Nettleton says. “It is believed that those same people will now be in charge behind the scenes for Kim Jong-Un, maintain his authority, maintain his power.”

The country has been known for its disregard for human and religious rights. North Korea’s policies and practices that persecute believers have kept it atop the Open Doors World Watch List for over four years. It is estimated that between 50,000 to 70,000 Christians suffer in prison camps because of their faith. People rarely get out of alive.

Despite that, the reclusive nation claims they have freedom of religion. Nettleton explains, "If you acknowledge Kim Jong-Il as a divine being, if you pray to Kim Il Sung—the founder of North Korea, and expect him to provide blessings and provisions in your life, then there is religious freedom for you."

In practice, there is no freedom to build churches or to worship in homes. An estimated 400,000 Christians practice their faith in underground networks. Possession of a Bible or Christian material is illegal and punishable by death. Two years ago, authorities stepped up their surveillance of Christians, and house searches are said to be more rigorous than in the past.

Why the overkill response to Christians? Nettleton says believers are viewed as "a danger to society." Locking people in concentration camps—not just the people who are assumed to be guilty of this crime but their parents and their children as well"— is not an unusual response.

"Three generations to try to rid the country of this Christian philosophy that undermines not only the religion of Juche and the religion of the Kim's as divine beings, but it undermines the legitimacy of the government itself," Nettleton says.

VOM has been working with persecuted believers in North Korea for decades, including launching thousands of scripture balloons across into the notoriously closed country. VOM also found another way to get the hope of Christ across the borders: sending gospel broadcasts across the border into North Korea. A part of that gospel broadcast is slowly reading the scripture so that people can write it down as the person is reading, Nettleton explains.

"Pray for the rest of North Korea to see the falsehood of the Juche religion and the falsehood of the Kim family as divine beings," Nettleton urges. "We can pray that God will provide

truth to them.”