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## **About 23 Christians arrested, 3 executed**

Asia News (10.08.2010) / HRWF (11.08.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - As the country's economic crisis worsens, North Koreans turn to faith despite the regime's vicious persecution. In reprisal, Kim Jong-il orders another crackdown.

North Korea's Stalinist regime has discovered some underground Christians in a house church in Pyongan Province. All 23 who met to celebrate a religious function were arrested. Three were tried and given the death penalty, which was swiftly executed, sources told AsiaNews. Confirmation about the incident also came from the North Korea Intellectual Solidarity, a group of North Korean exiles.

According to the sources, the arrests and executions were carried out in mid-May. "At that time, right after the disastrous currency reform, police discovered 23 Christians in Kuwal-dong, Pyongsung County, in Pyongan Province, who met at an underground church. After their arrest, they were interrogated at length. Eventually, the group's "ringleaders" were sentenced to death and executed. The others were sent to Kwan-li-so (Penal labour colony) No 15 in Yodŏk."

These North Koreans discovered underground Christianity when some of them travelled to mainland China for work.

"As the authorities fear the spread of religion, many area residents are rounded up and interrogated for days," the sources said. However, "they cannot help it because the situation is so desperate that people are going back to religion. Such sentences are meant to scare people."

North Korea denies freedom of religion absolutely. Officially, the country has three Christian places of worship (one Catholic and two Protestant churches) and four Buddhist temples, but only in the capital Pyongyang. No one has been able to confirm how many exist in the rest of the country. Accounts about their number by foreigners who have travelled around the country vary.

The only cult allowed is that of 'Eternal President' Kim Il-sung and his son, the 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong-il.

After the Korean War in 1953, the Stalinist regime ruthlessly proceeded to kill the country's estimated 200,000 Catholics, and destroy their churches and abbeys.

Sources have told AsiaNews that in North Korea there are "no more than 200 Catholics left, all very old".

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## **'Pinpricks' of truth making way into North Korea**

### ***Citizens increasingly enlightened about world's worst violator of religious freedom***

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct (26.04.2010) / HRWF (28.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - As refugees from North Korea and activists from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) gather in Seoul, South Korea this week to highlight human rights violations in the hermit kingdom, there are signs that North Korean citizens are accessing more truth than was previously thought.

A recent survey by the Peterson Institute found that a startling 60 percent of North Koreans now have access to information outside of government propaganda.

"North Koreans are increasingly finding out that their misery is a direct result of the Kim Jong-Il regime, not South Korea and America as we were brainwashed from birth to believe," Kim Seung Min of Free North Korea Radio said in a press statement. The radio station is a partner in the North Korea Freedom Coalition (NKFC), which is holding its annual North Korea Freedom Week (NKFV) in Seoul rather than Washington, D.C. for the first time in the seven-year history of the event.

"We set out to double the radio listenership of 8 or 9 percent, and we've seen a dramatic increase in the number of people who have access to information," said NKFC Co-Chair Suzanne Scholte. She described the flow of information as "pinpricks in a dark veil over North Korea. Now those pinpricks are becoming huge holes."

The radio station now air-drops radios into North Korea and broadcasts into the country for five hours a day, adding to information gleaned by refugees and merchants who cross the border regularly to buy Chinese goods.

In recent years the government has been forced to allow a limited market economy, but trade has brought with it illegal technology such as VCR machines, televisions, radios and cell phones that can detect signals from across the border. Previously all televisions and radios available in North Korea could only receive official frequencies.

"The government hasn't been able to stamp out the markets, so they begrudgingly allow them to continue," Scholte confirmed. "This means North Koreans aren't relying solely on the regime anymore."

Holding the annual event in Seoul this year sends a significant message, Scholte told Compass.

"This is a spiritual conflict as well as a physical one – some people didn't want us to call it freedom week," she said. "But we're making a statement ... God gives us freedom by the very nature of being human and North Koreans are entitled to that too."

All people say they would never allow the World War II holocaust to be repeated, Scholte said, "but this is a holocaust, a genocide. I firmly believe we will be judged if we fail to intervene."

The coalition hopes this week's event will empower the 17,000 strong North Korean defectors in South Korea, awaken the consciousness of the world about human rights conditions in North Korea, and inform all who are suffering in North Korea that others will "work together until the day their freedom, human rights and dignity are realized," Scholte said in the press statement.

As part of the week's activities, the coalition will send leaflets into North Korea via balloon stating in part, "In the same year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed, Kim Il-Sung was ensuring that you wouldn't have any of those rights."

Religious freedom in particular is almost non-existent. The only accepted belief is Juche – an ideology that strictly enforces worship of the country's leaders.

"The regime is a perversion of Christianity," Scholte told Compass. Juche has a holy trinity just as Christianity does, with Father Kim Il-Sung, son Kim Jong-Il, and the spirit of Juche said to give strength to the people.

"Kim Il-Sung is God; a real God can't replace him," a former North Korean security agent confirmed in David Hawke's 2005 report, "A Prison Without Bars."

While four churches exist in the capital, Pyongyang, experts believe these are largely showpieces for foreign visitors.

The government has allowed token visits from high-profile foreign Christians such as Franklin Graham, president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, who preached at Bongsu Protestant church in Pyongyang in August 2008; and two U.S. Christian bands, Casting Crowns and Annie Moses, attended and won awards at the Spring Friendship Arts Festival in April 2009.

Worship outside limited official venues is simply not tolerated, giving North Korea first place on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2010 World Watch List for persecution of Christians.

Ordinary citizens caught with a Bible or in a clandestine prayer meeting are immediately labeled members of the hostile class and either executed or placed in prison labor camps, along with three generations of their immediate family. Every North Korean belongs to either the "hostile," "wavering" or "core" class, affecting privileges from food and housing to education and physical freedom, according to Hawke's report.

There are no churches outside the capital, but the regime in 2001 estimated there were 12,000 Protestants and 800 Catholics in North Korea. In July 2002 the government also reported the existence of 500 vaguely-defined "family worship centers" catering to a population of approximately 22.7 million, according to a September 2009 International Religious Freedom report issued by the U.S. State Department.

By contrast, South Korea's Dong-A Ilbo newspaper in July 2009 put the estimate at 30,000 Christians, some NGOs and academics estimate there may be up to several hundred thousand underground Christians.

### **Uncertain future**

As North Korea celebrated the birthday of Kim Jong-Il on Feb. 16, rumors spread that the elderly leader, currently battling heart problems, had chosen third son Kim Jong-Eun as his successor.

Documents extolling the virtues of Kim Jong-Eun began circulating as early as November, according to the Daily NK online news agency. An official "education" campaign for elite officials began in January and was extended to lesser officials in March. One document obtained by the agency described the "Youth Captain" as being "the embodiment of Kim Il-Sung's appearance and ideology."

"Kim picked this son because he's ruthless and evil," Scholte said, "but I don't think they're quite ready to hand over to him yet. There is an uncertainty, a vulnerability."

Scholte believes this is the ideal time to “reach out, get information in there and push every possible way.”

“There are many double-thinkers among the elite,” she explained. “They know the regime is wrong, but they have the Mercedes, the education for their kids and so on, so they have no incentive to leave.”

The coalition is trying to persuade South Korea to establish a criminal tribunal, she said.

“North Koreans are actually citizens of South Korea by law,” she said. “We have to let these guys know there’s going to be a reckoning, to create a good reason for them not to cooperate [with authorities].”

Those in other countries have an obligation too, Scholte concluded. “When people walk out of the camps, it will haunt us. They’ll want to know, ‘What were you doing?’ We will be held accountable.”

Article 26 of North Korea’s constitution declares that the people have freedom of religion. The organizers of this year’s freedom week fervently hope that this declaration will soon become a reality.

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## **The cross at the border: China’s complicity in refugees’ suffering**

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct (26.04.2010) / HRWF (28.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) estimate anywhere from 30,000 to 250,000 refugees from North Korea are living in China, either in border areas or deeper inland. Few are Christians when they emerge from North Korea, but the whispered advice among refugees is to “head for a cross,” signaling a Chinese church that may assist them, according to a February 2009 National Geographic report.

Since China will not allow the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees access to border areas, Chinese Christians work with Christian NGOs to provide an “underground railroad” moving refugees via several routes to safety, most often in South Korea.

Chun Ki-Won, director of Christian NGO Durihana, admits that some of the refugees adopt Christianity to win favor with their rescuers, but others retain and strengthen their faith on arrival in South Korea.

China insists that the refugees are economic migrants and pays police a bounty to arrest and return them to North Korea. On arrival, North Korean officials pointedly question the refugees about contact with Chinese Christians or Christian NGOs. If any contact is admitted, execution or imprisonment is likely, according to David Hawke’s 2005 report, “A Prison Without Bars.”

As one refugee told Hawke, “Having faith in God is an act of espionage.”

Still others choose to return to North Korea with Bibles and other Christian resources at great risk to themselves. For example, officials in June 2009 publicly executed Ri Hyon-Ok, caught distributing Bibles in Ryongchon, a city near the Chinese border, South Korean activists reported.

China remains impervious to the refugees' plight.

"China fears being flooded by refugees if they show compassion," said Suzanne Scholte, co-chair of the North Korea Freedom Coalition. "But refugee flows aren't going to collapse the [North Korean] regime. If that was going to happen, it would have happened already during the famine, so their argument doesn't hold water."

She added that North Koreans don't want to leave. "They leave because of Kim Jong-Il," she said. "Those [North Korean refugees] in South Korea want to go back and take freedom with them."

Two U.S. Christians entered North Korea in recent months with the same goal in mind. Robert Park, an evangelical Christian missionary, crossed the border on Dec. 25 with a letter calling for Kim Jong-Il to resign. Officials immediately arrested Park, according to the regime's Korean Central News Agency. He was later sentenced to eight years of hard labor but released in late February after making what many experts believe was a forced confession.

Fellow activist Aijalon Mahli Gomes entered North Korea on Jan. 25, the same news agency reported. Officials sentenced Gomes to nine years of hard labor and fined him 70 million new Won (US\$518,520). At press time Gomes remained in detention.

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