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Written statement submitted by European Centre for Law and Justice, The / Centre Européen pour le droit, les Justice et les droits de l'homme, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 February 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

North Korea Must Take Immediate Action To Stop The Continuous Persecution Of Christians

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Open Doors' World Watch List, North Korea is ranked as the number one nation in the world for Christian persecution.(1) There are an estimated 400,000 Christians living in North Korea.(2) To be caught as a Christian in the country is to face, at best, a life in labor camps, and, at worst, immediate execution.(3) It is common for North Korean students who have studied abroad to be imprisoned or sent to labor camps for participating in religious worship after returning from foreign countries.(4) The government's strong opposition to religion is further reflected in multiple youth-specific laws that bar children from engaging in religious conduct and punish those who are found to have taken part in religious ceremonies.(5) The persecution of Christians in North Korea can be described as an all-out "war on religion."(6)

2. BACKGROUND

In North Korea, being a follower of Jesus is considered an act of treason.(7) Such labeling has a long history in North Korea, dating back to the closure of all Catholic Churches in the 1950s and the disappearance of the last Bishop of North Korea, Francis Hong Yong-ho, in 1962.(8) Christianity is viewed as a direct threat to the North Korean government.(9) As a result, only a small number of officially registered churches exist in North Korea.(10) Visitors have reported that the churches "operate[] strictly under the state's control and function[] as a showpiece for foreigners."(11) Christians can only gather for worship in homes in strict secrecy and in small groups.(12)

In North Korea there is the principle of guilt-by-association.(13) Under this principle, descendants and family members of Christians face extreme hardship and are heavily surveilled.(14) Under North Korean laws there also exists what is known as "three generations of punishment."(15) Under this, if an individual commits a crime, then their children and grandchildren will also be punished.(16)

The North Korean government has actively taken steps to stop the spread of religion within the country. In 2020, the government passed the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act, which criminalizes the distribution or possession of religious materials.(17) The government has also routinely produced propaganda films that portray religious believers as enemies of the state.(18) Furthermore, on January 7, 2026, it was reported that kindergartners are instructed to pray to Kim Il Sung in thanks for their food.(19) Moreover, young children are encouraged to act as state agents by observing and reporting their parents for any patterns consistent with praying or worshiping.(20) For example, children are trained to report if their parents "look up to the sky and talk to some[one]" or "have a special book they keep hidden."(21)

3. VIOLATIONS

It is extremely difficult for Christians living in North Korea to actively report on the extreme persecution they are suffering daily. They are living completely isolated from the outside world.(22) The government severely restricts access to information.(23) It is illegal for anyone to access the internet or attempt to communicate with anyone outside the country.(24) Anyone who attempts to reach the outside world suffers severe punishment, including prison camps or reeducation.(25) Below we have shared a few examples of Christian persecution. However, due to restrictions on communications, there are many more stories that are untold.

Many Christians in North Korea have been arbitrarily detained for unknown lengths. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are currently detained in prison camps.(26) For example, for more than twelve years, the South Korean Christian

missionary Kim Jung-wook has been detained in North Korea for his faith.(27) To this day, his family has not been permitted to contact him, and his current condition and whereabouts are unknown.(28) He was arrested on October 8, 2013, for bringing religious items into the country.(29)

On November 18, 2025, a Seoul-based news agency reported, citing internal sources in North Korea, that the regime is confident that it has virtually eradicated underground churches and worship groups.(30) Underground churches are secret meetings for persecuted North Korean Christians, and when discovered they are eliminated by the government.(31)

In January 2025, South Korea requested that North Korea release a Christian missionary, Choi Chun-gil, who was arrested ten years earlier.(32) He was arrested in December 2014 and sentenced to a lifetime of “reform through labor.”(33) There is no information available on Chun-gil’s condition or whereabouts.(34)

4. REQUESTS

We request that North Korea take immediate steps to allow Christians to practice their faith without fear of being arbitrarily detained. Christians in North Korea must be permitted to gather to worship, read the Bible, build churches, and share their faith with others. We want to remind North Korea that these rights are enshrined in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which state that everyone has the “right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” and this includes the right of everyone to “individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”(35) Additionally, North Korea must immediately release the thousands of Christians who have been detained for their faith.

(1) North Korea, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/north-korea/> (last visited Jan. 27, 2026).

(2) A Glimpse Behind the Curtain in North Korea, OPEN DOORS (May 19, 2025), <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/stories/a-glimpse-behind-the-curtain-in-north-korea/>.

(3) North Korea, *supra* note 1.

(4) Julian Ryall, North Korea Claims Victory in ‘War on Religion’, DW (Nov. 28, 2025), <https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-claims-victory-in-war-on-religion/a-74937436>.

(5) A Glimpse Behind the Curtain in North Korea, *supra* note 2.

(6) Ryall, *supra* note 4.

(7) Katie Siedenburg, Christianity Treated as Treason in North Korea, MISSION NETWORK NEWS (Jan. 7, 2026), <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/christianity-treated-as-treason-in-north-korea/>.

(8) John L. Allen Jr., Catholicism in North Korea Survives in Catacombs, NAT’L CATH. REP. (Oct. 19, 2006), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/catholicism-north-korea-survives-catacombs>.

(9) *Id.*

(10) Christianity in North Korea, CROSSING BORDERS, <https://www.crossingbordersnk.org/christianity-in-north-korea> (last visited Jan. 27, 2026).

(11) *Id.*

(12) Explore Christian Persecution by Country: North Korea, GLOB. CHRISTIAN RELIEF, <https://globalchristianrelief.org/resources/countries/north-korea/> (last visited Jan. 27, 2025).

(13) North Korea Country Dossier, OPEN DOORS 2026, https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/North-Korea-Country_Dossier-ODI-2026.pdf.

(14) *Id.*

(15) Three Generations of Punishment, SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE, <https://photocontest.smithsonianmag.com/photocontest/detail/three-generations-of-punishment/>.

(16) *Id.*

(17) A Glimpse Behind the Curtain in North Korea, *supra* note 2.

(18) *Id.*

- (19) Siedenburger, *supra* note 7.
- (20) *Id.*
- (21) *Id.*
- (22) See North Korea, *The Surveillance State*, AMNESTY INT'L (Apr. 01, 2025), <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/north-korea-surveillance-state-prison-camp-internet-phone-technology>; see also North Korea, HUM. RTS. WATCH (Feb. 29, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/north-korea>.
- (23) *Id.*
- (24) *Id.*
- (25) *Id.*
- (26) Tim, *South Korea Requests Release of Missionary in North Korea as Rare Footage Shows Arrest of Christians*, OPEN DOORS (Jan. 18, 2025), <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/northkorea-missionary-footage/>.
- (27) *South Korean Missionary Still Imprisoned After More than a Decade*, INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN (Oct. 3, 2025), <https://persecution.org/2025/10/03/south-korean-missionary-still-imprisoned-after-more-than-a-decade>.
- (28) *Id.*
- (29) *Id.*
- (30) Ryall, *supra* note 4.
- (31) Simon, *Secret Believers in North Korea Discovered and Killed*, OPEN DOORS (Mar. 22, 2022).
- (32) *South Korea Requests Release of Missionary*, *supra* note 26.
- (33) *Id.*
- (34) *Id.*
- (35) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, adopted Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.