



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2023

U.S. POLICY AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN NORTH KOREA

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

On October 27, 2022, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on *U.S. Policy and Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea*. The hearing provided latest updates on religious freedom conditions in North Korea and discussed recommendations for a balanced U.S. policy toward the country that closely integrates human rights and security concerns.

[*Vice Chair Abraham Cooper*](#) led the hearing, convening four witnesses who offered expertise on religious freedom conditions in North Korea and U.S. policy toward the country. In his opening remarks, Vice Chair Cooper noted that since the release of the monumental 2014 U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea report, systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom have continued to occur in the country and may amount to genocide and crimes against humanity. Vice Chair Cooper also discussed China's complicity in exacerbating religious freedom conditions in North Korea, through forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees—especially those with connection to Christianity.

[*Commissioner Fred Davie*](#) emphasized the importance of closely integrating security and human rights as complementary objectives in U.S. government policy toward North Korea. In that regard, Commissioner Davie reiterated USCIRF recommendations that the U.S. government and Congress should reauthorize as soon as possible the North Korean Human Rights Act and fill the position of the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, which has remained vacant since 2017.

In his recorded remarks, [*Representative Ami Bera*](#) commended USCIRF for its valuable work and policy recommendations. He also announced his co-sponsorship of the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2022 (H.R.7332) with Representative Young Kim.

Robert King, former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, endorsed USCIRF’s assessment that “religious freedom conditions in North Korea are among the worst in the world” and have again been declining. He explained that dealing with the North Korean religious freedom issue is now particularly difficult due to challenges related to obtaining information about conditions in that country. These challenges include the declining number of North Korean refugees—the principal source of information—who resettled in South Korea and other countries, as well as the expulsion of foreigners such as tourists, humanitarian aid workers, diplomats, and businessmen—amid the COVID-19 pandemic that has made information even more difficult to obtain. Ambassador King called on the U.S. government to:

- Continue to use its influence and diplomatic capacity through the United Nations to call attention to human rights abuses and limitations on religious freedom in North Korea.
- Support our ally South Korea in pressing for human rights in the North, especially as a new South Korean government under President Yoon Suk Yeol has taken steps to highlight human rights in North Korea.
- Appoint a Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights.¹
- Take steps to encourage humanitarian efforts in North Korea, including such work led by many religious communities.

Shirley Lee, Consultant at Korea Future, provided three recommendations for U.S. government policy toward North Korea in light of findings from Korea Future’s recent investigations.

- Appoint a Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea to demonstrate U.S. values and interests in human rights to allies and those who may not share the same values.

- Understand and expose, at every opportunity, the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) and its mission of upholding Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the Ten Principles that sustain and direct the systematic violations and denials of freedom of religion or belief, rather than vaguely blaming North Korea.
- Recognize and embrace asymmetric leverage to reinforce, amplify, and support the separation between the North Korea’s ruling ideology—the Kimism and the Ten Principles—and the country of North Korea. U.S. policy approaches must aim to weaken rather than entrench the bonds between the Kim regime and the country.

Inje Hwang, Investigator at Korea Future, provided summary findings of its 2022 investigative report, authored on behalf of USCIRF. The report found that the North Korean state imposes a ruling ideology known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism—guidance and teachings of North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il—that controls all internal and external aspects of North Korean life. This ideology, which the ruling WPK enforces throughout the society, requires North Koreans to reject and persecute other systems of religion or belief. Hwang stressed the importance of considering the holistic nature of WPK’s approach to its systematic violation of freedom of religion and belief, explaining that effective countermeasures would entail a combination of cultural and political intervention from outside sources.

Jimmy (Jinmyung) Choi, a North Korean defector, discussed his experience living in North Korea prior to escape. He described the political indoctrination he received in the “learning center” of his school that excluded the freedom of religion and belief. Students were required to demonstrate absolute loyalty to North Korea’s supreme leaders and their teachings, and any deviation, including belief in religion or “superstition,” would be met with severe punishment, such as imprisonment.

Commissioner Fred Davie closed the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.

¹ On January 23, 2023, President Joseph R. Biden nominated Julie Turner as the nominee for Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues, with the Rank of Ambassador. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/23/president-biden-announces-key-nominees-36/>



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.