

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in North Korea remained among the worst in the world. Protestant Christians continued to be especially [vulnerable](#) to persecution. According to a 2023 South Korean government report, the North Korean government [regards](#) Christians as “counter-revolutionaries” and “traitors”—which are political crimes—who must be eliminated. Possessing a Bible, practicing the faith, and simply being a Christian could lead to [severe punishment](#), including torture, forced labor, imprisonment, and execution. In April 2023, authorities in Tongam village, South Pyongan Province, [arrested](#) a group of five Christians for their religious activities and confiscated dozens of Bibles. The Christians reportedly refused to renounce their faith and disclose the Bibles’ origin.

The government has intensified [persecution](#) of North Korean citizens who practice “superstitious activities” such as shamanism and fortune telling, which are classified as “unsocialist behaviors.” Authorities criminalize and crack down on these religious activities, and practitioners can be executed by firing squad or sentenced to a maximum 10-year imprisonment in addition to forced labor and administrative penalties. Information on religious freedom conditions for practitioners of other religious traditions in North Korea—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism—remains severely limited.

The overarching ideological and enforcement framework for restricting religious freedom remained in force. North Korea’s ruling

ideology, known as [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism](#), [forbids](#) competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. The country’s most fundamental legal document, known as the [Ten Principles](#) for the Establishment of a Monolithic Leadership System, requires absolute loyalty and obedience to the teachings of North Korean leaders. The Ten Principles contradict the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law and in the country’s own [constitution](#), which nominally grants religious freedom. The ruling Workers’ Party of Korea actively [enforces](#) the Ten Principles at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to religious freedom.

North Korea’s discriminatory [songbun](#) system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state. Religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving “discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution.” The government attempts to [provide](#) an illusion of freedom of religion to the outside world through state-controlled religious sites and organizations, which include the Buddhist Federation, the Korean Christian Federation, and the Korean Catholic Association. In reality, religious freedom remains nonexistent as authorities actively and systematically target and [persecute](#) religious groups and adherents.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward—and in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with—North Korea;
- Impose targeted and broad sanctions—including coordinated, multilateral sanctions with international partners—as appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea and consider lifting certain sanctions in return for concrete progress on religious freedom and related human rights; and
- Coordinate closely with South Korea to ensure the safe passage of North Korean refugees—especially those with religious ties—to the country through China and relevant Southeast Asian countries.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2023 ([H.R.3012/S.584](#)).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the Right to Freedom of Religion, Thought, and Conscience in North Korea](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [North Korea](#)

Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. Historically, North Koreans followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). The country was also home to a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), with Pyongyang known as the “Jerusalem of the East,” but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated [two percent](#) of the total population. Shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are also prevalent.

North Korean Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. In recent years, however, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has decreased significantly due to tightened security along the borders between China and North Korea as well as between China and Southeast Asian countries. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, only 196 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea in 2023—one of the lowest numbers in over 20 years.

The Chinese government [views](#) all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and repatriates them if discovered, disregarding their risk of persecution upon return and violating its international obligations. North Korean refugees in China who engage in religious activities and have contact with Christian missionaries and nongovernmental organization workers—who play an instrumental role in helping the refugees escape—[face](#) severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. In 2023, Chinese authorities held roughly [2,000](#) North Korean refugees in detention centers and repatriated as many as 600 of them in October, with more facing imminent repatriation. North Korean refugees caught by authorities in Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, also [risk](#) deportation to China and then repatriation to North Korea. The U.S. and South Korean governments have repeatedly [raised](#) this issue with China and [urged](#) the country to stop forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees. In addition to China, North Korea also [engages](#) in transnational repression, such as abduction and forced repatriation, against its own citizens and foreign nationals in other countries.

International Accountability in the United Nations

In March, United Nations (UN) experts, the United States, and other Western countries [held](#) a UN Security Council meeting on North Korean human rights, including the right to freedom of religion. During the meeting, a senior official in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea underscored the links between North Korea’s dire human rights situation and international peace and security. China and Russia blocked the United States from broadcasting the meeting. In August, the United States [led](#) a UN Security Council

meeting on the human rights situation in North Korea, which China and [Russia](#) publicly [opposed](#). Afterward, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [delivered](#) a joint statement on behalf of 52 countries and the European Union, calling attention to North Korea’s human rights violations and urging more UN member states to highlight linkages between the country’s human rights abuses and international peace and security.

In April, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses committed” in North Korea. It expressed grave concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals on the basis of religion or belief; denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to adopt a religion or belief; and discrimination based on the *songbun* system, which classifies and discriminates against people based on religion and other considerations. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to thought, conscience, and religion or belief. In December, the UN General Assembly [passed](#) a resolution condemning North Korea’s “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights.” The resolution also highlighted concern about China’s forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees, which violates the principle of nonrefoulement.

Key U.S. Policy

There was little to no change in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2023, and the North Korean government again [rejected offers](#) of the United States and allies for [dialogue](#) and [diplomacy](#). In August, U.S. President Joseph R. Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met and [formed](#) a new trilateral security partnership at Camp David. The leaders also committed to strengthening cooperation on promoting respect for human rights in North Korea and reestablishing dialogue with the country with no preconditions. On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) and reimposed the existing, ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974.

In July, the U.S. Senate [confirmed Julie Turner](#) as the special envoy for North Korean human rights issues. In October, Special Envoy Turner traveled to Seoul to meet with her South Korean government counterparts, civil society groups, and North Korean defectors. She [reiterated](#) the U.S. government’s commitment to [work](#) with South Korea and the international community on promoting human rights in North Korea and to hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations. In March, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2023 ([S.584](#)). In April, Representative Young Kim (R-CA) and Representative Ami Bera (D-CA) [introduced](#) the House version of the bill ([H.R.3012](#)). Both chambers of Congress took [no further action](#) on the measure during the year.