



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

November 2024

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NORTH KOREA AND NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES: TRENDS AND U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

Stephen Schneck  
*Chair*

Eric Ueland  
*Vice Chair*

#### Commissioners

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Susie Gelman

Vicky Hartzler

Asif Mahmood

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk  
*Executive Director*

#### USCIRF's Mission

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

On September 26, 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing, [Religious Freedom in North Korea and North Korean Refugees: Trends and U.S. Policy Options](#). USCIRF Chair Stephen Schneck and Vice Chair Eric Ueland led the hearing, which featured testimony by representatives from the U.S. government, and American and South Korean civil society to discuss North Korea's egregious religious freedom violations, China's role perpetuating North Korean abuses, and potential avenues to strengthen U.S. policy. Commissioners Vicky Hartzler, Asif Mahmood, and Meir Soloveichik also participated in the hearing.

[Chair Stephen Schneck](#) opened the hearing by highlighting the challenges religious groups in North Korea face. He explained how North Korea's ruling ideology, known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, treats religion as an existential threat, providing no space for genuine religious freedom and resulting in severe government crackdowns on those who do practice their religious beliefs. Chair Schneck also recounted USCIRF's recent travel to South Korea in July, stressing the invaluable role South Korean civil society and government play in documenting North Korea's religious freedom and related human rights violations.

[Vice Chair Eric Ueland](#) subsequently raised the cases of Kim Jung-wook, Kim Kook-kie, and Choi Chun-gil, three South Korean missionaries unjustly imprisoned in North Korea, as well as other prisoners featured in USCIRF's Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List. Vice Chair Ueland also discussed how China facilitates the North Korean government's religious freedom violations against North Korean refugees living in China. He ended his remarks by drawing attention to USCIRF's policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Ambassador Julie Turner, U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues for the U.S. Department of State, provided an overview of the religious freedom situation in North Korea. She laid out her priorities as special envoy, including increasing access to information in North Korea, promoting accountability for North Korean human rights abuses, and working with allies to raise concerns about North Korean human rights and religious freedom. She ultimately emphasized that North Korea's human rights situation is at its core an international peace and security issue.

[Hanna Song](#), Executive Director of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), focused on her organization's decades-long work with North Korean refugees living in South Korea. Based on interviews with nearly 15,000 refugees, she reported a complete lack of religious freedom in North Korea and discussed the regime's brutal repression of Christianity and Shamanism. She called attention to the disconnect between North Korea's positive rhetoric on religious freedom when engaging with



the international community and its repressive country conditions. She argued North Korea's persecution of religious communities constitutes crimes against humanity and called on the international community to ensure accountability.

[Ethan Shin](#), Legal Analyst at the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), recounted the findings of the United Nations (UN)'s 2014 Commission of Inquiry report on North Korea's human rights situation. He called on countries during North Korea's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN to push for the release of the three imprisoned South Korean missionaries and for an end to China's repatriation of North Korean refugees. He outlined several recommendations to the U.S. government, including expanding existing sanctions legislation to target North Korea's utilization of forced labor and making an atrocity determination on North Korea.

[Joanna Hosaniak](#), Deputy Director General of the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), outlined how North Korea's *songbun* class system forms the basis of the state security services' violations, including against religious individuals. She discussed how the Chinese government cooperates with North Korea to document North Korean refugees' religious activities and

their affiliations with religious groups and missionaries. She subsequently explained how political prisoners, including based on *songbun* and religious affiliations or beliefs, make up North Korea's vast network of political labor camps, which fund the North Korean government and its military.

[Greg Scarlatoiu](#), Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), emphasized the role underground Christian churches in North Korea play in the broader context of North Korea's nonexistent civil society. He emphasized the direct connection between North Korea's human rights violations and its broader threats to international and regional peace and security. He called on all relevant governments, civil society groups, and the private sector to unite under a common human rights strategy for North Korea.

Following witness testimonies, Chair Schneck and Vice Chair Ueland led discussions among participants. Commissioners posed questions to panelists about expanding the free flow of information to North Koreans, South Korean missionaries' ability to assist North Korean refugees in China, examining China's use of advanced technologies to target North Korean refugees, and helping prisoners of conscience in North Korea.

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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.