



북한인권정보센터  
DATABASE CENTER FOR NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS

[www.nkdb.org](http://www.nkdb.org)

[info@nkdb.org](mailto:info@nkdb.org)

Chair Schenk, Vice-chair Ueland, and distinguished commission members, thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights and for holding this important hearing on the issue of religious freedom in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

*"Praying to something was the only thing that I had left to hold onto, the only way to look for security, but it was also what I knew might lead to our family's fall—it had happened before."*

These are the words of Ms. K, a North Korean escapee that my organization NKDB interviewed a few weeks ago.

My statement today draws from my organization's documentation efforts over the past two decades, including the routine publication of the *White Paper on Religious Freedom in North Korea* since 2008. This statement is based on the testimonies of 14,832 North Koreans who successfully fled North Korea and resettled in the South.

North Korea enshrines religious freedom in Article 68 of the constitution stating that "citizens have freedom of religious belief." In international forums, North Korea has repeatedly emphasized this. Notably, during the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in 2019, North Korea accepted five recommendations on religious freedom, signaling a supposed commitment to improving the situation.

Among these recommendations, North Korea agreed to allow Christians and other religious communities to "exercise their religion independently and publicly, without fear of punishment, reprisal, or surveillance." However, the reality remains one of severe repression. The state-sanctioned religious institutions in the capital Pyongyang, exist primarily for propaganda purposes, rather than serve as genuine places of worship.

In North Korea, the state's ideology of Juche, which places Kim Il Sung and his family at the center of all aspects of life, leaves no room for religious freedom. The regime views any other beliefs as an existential threat. As a result, those who hold religious convictions—whether Christian, Buddhists, shamanist, or others—are brutally persecuted.

Moreover, NKDB data shows that 99.6% of respondents confirmed that religious activities are not tolerated in North Korea. The remaining 0.4% were uncertain about what religious activities were. Since religious practices are heavily restricted, North Koreans are forced to maintain their faith in secret. Yet, those discovered engaging in religious activities are often punished in labor training camps, prisons, political prison camps or even public executions.

Among all religious groups, Christians endure the harshest persecution. The regime views Christianity as especially dangerous due to its perceived links to Western values and its potential to inspire underground resistance. As a result, believers must practice in extreme secrecy, knowing that discovery could lead to arrest, torture, imprisonment, or execution.

Due to the systematic crackdown, there is a near-eradication of organized religions like Christianity and escapees have reported sporadic practices of shamanism. In times of growing uncertainty, instability, and isolation in North Korea especially since the COVID 19 pandemic, more people like Ms K that I mentioned earlier are turning to shamanism in search of stability and guidance. These practices offer a rare sense of connection beyond the rigid constraints of the regime's ideology, particularly during crises such as food shortages and economic difficulties.

However, even shamanism is not safe to practice in North Korea. While shamanism is rooted in Korean cultural traditions, the regime classifies shamanism as an “anti-socialist act,” fearing that it might inspire defiance or loyalty to something other than the state. Consequently, those participating in shamanistic rituals face harsh consequences, with new laws such as the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act passed in 2020 which has added even stricter punishments particularly if they are deemed to be “propagating anti socialist acts” in opposition to the regime.

As life in North Korea becomes more precarious, the paradox emerges: more people seek hope and control, yet the act of seeking this spiritual guidance puts them at greater risk of state persecution. To give you a sense of the severity of the regime’s crackdowns on religion, even light acts like owning a Bible or meeting with a believer can result in severe punishment. Since last year, hundreds of North Koreans have been forcibly repatriated from China, despite the known risks they face upon return. Upon crossing back into North Korea, one of the first questions they will be asked by authorities is whether they have met with a missionary during their time in China. This question is not merely a formality; the answer determines the severity of punishment they will endure.

If an individual admits to or is found to have had contact with a missionary, particularly one affiliated with Christianity, they are often subject to the harshest forms of torture, imprisonment, or even execution. For North Koreans forcibly returned from China, simply encountering a religious figure could mark them for life, turning an already dire situation into one of extreme suffering. The international community must urgently act to address these forced repatriations and the inhumane consequences awaiting those sent back to North Korea.

The systematic persecution of religious communities by the Kim regime constitutes a grave violation of human rights that amounts to crimes against humanity, and we must continue to speak out on behalf of those who cannot. In the history of documenting human rights violations, North Korea has never been more isolated. The extensive border closures imposed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic have made it nearly impossible for North Koreans to escape or for information to emerge from within the country, further obscuring the harsh realities on the ground. While the North Korean government continues to silence its people, the international community must hold the regime accountable for these egregious acts and work tirelessly to bring freedom to those suffering under this oppressive rule.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and I look forward to your counsel and your questions.