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**United States Commission on the International Religious Freedom**  
**Hearing on North Korea's Religious Freedom Violations and North Korean**  
**Refugees**

**Statement provided by Joanna Hosaniak, Deputy Director General**

Honorable Chair Stephen Schneck and Vice Chair Eric Ueland, Honorable Members and Staff of the Commission,

I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation to speak at this hearing. Today, I wish to address the issue of religious freedom in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly known as North Korea, and how religion serves as a basis for persecution in the country. In the latter part of this statement, I will articulate the regime's purpose behind the ongoing persecution.

Persecution, in this context, should be understood as an element of crimes against humanity, characterized by the discriminatory intent that enables the North Korean regime to carry out widespread and systematic attacks against its civilian population. These attacks occur within a network of various detention facilities operated by the security forces, namely the Ministry of State Security (MSS), also known as the secret police, and the Ministry of People's Safety (MPS), or police.

It is important to place the religious persecution within the wider framework of North Korea's *songbun* system, which serves as a discriminatory socio-political caste hierarchy that facilitates such persecution. Acts deemed prohibited, particularly those perceived as threats to the state—such as expressions of freedom of thought, opinion, or belief—can adversely affect an individual's caste designation within the *songbun* hierarchy. This system serves dual purposes: it acts as a means of purifying the lineage of those in trusted positions and helps maintain a hereditary structure of power within the ruling elite and in the institutions of control over the society. Second, it

allows for the discrimination against generations of people and provides grounds for the security forces to target specific individuals and their families.

### **1. Persecution: The system for upholding purity at the highest levels while actively creating prisoners**

The Ministry of State Security holds responsibility for safeguarding the Party and its Leadership, overseeing cases of anti-state offenses. It recruits offspring and kin of MSS personnel, subject to thorough vetting through several generations along both paternal and maternal lines. The higher the position within the elite ranks, the more intense the scrutiny becomes concerning family lineage and its associated views. Actions such as fleeing to another country, participating in religious activities, or having political prisoners among even distant relatives would at the minimum jeopardize opportunities for career advancement in the elite ranks. Due to generations of efforts to preserve the purity of the system, institutions like MSS have become hermetically sealed. Consequently, any information, transgressions or misdeeds by MSS members remain insulated within their closed circles.

In North Korea, religion is regarded as an anti-state crime. The MSS is the primary institution that focuses on prosecuting anti-state offenses outlined in the North Korean Criminal Code. These were reported to include illegal border crossings, smuggling of goods or individuals, currency exchange, receiving funds from abroad, interactions with religious groups, and contacts with South Korea, even through phone calls. While some crimes are explicitly stated in the North Korean Criminal Code, others are subject to interpretation by MSS officers because they are not defined in the Law. Insider witnesses from the MSS, MPS, and the Prosecutor's Office have all reported that individuals found to have engaged with religious activities face severe punishment. MSS has a counter-espionage department, and preliminary examination department while the analysis department looks into family relations of the criminal and goes to the field to gather more information from family, neighbors and colleagues of the person. MSS officers have the power to add to the crime and present a report that will further incriminate the person.

The Ministry of People's Safety, on the other hand, is tasked with monitoring the populace, with local police departments having maintained detailed records of each and every citizen of the DPRK since the 1950s. These records, while secret to the citizens and most of the MPS employees, were reported to explicitly record the *songbun* class of individuals, used as a means of discriminating against those

classified as politically hostile to the system. The breadth of information collected, degree of organization of the recordkeeping, and extent of protection by the MPS demonstrates that this system is maintained for purposes extremely important to the regime.

A Resident Registration Officer of the MPS at a local MPS station reported that their role was to write down all details of every resident in his unit. These records of 100 to 200 pages have included information about an individual's extended family members, up to their uncles, cousins, and grandparents. A person's *songbun* (caste) is clearly marked by number on the front, and each class gets its own number. All information is meticulously recorded in a system operated by the MPS, starting with their birth records and extending to their family details, marriage, and residence. There are four marks according to caste basic class, core class, complex class and the families of the punished. Except for the full documentation, North Korean police also maintain small identification cards, where basic information, including *songbun* is recorded for a quick identification.

Several insider witnesses described how missionaries are viewed as a hostile caste in this system, making them and their families primary targets for imprisonment. Additionally, some witnesses explained that the actions of missionaries are viewed as acts of espionage.

“W: Public security forces deal with collaborators with the Japanese during the colonial period, and those who informed on party members to the police, things like that. Then those who helped people through to South Korea. Then there are missionaries. They are categorized as the hostile class. South Korea always falls into the hostile class without exception.”

## **2. The role of the Chinese government in the ongoing religious persecution in North Korea.**

A significant factor related to religious persecution in North Korea is the role of the Chinese government. Most interactions between North Korean individuals and religious groups occur in China. These religious workers are often the primary source of assistance for North Korean refugees, offering not only material support such as food and medical aid but also safe housing and escape routes to other countries, particularly South Korea.

Despite claims from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that authorities merely address illegal migration by returning undocumented North Koreans, evidence indicates a significant level of coordination between Chinese and North Korean authorities and their security forces. China conducts thorough investigations of North Korean individuals arrested on its soil, with documented cases of torture occurring in its detention facilities during the interrogation. These investigations often focus on specific offenses, such as connections with religious groups (notably Christianity) or attempts to cross the border *en route* to other countries, with an aim to reach South Korea. During the investigative process, Chinese police segregate North Koreans based on the alleged offenses and inform North Korean customs, operated by the Ministry of State Security (MSS), to collect the detained individuals at the border bridge at the arranged time. According to the witnesses, the Chinese stamp changes color if an offense is contact with Christianity.

The MSS conducts thorough investigations into individuals deported from China, focusing on key questions regarding their interactions with South Koreans, attempts to flee to other countries, and affiliations with religious practices. If a witness denies having religious connections, MSS often probes further, inquiring if they have ever seen a cross symbol in China. Denials frequently lead to violent treatment from MSS officers until they are satisfied with answers or found no other discrepancies in the statements.

Witnesses have reported that individuals suspected of attending church in China were segregated from other groups of illegal border crossers and were considered targets for political prison camps. Most of those deported took every precaution to ensure that their connections with religious groups remained hidden during the MSS investigation. Concealing of such fact would allow them to be released into police custody and face trial and sentence in police detention facilities, and not in political prison camp. Witnesses frequently mentioned encountering fellow deportees in the same long-term *kyohwaso* police prison. However, those accused of religious affiliation never made it to that facility. There were also testimonies that if information about a person's contact with religion in China became known while the inmate was already serving their sentence in police *kyohwaso* prison, that individual would mysteriously vanish the following day, never to be seen again.

### **3. Crimes against humanity within the North Korean supply chain and their link to the ongoing persecution**

The Citizens' Alliance has conducted a lengthy investigation into the involvement of the North Korean regime's highest authorities in exports associated with large-scale human rights atrocities, as detailed in our previous report ([\*Blood Coal Export from North Korea. Pyramid Scheme of Earnings Maintaining Structures of Power\*](#)).<sup>1</sup> This investigation revealed that the DPRK sustains its economic system through a coercive quota system, compelling civilians to meet quotas for the export of minerals, agricultural and livestock products, metals, construction materials, and more.

Goods quotas are also met through the use of forced labor in detention facilities. This method of export generates foreign currency for the regime, benefiting various companies run by military and security forces, the Cabinet, or agencies of the Workers' Party of Korea. Victims are targeted by the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of People's Safety based on *songbun*, gender, political beliefs, and/or religion. For the regime, acting with this discriminatory intent enables the perpetuation of a system of enslavement within detention centers.

Detained populations especially in political prison camps produce the top commodities for export, which are often the target of the most restrictive international sanctions, such as coal and minerals. Similarly to *kwalliso* political prison camps operated mostly by MSS, the *kyohwaso* prisons operated by MPS are also major sites of production (mining, lumbering, farming, production of goods for export). Women repatriated from China who served sentences in those prisons have been reporting for more than a decade that some *kyohwaso* prisons have been operating large wards for women deported from China where women produced textiles, wigs, or fake eyelashes labelled 'Made in China'.<sup>2</sup>

This system of hunting for prisoners and perpetuating the slavery is administered by the Ministry of State Security, which collaborates with the Ministry of People's Safety. Together, with the Korea's People Army, they operate under the leadership of Kim Jong Un in the State Affairs Commission, the highest governing body in the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights. *Blood Coal Export from North Korea. Pyramid Scheme of Earnings Maintaining Structures of Power*, Seoul, January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Hosaniak, *Written Statement to the U.S. Congressional Executive Commission on China. Hearing on the forced repatriation of North Korean Refugees*

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that decisive action is necessary to address this issue. This includes urging Chinese officials to halt all forms of forced repatriation, ceasing collaboration with the North Korean Ministry of State Security regarding individuals whose actions could lead to persecution in North Korea, and enforcing stricter regulations on businesses that engage in unethical practices within their borders. Third countries like Mongolia, Vietnam and Laos where many North Korean escapees are heading to in search of freedom must also be compelled to respect the principle of non-refoulement and provide them with free passage to South Korea or other countries where they wish to resettle, especially since religious organizations are often assisting in their transit, which poses risks if North Koreans are arrested and deported to North Korea.

Our organization urges the United States' government to propose measures addressing discrimination-related persecution that sustains North Korea's system of slavery during the DPRK's fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR), scheduled for November 2024. We emphasize the importance of ratifying core ILO Conventions and upholding business and human rights principles.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been able to strengthen its economic profit and weapons program through the utilization of crimes against humanity, such as enslavement, torture, sexual violence, and persecution based on religion, songbun, and/or political opinion. These crimes are financed by an international supply chain connected to the production sites in which these crimes have been committed – in spite of international sanctions and other efforts to inhibit financial gain by DPRK authorities. The Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights recommends that a special hearing in the US Congress is organized in the future to thoroughly examine this pressing issue, inviting expert testimonies.

Furthermore, proactive measures should be taken to ensure judicial accountability for those responsible for these atrocities. This would allow to bring empowering transformative justice to victims and survivors of North Korean atrocities.

I greatly appreciate your thoughtful consideration of these issues and potential solutions.

Sincerely yours,

Joanna Hosaniak