

# DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (DPRK) 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief. The 2014 Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the DPRK, however, found an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and in many instances, the COI determined that there were violations of human rights committed by the government which constituted crimes against humanity. Multiple sources indicated the situation had not changed since the report was published. On September 20, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK reported to the UN General Assembly, “There is no freedom of expression and citizens are subject to a system of control, surveillance and punishment that violates their human rights.” The government reportedly continued to deal harshly with those engaged in almost any religious practice through executions, torture, beatings, and arrests. The country’s inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to make arrests and punishments difficult to verify. It also made it difficult to estimate the number of religious groups in the country and their membership. A South Korean nongovernmental organization (NGO), citing defectors who arrived in South Korea from 2007 until December 2018 and other sources, reported 1,341 cases of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief by DPRK authorities, including 120 killings and 90 disappearances. For the 18th consecutive year, the Christian advocacy NGO Open Doors USA ranked the country number one on its annual World Watch List report of countries where Christians experienced “extreme persecution.” NGOs and defectors said the government often applied a policy of guilt by association in cases of detentions of Christians. According to one defector, some members of his extended family were in a political prison camp because one member was Christian and additional family members had been executed for being Christian. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of shamanism and “superstitious” activities. Media reported in March that in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province, authorities publicly executed two women for fortune telling and sentenced a third to life in prison following a sham trial. According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners. Sources said in April police issued a proclamation ordering citizens to report their status as Falun Gong practitioners. Following the proclamation, police arrested 100 persons in Pyongyang’s Songyo District for being Falun Gong practitioners. In September *The Christian Post* reported an NGO obtained a government video depicting

Christians as “religious fanatics” and “spies.” According to NGOs, the government’s policy toward religion was intended to maintain an appearance of tolerance for international audiences while suppressing internally all religious activities not sanctioned by the state. Many foreign visitors said activities at the state-sanctioned churches in Pyongyang appeared to be staged, and an NGO stated the churches served “mere propaganda purposes.”

There were reports of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious networks remained difficult to quantify. Defector accounts indicated religious practitioners often concealed their activities from neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear of being branded as disloyal and concerns their activities would be reported to authorities. Some defector and NGO reports confirmed unapproved religious materials were available clandestinely.

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the country. In his remarks at the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., the Vice President said, “[T]he United States will continue to stand for the freedom of religion of all people of all faiths on the Korean Peninsula.” Additionally, the United States cosponsored a resolution adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly in December that condemned the country’s “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights[.]”

Since 2001, the country has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 18, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 25.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The North Korean government last reported religious demographics in 2002, and estimates of the number of total adherents and of different religious groups varies. In 2002 the DPRK reported to the UN Human Rights Committee there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, 800 Catholics, and 15,000

practitioners of Chondoism, a modern religious movement based on a 19th century Korean neo-Confucian movement. South Korean and other foreign religious groups estimate the number of religious practitioners is considerably higher than reported by authorities. UN estimates place the Christian population between 200,000 and 400,000. Open Doors USA estimates the country has 300,000 Christians. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates there are 100,000 Christians. In its 2020 World Christian Database, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity reported 58 percent of the country is agnostic; 15 percent atheist; 13 percent “new religionists” (believers in syncretic religions); 12 percent “ethnoreligionists” (believers in folk religions); 1.5 percent Buddhists; and Christians, Muslims, and Chinese folk religionists represent less than 0.5 percent collectively. The COI report stated, based on the government’s own figures, the proportion of religious adherents among the population dropped from close to 24 percent in 1950 to 0.016 percent in 2002. Consulting shamans and engaging in shamanistic rituals is reportedly widespread but difficult to quantify. The South Korea-based Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) reported five priests from the Russian Orthodox Church are in Pyongyang.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states, “Citizens have freedom of religious belief. This right is granted through the approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies.” It further states, however, “Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state and social order.”

According to a 2014 official government document, “Freedom of religion is allowed and provided by the State law within the limit necessary for securing social order, health, social security, morality and other human rights.”

The country’s criminal code punishes a “person who, without authorization, imports, makes, distributes or illegally keeps drawings, photographs, books, video recordings, or electronic media that reflect decadent, carnal, or foul contents.” The criminal code also bans engagement in “superstitious activities in exchange for money or goods.” According to local sources, this prohibition includes fortune telling. The NGO Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) reported that under these two provisions, ownership of religious materials brought in from

abroad is illegal and punishable by imprisonment and other forms of severe punishment, including execution.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports the government continued to deal severely with those who engaged in almost any religious practices through executions, torture, beatings, and arrests. The country's inaccessibility and lack of timely information continued to make arrests and punishments difficult to verify. The 2014 COI final report concluded there was an almost complete denial by the government of the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information, and association. It further concluded in many instances the violations of human rights committed by the government constituted crimes against humanity, and it recommended the United Nations ensure those most responsible for the crimes against humanity were held accountable. On September 20, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, Tomas Ojea Quintana, reported to the UN General Assembly that the human rights situation in the country "remains extremely serious. The political prison camps, in which a large number of political prisoners are detained in the worst conditions, remain in operation under complete secrecy. There is no freedom of expression and citizens are subject to a system of control, surveillance and punishment that violates their human rights."

The NKDB, using reports from defectors and other sources, aggregated 1,341 specific cases of abuses of the right to freedom of religion or belief by authorities within the country from 2007 to December 2018. Charges included propagation of religion, possession of religious materials, religious activity, and contact with religious practitioners. Of the 1,341 cases, authorities reportedly killed 120 individuals (8.9 percent), disappeared 90 (6.7 percent), physically injured 48 (3.6 percent), deported or forcibly moved 51 (3.8 percent), detained 794 (59.2 percent), restricted movement of 133 (9.9 percent), and persecuted 105 (7.9 percent) using other methods of punishment.

A South Korean NGO estimated in 2013 that 80,000 to 120,000 political prisoners, some imprisoned for religious activities, were held in prison camps in remote areas under harsh conditions. In February Open Doors UK estimated 50,000 to 70,000 citizens were imprisoned for being Christian. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said a policy of guilt by association was often applied in cases of detentions

of Christians, meaning the relatives of Christians were also detained regardless of their beliefs. According to one defector, some members of his extended family were in a political prison camp because one member was Christian and additional family members had been executed for being Christian.

In September CSW reported there was no religious freedom in the country. CSW also reported that according to witness testimonies, “many Christians are detained in prison camps, where they endure dire living conditions and brutal torture.” CSW stated there were instances where citizens caught in possession of a Bible were executed.

While shamanism has always been practiced to some degree in the country, NGOs noted an apparent continued increase in shamanistic practices, including in Pyongyang. One source told RFA it was common for persons to consult fortune tellers before planning weddings, making business deals, or considering other important decisions. NGOs reported authorities continued to take measures against the practice of shamanism. RFA reported a source said that in March in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province, authorities found three women guilty of fortune telling in a public trial. Two of the women were publicly executed by shooting, and the third was sentenced to life in prison. According to the source, the women had created a group called Chilsungyo (Seven Star Group) and said two children in the group were possessed by an oracle spirit. The women received money for telling fortunes. The source said thousands of persons from factories, colleges, and housing units were forced to attend the trial and executions, which were aimed at forcing officials to stop patronizing fortune tellers and engaging in other “superstitious” behavior.

In its annual report, Open Doors USA for the 18th year in a row ranked the country number one on its watch list of countries where the government persecutes Christians. Open Doors USA stated arrests and abductions of foreign missionaries and punishments for Christians increased. According to the NGO, “If North Korean Christians are discovered...not only are they deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, their families will share their fate as well. Christians do not have the slightest space in society; meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy.” The government strengthened border controls, with harsher punishments for citizens being repatriated from China and increased efforts “to eliminate all channels for spreading the Christian faith.”

Religious and human rights groups outside the country continued to provide reports that members of underground churches were arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed because of their religious beliefs. According to Open Doors USA, one refugee said her family, upon being repatriated from China, was imprisoned for what authorities said were “problematic political beliefs,” and guards beat her parents for refusing to stop praying. Another woman who had been imprisoned after being repatriated from China told the NGO that prison authorities repeatedly asked her whether she went to church while in China, whether she owned a Bible, and if she was a Christian. The woman said she believed she would have been killed if she admitted being Christian.

According to the NKDB, there was a report in 2016 of disappearances of persons found to be practicing religion within detention facilities. International NGOs and North Korean defectors continued to report any religious activities conducted outside of those that were state-sanctioned, including praying, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, could lead to severe punishment, including imprisonment in political prison camps. According to the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Institute for National Unification's (KINU) 2018 report, authorities punished both superstitious activities and religious activities, but the latter more severely. In general, punishment was very strict when citizens or defectors were involved with the Bible or Christian missionaries; authorities frequently punished those involved in superstitious activity with forced labor, which reportedly could be avoided by bribery.

According to RFA, authorities launched crackdowns on Falun Gong practitioners during the year. Sources said the practice of Falun Gong entered the country through trade workers and spread rapidly, even among high-ranking government officials and their families. In April police issued a proclamation that ordered citizens to report their status as Falun Gong practitioners, the government's first ever such action. According to RFA, the proclamation threatened harsh punishments for those refusing to turn themselves in. Following issuance of the proclamation, police arrested 100 persons in Pyongyang's Songyo District for Falun Gong practices. According to sources, the crackdowns and negative publicity only increased Falun Gong's popularity.

The government reportedly detained foreigners who allegedly engaged in religious activity within the country's borders. There was no further information on three South Korean missionaries detained in the country. In December 2018 *The Korea Times* reported the South Korean government tried to negotiate their release. One had been held since 2013 and two others since 2014.

*Juche* (“self-reliance”) and *Suryong* (“supreme leader”) remained important ideological underpinnings of the government and the cults of personality of previous leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and current leader Kim Jong Un. Refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority was regarded as opposition to the national interest and reportedly resulted in severe punishment. Some scholars stated the *Juche* philosophy and reverence for the Kim family resembled a form of state-sponsored theology. Approximately 100,000 *Juche* research centers reportedly existed throughout the country. In KINU’s 2016 white paper, one defector said, “North Korea oppresses religion, particularly Christianity, because of the sense that the one-person dictatorship can be undermined by religious faith.”

The COI 2014 report found the government considered Christianity a serious threat that challenged the official cults of personality and provided a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the government. The report concluded Christians faced persecution, violence, and heavy punishment if they practiced their religion outside the state-controlled churches. The report further recommended the country allow Christians and other religious believers to exercise their religions independently and publicly without fear of punishment, reprisal, or surveillance.

Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), a charitable organization that helps North Korean refugees, said on its website that organized religion was seen by the government as a potential threat to the regime. Defectors continued to report the government increased its investigation, repression, and persecution of unauthorized religious groups in recent years, but access to information on current conditions was limited.

According to NGOs, the government’s policy toward religion was intended to maintain an appearance of tolerance for international audiences while suppressing internally all religious activities not sanctioned by the state. As it had in years past, KINU stated in its annual white paper on human rights, “[I]t is practically impossible for North Korean people to have a religion in their daily lives.” The white paper quoted one defector as saying, “[A]uthorities call religion, as a whole, superstition. And all superstitious behaviors are prohibited.” According to the NKDB, the constitution represented only a nominal freedom granted to political supporters and only when the regime deemed it necessary to use it as a policy tool. A survey of 12,625 refugees between 2007 and March 2018 by the NKDB found 99.6 percent said there was no religious freedom in the country. In its 2018 report,

the NKDB stated less than 1 percent of 12,880 defectors said they had visited religious facilities.

The HRNK reported the government continued to promote a policy that all citizens, young and old, participate in local defense and be willing to mobilize for national defense purposes. There were neither exceptions for these requirements nor any alternative to military service for conscientious objectors.

The Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian nonprofit organization, reportedly obtained a government video in September that depicted Christians as “religious fanatics” and “spies” who attempt to undermine the government. The video was allegedly used to instruct state security agents on how to identify and silence Christians in the country.

According to the NKDB, the South Korean government estimated that as of 2018 there were 121 religious facilities in the DPRK, including 60 Buddhist temples, 52 Chondoist temples, three state-controlled Protestant churches, and one Russian Orthodox church. The 2015 KINU annual white paper counted 60 Buddhist temples and reported most citizens did not realize Buddhist temples were religious facilities and did not regard Buddhist monks as religious figures. The temples were regarded as cultural heritage sites and tourist destinations. KINU's 2019 annual white paper concluded no religious facilities existed outside of Pyongyang.

According to KINU's 2018 report, the government continued to use authorized religious organizations for external propaganda and political purposes and reported citizens were strictly barred from entering places of worship. Ordinary citizens considered such places primarily as “sightseeing spots for foreigners.” Foreigners who met with representatives of government-sponsored religious organizations said they believed some members were genuinely religious, but others appeared to know little about religious doctrine. KINU concluded the lack of churches or religious facilities in the provinces indicated ordinary citizens did not have religious freedom.

The five state-controlled Christian churches in Pyongyang included three Protestant churches (Bongsu, Chilgol, and Jeil Churches), a Catholic church (Changchung Cathedral), and the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Chilgol Church, a state-controlled Protestant church, was dedicated to the memory of former leader Kim Il Sung's mother, Kang Pan Sok, a Presbyterian deaconess. The number of congregants regularly worshipping at these churches was unknown,

and there was no information on whether scheduled services were available at these locations. Some defectors who previously lived in or near Pyongyang reported knowing about these churches. One defector said when he lived in Pyongyang, authorities arrested individuals whom they believed lingered too long outside these churches to listen to the music or consistently drove past them each week when services were being held on suspicion of being secret Christians. This defector also said authorities quickly realized one unintended consequence of allowing music at the services and permitting persons to attend church was that many attendees converted to Christianity, so authorities took steps to mitigate that outcome. Numerous other defectors from outside Pyongyang reported no knowledge of these churches.

According to KINU, foreign Christians who visited the country testified they witnessed church doors closed on Easter Sunday, and many foreign visitors said church activities seemed to be staged. LiNK stated on its website “nothing apart from token churches built as a facade of religious freedom for foreign visitors are allowed.” In its 2018 report on religious persecution in North Korea, Open Doors USA stated, “The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.”

Foreign legislators who attended services in Pyongyang in previous years reported congregations arrived and departed services as groups on tour buses, and some observed the worshippers did not include any children. Some foreigners noted they were not permitted to have contact with worshippers, and others stated they had limited interaction with them. Foreign observers had limited ability to ascertain the level of government control over these groups but generally assumed the government monitored them closely.

In its 2002 report to the UN Human Rights Committee, the government reported the existence of 500 “family worship centers.” According to the 2018 KINU report, however, not one defector who testified for the report was aware of the existence of such “family churches.” According to a survey of 12,810 defectors cited in the 2018 NKDB report, none saw any of these purported home churches, and only 1.3 percent of respondents believed they existed. Observers stated “family worship centers” could be part of the state-controlled Korean Christian Federation (KCF).

The 2018 NKDB report noted the existence of state-sanctioned religious organizations in the country, such as the KCF, Korea Buddhist Union, Korean Catholic Council, Korea Chondoist Church Central Committee, Korea Orthodox

Church Committee, and Korean Council of Religionists. There was minimal information available on the activities of such organizations, except for some information on inter-Korean religious exchanges in 2015.

The government-established Korean Catholic Council continued to provide basic services at the Changchung Cathedral, but the Holy See continued not to recognize it as a Roman Catholic church. There were no Vatican-recognized Catholic priests, monks, or nuns residing in the country.

According to foreign religious leaders who traveled to the country, there were Protestant pastors at Bongsu and Chilgol Churches, although it was not known if they were citizens or visiting pastors.

Five Russian Orthodox priests served at the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country. The clergy included North Koreans, several of whom reportedly studied at the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow.

The COI report concluded authorities systematically sought to hide the persecution of Christians who practiced their religion outside state-controlled churches from the international community by pointing to the small number of state-controlled churches as exemplifying religious freedom and pluralism.

In April United Press International cited a report by the state-run media outlet Ryomyong describing an Easter Sunday service at Pyongyang's Changchung Cathedral. According to Ryomyong, citizens and foreign worshippers attended. The report quoted the clergyman making anti-U.S. and other political statements during the service.

The NKDB stated officials conducted thorough searches of incoming packages and belongings at ports, customs checkpoints, and airports to search for religious items as well as other items the government deemed objectionable. Open Doors USA reported some individuals brought audio devices containing the Bible and other religious materials from China or smuggled in radios for local residents to listen to Christian broadcasts from overseas.

The government reportedly closely regulated certain forms of religious education, including programs at three-year colleges for training Protestant and Buddhist clergy, a religious studies program at Kim Il Sung University, a graduate

institution that trained pastors, and other seminaries affiliated with Christian or Buddhist groups.

According to KINU, religion continued to be used to justify restricting individuals to the lowest class rungs of the *songbun* system, which classifies individuals on the basis of social class, family background, and presumed support of the regime. The *songbun* classification system resulted in discrimination in education, health care, employment opportunities, and residence. KINU continued to report that religious persons and their families were perceived to be “anti-revolutionary elements.”

According to KINU, the government continued to view Christianity as a means of foreign encroachment. KINU quoted the North Korean Academy of Social Science Philosophy Institute’s “Dictionary on Philosophy” as stating, “Religion is historically seized by the ruling class to deceive the masses and was used as a means to exploit and oppress, and it has recently been used by the imperialists as an ideological tool to invade underdeveloped countries.” KINU again reported citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year emphasizing ways to detect individuals who engage in spreading Christianity.

According to a 2018 Associated Press article, dozens of missionaries in areas of China near the border, most of whom were South Koreans or ethnic Koreans, provide assistance and religious education to North Koreans. According to the Rev. Kim Kyou-ho, head of the Seoul-based Chosen People Network, in recent years, 10 such frontline missionaries and pastors died mysteriously, and he suspected the North Korean government was involved.

The government reportedly continued to be concerned that faith-based South Korean relief and refugee assistance efforts along the northeast border with China had both humanitarian and political goals, including the overthrow of the government, and alleged these groups were involved in intelligence gathering. The government reportedly continued tightening border controls in an effort to crack down on any such activities.

The government continued to allow some overseas faith-based aid organizations to operate inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance. Such organizations reported they were not allowed to proselytize; their contact with local citizens was limited and strictly monitored, and government escorts accompanied them at all times. In October the *Asia Times* reported South Korean-based Christian charities said the government sometimes declined aid for political reasons, and in some

cases the charities distributed the aid in secret through underground Christian networks.

The COI report concluded government messaging regarding the purported evils of Christianity led to negative views of Christianity among ordinary citizens.

In November media reported South Korean President Moon Jae-in's office invited Pope Francis to meet Chairman Kim at the demilitarized zone. At year's end, however, there were no reports that the pope planned to do so.

In December the UN General Assembly passed by consensus a resolution, cosponsored by the United States, condemning "the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights in and by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." The UN General Assembly expressed its very serious concern at "the imposition of the death penalty for political and religious reasons," and "all-pervasive and severe restrictions, both online and offline, on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion or belief, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association." The UN General Assembly also "strongly urge[d] the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to respect fully all human rights and fundamental freedoms[.]" The annual resolution again welcomed the Security Council's continued consideration of the COI's relevant conclusion and recommendations.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Due to the country's inaccessibility, little was known about the day-to-day life of individuals practicing a religion.

Defector accounts indicated practitioners often concealed their activities from neighbors, coworkers, and other members of society due to fear they would be reported to authorities. In February the *South China Morning Post* reported one defector described her family's quietly singing Christian hymns on Sundays while one person watched for informers. Another described hiding under a blanket or in the bathroom while praying. Open Doors USA reported many Bibles, devotionals, Christian books, and songbooks dated from the 1920s through the end of World War II. These were kept hidden and passed among believers. One man said individuals remained careful even within their own families when teaching Christian beliefs for fear of being reported. According to the NGO, "Meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some believers dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy."

In August the KCF Central Committee and the National Council of Churches in Korea (South Korea) composed their annual joint prayer for peaceful reunification of the peninsula, stating in part, “Lord, hear the prayers of the beloved Christians throughout the world for peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula. . . . Let the fervent prayers of Christians all over the world bloom in our hearts, and in every corner of the Korean Peninsula as a flower of hope.”

In 2017, KINU reported accounts of private Christian religious activity in the country, although the existence of underground churches and the scope of underground religious activity remained difficult to quantify. While some NGOs and academics estimated up to several hundred thousand Christians practiced their faith in secret, others questioned the existence of a large-scale underground church or concluded it was impossible to estimate accurately the number of underground religious believers. Individual underground congregations were reportedly very small and typically confined to private homes. Some defector and NGO reports confirmed unapproved religious materials were available, and secret religious meetings occurred, spurred by cross-border contact with individuals and groups in China. Some NGOs reported individual underground churches were connected to each other through well-established networks. The government did not allow outsiders access to confirm such claims.

KINU reported religious ceremonies accompanying weddings and funerals were almost unknown, but other sources indicated there were still shamanistic elements in weddings and funerals.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations with the DPRK and has no official presence in the country. In February the President and Chairman Kim held a second summit in Vietnam, and they held another meeting in the Korean Demilitarized Zone in June. In engagements with DPRK officials, the U.S. government consistently made clear full normalization of relations will require addressing human rights, including religious freedom.

In his remarks at the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., the Vice President said, “[T]he United States will continue to stand for the freedom of religion of all people of all faiths on the Korean Peninsula.”

The United States cosponsored the resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in December that condemned the country’s “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations.”

The U.S. government raised concerns about religious freedom in the country in other multilateral forums and in bilateral discussions with other governments, particularly those with diplomatic relations with the country. This included an October meeting in Brussels of like-minded countries to coordinate actions and discuss the DPRK’s human rights record. The United States made clear that addressing human rights, including religious freedom, would significantly improve prospects for closer ties between the two countries. Senior U.S. government officials, including the President, met with defectors and NGOs that focused on the country, including some Christian humanitarian organizations.

Since 2001, the country has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 18, 2019, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions to which North Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment) pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.