



Image: Björn Christian Torrissen (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juche_Tower-Foundation-Monument.jpg)

NORTH KOREA

North Korea is widely considered the most dangerous place to be a Christian, with reportedly the world’s worst record regarding religious freedom.¹ Citizens must show devotion to the ruling Kim family and the regime. Suspected disloyalty – including profession of Christianity, which is seen as “Western” – is severely punished. Defectors have described how, if caught, Christians face torture. Many are sent to Kwalliso camps for political prisoners. Between 50-70,000 Christians could be present in these camps, comprising up to half of those held there. One estimate suggests that 75 percent of Christians die from the camps’ harsh treatment.² There they have suffered extra-judicial killings, forced labor, torture, persecution, starvation, rape, forced abortion and sexual violence.³ Believers have been “hung on a cross over fire, crushed under a steamroller, hurled off bridges, trampled underfoot.”⁴ After Kim Jong-un took power as Supreme Leader, up to 80 Christians were reportedly executed in a stadium for owning Bibles.⁵

North Korea’s ‘Songbun’ system – which categorizes people according to their loyalty to the regime, and determines access to necessities such as health care – classifies Christians as ‘hostile.’ The four official churches in Pyongyang are regarded as show churches for the benefit of foreign visitors.⁶

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A report by the International Bar Association’s War Crimes Committee stated that “Christians are heavily persecuted and receive especially harsh treatment in prison camps,” noting that they have been “tortured and killed” for religious affiliation, attending Christian meetings, or reading the Bible and are “subjected to more severe deprivation.” North Korean defectors reported atrocities including a prisoner’s new-born baby being fed to guard dogs, the execution of starving prisoners caught digging for edible plants, and forced abortions.⁷

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A defector in Seoul spoke about a fellow inmate, Hyun, who told guards about her faith, insisting on using her baptismal name during questioning in 2004. “She told [the interrogators], ‘I’m a child of God and I’m not scared to die. So if you want to kill me, go ahead and kill me.’” The defector described seeing Hyun returning from interrogation with severe bruises on her forehead and bleeding from her nose. Guards later took her away and she was not seen again.⁸

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The account of a North Korean prisoner was published by Open Doors. Prisoner 42 said she was asked every day if she was a Christian. “If I admit it, I will be killed. Every day, I’m beaten... They force me to sit on my knees with closed fists, never allowed to open them.” She was sentenced to a re-education camp. Another believer she met there was taken away and never seen again.⁹

1. See 2019 Open Doors World Watch List; *Religious Freedom in the World 2018 – Executive Summary*, Aid to the Church in Need, p. 13.
2. Database from Center for North Korean Human Rights, cit. in Hollie McKay, “North Korea: How Christians survive in the world’s most anti-Christian nation,” *Fox News*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/north-korea-how-christians-survive-in-the-worlds-most-anti-christian-nation> (accessed July 22, 2019).
3. *UN Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, February 17, 2014, www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx; *Forbes* January 25, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviaenos/2017/01/25/north-korea-is-the-worlds-worst-persecutor-of-christians/#5ede9b318e> (accessed June 13, 2019).
4. Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Total Denial North Korea 2016 report*, p.16.
5. Charles J. Lidguard, “The shockingly normal things that you’d be executed for in North Korea,” *Daily Express*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.express.co.uk/travel/articles/632732/kim-jong-un-north-korea-dictatorship-execution-killed> (accessed July 5, 2019).
6. Joey Millar, “North Korea Photos: Kim’s Fake Churches where actors pretend to pray to cover up abuse,” *Daily Express*, January 27, 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/909477/north-korea-news-latest-pictures-photos-churches-open-doors-kim-jong-un> (accessed June 13, 2019).
7. International Bar Association, *Inquiry on Crimes Against Humanity in North Korean Political Prisons*, December 12, 2017, <https://righthumanrights.org/assets/documents/REPORT-SYNOPSIS-AND-EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-NORTH-KOREA.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2019).
8. Hyung-Jin Kim, “N. Korean Christians keep faith underground amid crackdowns,” *AP*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/a7079dea595349928d26c687fa42a19c> (accessed June 13, 2019).
9. Lindy Lowry, “Naked, shaved and stripped of her name — life in a North Korean Prison,” *Open Doors (USA)*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/naked-shaved-and-stripped-of-her-name-life-in-a-north-korean-prison/> (accessed June 13, 2019).