

Table of Contents

- ***Life in 70-years-old North Korea 'is like living in Orwell's 1984', says escapee***
 - ***Who Are the Three US Citizens Released by North Korea?***
 - ***US citizens set for release ahead of Trump-Kim talks***
-

Life in 70-years-old North Korea 'is like living in Orwell's 1984', says escapee

World Watch Monitor (07.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2x6H8ab> - As North Korea prepares to celebrate its 70th anniversary this weekend with a military parade and "Mass Games", its population lives in perpetual war (the 1953 Korean war has never officially ended), under government surveillance and with a propaganda machine controlled by the national leader's personality cult.

It actually is not unlike George Orwell's classic book *1984*, John Choi* comments, a Christian human rights advocate who escaped from North Korea and now lives in the UK: "Life [in North Korea] is very rough. Frequent food shortages, power cuts, typhoons, floods and other natural disasters; just some of the challenges North Koreans still have to deal with. Add to that gross human rights violations, total lack of freedom, information censorship, propaganda and the ongoing political mismanagement and you can see why living in North Korea is like living in Orwell's *1984*," he says.

Under the 'god-like' leadership of the Kim dynasty from the 1950s onwards, thousands of Christians have been sent to labour camps as they are seen as hostile to the regime and have to be eradicated.

"Many fled, others were captured and/or killed. But a small remnant was able to go underground. They survived as secret believers, which is a God-sized miracle," says the activist.

He estimates that there are between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians in the DPRK, of which 50,000 – 70,000 are in the prison system: "The others have managed to keep their faith secret and continue to stay faithful under the most difficult circumstances." Imprisonment, torture, and death are the potential risks – not only to oneself, but to one's family.

The country is number 1 on the 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Christian references

It wasn't always like that. Between the two Koreas, the North was always more open and tolerant than the traditionally agricultural backwater of the South. With its position bordering the rest of the East Asian continent, it was the place for commercial and cultural exchange with China and Manchuria. It was also the place where Christianity flourished. In the early 20th century, Pyongyang came to be known as the "Jerusalem of the East", with so many church crosses dotting the horizon.

The present leader Kim Jong-un's grandfather, "the great leader" Kim Il-sung, came from a Christian family. He was raised for most of his life by his grandparents who were deacons in the Church, but his parents were committed Christians as well, according to Choi.

"His father Kim Hyung-Jik didn't like Communism because communists did not accept Christian love and equal rights. The Protestant Chilgol Church in Pyongyang is dedicated to his mother, Kang Pan-Suk. Her name means 'rock'. She was named after the apostle Simon, named 'Peter' (Rock) by Jesus", he says, adding "what a tragedy that this church is now one of the four showcase churches in the country".

Choi says that it is very likely that, as a child, Kim Il-sung joined his family in going to church, and that this might explain why there are so many Christian references in Kim's personality cult: "For example, they have their own trinity with Kim Il-sung as the father, his son Kim Jong-il as the son, and the Juche (self-reliance) ideology in the role of 'Holy Spirit'. There's even a nativity-like story for Kim Jong-il's birth. People don't go to church on Sunday, but they have to go to the local Kim Il-Sung Research Center on Saturday and study the leaders' scriptures."

'Divide-and-rule approach'

So what happened to Kim Il-sung that made him turn against the religion of his fathers? "What may play a part is that some of his first – and strongest – opponents were actually Christians," says Choi. In the time between the end of 30 years of Japanese occupancy (at the end of World War II) and the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with Kim as premier, Soviet authorities helped him implement communist policies. This led to opposition.

"The Christian Social Democratic Party (CSDP) was founded in September 1945, and the Korean Democratic Party – led by a Christian – in November 1945. In 1947, some Christian ministers founded the Christian Liberal Party," explains Choi.

"Kim Il-sung especially had to deal with Cho Man-Sik (the best known nationalist leader in the North) and the Protestant community, which supported Cho and other Christian leaders. There were several violent clashes between pro-communists and anti-communist groups. Christians led most of the anti-communist activities at the time."

"Through a clever divide-and-rule approach, Kim Il-sung eventually won the battle," Choi continues. "Many Christian leaders were arrested, with a significant percentage of them executed. Cho himself died in captivity in 1950, soon after the start of the Korean War. It's believed he was murdered in prison."

Christians in North Korea then were given three options: to become communist and abandon their faith, become a martyr, or escape to South Korea. According to Choi, between 1946 and 1953 up to 1.5 million North Koreans, mostly Christians, chose the last option and moved south.

But Kim Il-sung wasn't successful in his attempt to wipe out the Christian church in North Korea and neither were his successors.

* John Choi (not his real name) also pens a series of blogs for Christian charity Open Doors International.

Who Are the Three US Citizens Released by North Korea?

Newsmax (14.05.2018) - <https://nws.mx/2wD9efg> - The three former prisoners are Korean-Americans who traveled to North Korea for humanitarian purposes.

North Korea released the men, who are coming home with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, President Donald Trump said Wednesday.

Despite years of hostility between Washington and Pyongyang, hundreds of Americans visited North Korea every year until the U.S. State Department finally issued a travel ban on the country last September.

Americans made the journey to North Korea for a range of reasons, from holidays and business trips to humanitarian work and missionary purposes.

Seoul is also pushing for the release of six South Koreans held by Pyongyang including three defectors originally from North Korea, and three Christian missionaries -- the first of whom was detained in 2013.

Pompeo's visit to North Korea comes with Trump preparing for a historic summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in the coming weeks, as a dramatic diplomatic thaw on the peninsula quickens.

These are the US citizens who were released:

Kim Hak-song had been working for the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) undertaking agricultural development work with the school's farm.

He was arrested at Pyongyang railway station in May 2017 on suspicion of committing "hostile acts" against the government, as he was boarding a train headed for his home in Dandong, China.

Kim, who is in his mid-50s, was born in Jilin, China, and educated at a university in California, CNN reported, citing a man who had studied with him. He said Kim returned to China after about 10 years of living in the US.

PUST was founded by evangelical overseas Christians and opened in 2010. It is known to have a number of American faculty members and students are generally children from the North's elite.

Kim Sang-duk, or Tony Kim, was arrested in April 2017 at the capital's main airport as he tried to leave the country after teaching for several weeks, also at PUST.

Kim is a former professor at Yanbian University of Science and Technology in China, close to the Korean border. Its website lists his specialty as accounting.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency has reported Kim is in his late 50s and said he had been involved in relief activities for children in rural parts of North Korea. It cited a source who described him as a "religiously devoted man."

In a Facebook post, Kim's son said since his arrest his family has had no contact with him. His family said Kim will soon become a grandfather.

Kim Dong-chul, a South Korea-born American businessman and pastor who is in his 60s, was sentenced to 10 years' hard labor in April 2016 after being charged with subversion and espionage.

He was arrested in October 2015 after he reportedly received a USB stick containing nuclear-linked data and other military information from a former North Korean soldier.

In an interview with CNN in January 2016, Kim said he was a naturalized American who had lived in Fairfax, Virginia. He said he once ran a trading and hotel services company in Rason, a special economic zone near the North's border with China and Russia.

A month before his trial, Kim had also appeared at a government-arranged news conference and apologized for attempting to steal military secrets in collusion with South Korea. The South Korean spy agency has denied involvement.

US citizens set for release ahead of Trump-Kim talks

World Watch Monitor (03.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2rqnuSK> - Three American citizens detained in North Korea seem set to be released ahead of a meeting between the two countries' leaders next month.

The BBC reported that the three men had been "relocated to a Pyongyang hotel and are receiving good food and medical care".

US President Donald Trump tweeted yesterday (2 May) that the US "has long been asking for three hostages to be released from a North Korean Labor camp, but to no avail. Stay tuned!"



Who are the Americans?

Kim Dong-chul, a pastor in his early 60s, was arrested in 2015 and sentenced to 10 years' hard labour after admitting spying for South Korea, which Seoul denied.

Tony Kim (also known as Kim Sang-duk) was detained in April 2017 for "committing criminal acts of hostility" against the North Korean government. Kim, in his 50s, had been involved in humanitarian work with orphanages and taught at the Pyongyang University for Science and Technology (PUST), which trains the children of North Korea's elite and has a volunteer staff that includes many evangelical Christians.

Kim Hak Song was arrested two weeks later, in May 2017, as he prepared to leave the country after working for several weeks as a lecturer at PUST. He was arrested on charges of "hostile acts" against the regime. Reuters reported that in 2015, he had posted a message on the website of a Korean-Brazilian church in Sao Paulo, saying "he was a Christian missionary planning to start an experimental farm at PUST and was trying to help the North Korean people learn to become self-sufficient".

Others released

In August last year Hyeon Soo Lim, a Korean-Canadian church leader sentenced to life in prison with hard labour, was released "on sick bail". Detained since February 2015, he was convicted later that year of numerous charges, including an attempt to overthrow the government.

His release came just a few months after 22-year-old American student Otto Warmbier died at home, just one week after his release from 15 months' detention for stealing a small flag from his Pyongyang hotel. Warmbier had been sentenced to 15 years' hard labour but was released having reportedly falling ill while in detention and was evacuated in a medically induced coma.

In 2014 two Americans were released following a personal note from then US President Barack Obama to Kim Jong-un at the beginning of Obama's week-long tour of Asia.

But South Korean pastor Kim Jong-Wook, sentenced to a life of hard labour in 2014, is still being detained. As a missionary, Kim operated from the Chinese border city of Dandong, where he provided shelter, food and other aid to North Korean refugees who crossed the border seeking relief from the famine in their country.

North Korea is No. 1 on the 2018 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.
