

CHINA/NORTH KOREA: Christian Pastors arrested for smuggling defectors out of North Korea, will likely be charged

By Leah Marieann Klett

The Gospel Herald (16.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2mrLSUp> – Two South Korean Christian pastors have been arrested in China for allegedly helping to smuggle North Korean defectors out of the country.

Reuters quotes Yonhap news agency as reporting that one of the pastors was arrested with his wife as the pair tried to board a flight from China to South Korea, while the other was arrested at a Chinese hotel.

The wives of the two had been released but the pastors remained under arrest, the news agency said.

Pastor Peter Jung, who heads Justice for North Korea in Seoul, told Yonhap the two South Korean nationals were “protecting defectors” but were tracked down by Chinese police who promptly arrested the religious clerics and their families.

“The arrested pastors openly stated to Chinese authorities they were helping North Korean defectors out of fear they would be subject to inhumane treatment if repatriated to the North,” Jung said.

He added that Chinese police are seeking to charge the South Koreans for operating a human smuggling operation.

The arrests come amid an ongoing crackdown against Christian evangelizing in China and a mass expulsion of South Korean missionaries. According to Asianews, authorities recently arrested four missionaries and deported at least 32 more. The missionaries had been working in the northeast Yanji region of the country – which borders North Korea – for decades, providing assistance to fugitives fleeing North Korea.

“Chinese authorities raided the homes of the missionaries, citing a problem with their visas, and told them to leave,” a human rights activist told AFP.

The outlet notes that while missionary work from the foreigners is illegal in China, evangelism from South Korean missionaries has been overlooked on the grounds that these missionaries prove humanitarian service.

According to Reuters, China has a strictly enforced policy of sending back illegal entrants from North Korea, whom it considers economic migrants. For over a decade, North Korea has ranked no. 1 on Open Door USA’s World Watch List of countries where believers face the most persecution.

“Worship of the ruling Kim family is mandated for all citizens, and those who don’t comply (including Christians) are arrested, imprisoned, tortured or killed,” reads the report. “Entire Christian families are imprisoned in hard labor camps, where unknown numbers die each year from torture, beatings, overexertion and starvation. Those who attempt to flee to South Korea through China risk execution or life imprisonment, and those who stay behind often fare no better.”

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