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NORTH KOREA: Christians murdered, sources state

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

A North Korean army general who became a Christian was, after he had begun to evangelise in his unit, shot dead by another senior army officer in 2003, Protestant sources have told Forum 18 News Service. Other known Christians are in some cases martyred by being shot, or are imprisoned. The sentence is dependent upon the situation. Forum 18 knows of the execution and torture of Christians continuing, but has not been able to establish if followers of other religions have suffered similarly. North Korean Protestants are said to be "very, very strong believers", resisting material inducements in prison to recant their faith, but when they stubbornly refuse to recant they are then shot. The state is said to be watching the increase in contacts between North Korea and the rest of the world "very carefully", and "false believers" may be used by the authorities to contact missionaries in humanitarian aid initiatives. Details of sources cannot be revealed by Forum 18, for fear of reprisals against them.

Protestant sources, who have contacts with Christians in North Korea, have told Forum 18 News Service that a North Korean army general who had become a Christian was, after he had begun to evangelise in his unit, shot dead by another senior army officer in 2003. The sources also claim that known Christians are in some cases executed by being shot, or are imprisoned, and that it is thought by the authorities that "you are an enemy of the state if you have a Bible". The sentence depended upon the situation, the sources reported, and it remains unclear whether it is imposed by a court or by a single party official: "It can be for any excuse, without explanation." Forum 18 has also received a separate report that such executions continue from a Protestant who had learned of them from a North Korean in 2002.

Forum 18 has been unable to gain independent verification of the shooting dead of the unnamed general, or of the executions and martyrdom of other Christians, as the secretive regime ruling North Korea (known officially as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) does not allow independent religious freedom monitoring. Nor can Forum 18 reveal details of sources, for fear of reprisals against them. Forum 18 has not been able to establish if any followers of other religions, such as Buddhism or the Chondogyo ("Heavenly Way") religion, an indigenous Korean religious belief, have suffered similarly.

Forum 18 has received other reports of the execution of Christians, and the torture of religious prisoners in North Korea. A Korean speaker, who has interviewed North Korean refugees, told Forum 18 that a group of elderly Christians, who had maintained their faith since before 1950, in a small town along the North Korean-Chinese border were executed in 2000, for their refusal to renounce their faith. Former North Korean officials and prisoners, like Soon-Ok Lee, have also testified that religious persons, particularly Christians, who were imprisoned, were subject to worse treatment than other prisoners (see F18News 25 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261).

One Protestant who met North Koreans officially outside the country in 2002 told Forum 18 that none of them had any idea whatsoever about religion, "not even Buddhism". The Protestant said he had spoken of his faith one-to-one to a North Korean, a middle-aged man with a purely communist family background. The man described to the Protestant how he lived in communal conditions, with compulsory Party meetings every Saturday morning, and explained that he was outside North Korea to get extra food for his family.

He was interested in faith in principle, but said that a person who becomes a believer in North Korea might be shot for some kind of violation, or else bring negative consequences upon his or her family. The North Korean knew this to be the case, the Protestant told Forum 18, because he knew someone in an official position who was able to influence the nature of such punishments. The North Korean refused to accept a Korean-language Bible from the Protestant.

Such Protestant sources maintained that the main objection to Christianity is its incompatibility with state ideology, which demands sole faith – of a markedly religious nature – in the communist leadership, which is officially still headed by "Eternal President" Kim Il Sung, despite his death in 1994. "If you believe in Jesus you go to jail. You must believe in Kim Il Sung." However, they acknowledged that ownership of a South-Korean produced Bible, for instance, might also be a factor in punishment, since it suggested illegal contact with foreigners.

The sources also stressed to Forum 18 that North Korean Protestants are "very, very strong believers" and said prison guards sometimes offer material incentives to Christian prisoners if they recanted their faith, but that they stubbornly refuse to do this and

so are then shot.

While acknowledging that they did not know who met there, the sources told Forum 18 that they thought the official Protestant and Catholic churches in the capital Pyongyang are "just buildings", intended to put on a pretence of there being religious freedom. These official churches are soon due to be joined by an Orthodox church (see F18News 27 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=419) and possibly also, if the North Korean government gives permission, by an "International Church" exclusively for foreigners, with Protestant services in English, to be built by foreign charities active in North Korea.

North Korea is also said to have established a fake Protestant church for refugees outside the country, run by a Pastor whose family is being held hostage in North Korea, members of whose congregation have been forcibly taken back to North Korea (see F18News 25 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261).

Discussing the current increase in contacts between North Korea and the rest of the world, the sources told Forum 18 that some government officials might say they were believers in order to attract funds or gain information, and that the state was watching "very carefully" foreign missionaries and humanitarian aid workers who are trying to enter the country. "They [missionaries] will meet false believers, who will try to contact them," the sources warned.

The sources also told Forum 18 that there is no reliable estimate for the number of Christians, of any church, in North Korea, and that they could not name even towns where Christians are located for fear of an indiscriminate crackdown in those places. North Korean churches lead an entirely underground existence, they said, meeting in unpopulated areas of the countryside to evade bugging in homes or informants. Noting that the population lives communally, the sources said that the secret police were very prevalent in society with, for example, wives spying on husbands and vice versa.

North Koreans who became Christians as the result of a dramatic spiritual revival, which began in 1945-47 before the Korean War began in 1950, have been instrumental in Christianity surviving in North Korea, by the faith being passed on almost exclusively through families, the sources reported.

North Koreans outside the country with official permission remain highly fearful of religious contacts. A Korean-speaking Protestant pastor told Forum 18 that he had had some unofficial contact with such North Koreans, but that their superiors did not allow them to mix with foreigners, as this could have a negative impact on their families at home. He said that they might have some kind of memory of religion, but "they don't open up", adding: "One was interested to know what I did, but it was very difficult to determine his reaction."

For more background information see Forum 18's survey of religion in North Korea at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=261

A printer-friendly map of North Korea is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=nkorea>

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