

World Watch Research

# North Korea: Background Information

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



| North Korea: Population (UN estimate for 2024) | Christians | Chr%        |
|--|------------|-------------|
| 26,245,000                                     | 400,000    | OD estimate |

## Recent history

Understanding North Korea means understanding its leadership and personality cult. In its early years, from independence in 1945, the country followed Communist principles and engaged in an early war against UN troops in the Korean War 1950-53. Soon after that, it became clear that North Korea would

not be a Communist country led by a collective leadership, but rather by one person, Kim Il Sung. After his death in 1994, he was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Il, who was in turn succeeded after his death in 2011 by his son, Kim Jong Un.

The country has two ideologies as its basis and although the terms have increasingly been used interchangeably, they are still distinct. One is called “Juche” which basically says that man is self-reliant (although this philosophy seems to have become less pronounced in recent years). The other is “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism”, the worship of the leaders who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea and helping it flourish, without interference from outside forces. While Juche seems to have taken more of an ideological backseat in recent years, the worship of the leaders became ever more important and with its constant indoctrination, warnings about "superstitions" and religions (without naming them as such) became [more important](#) as well (USCIRF, "Kimilsungism-Komjongilism and the right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience in North Korea", 29 July 2022). The army plays an important role for the leadership, especially when it comes to the development and deployment of nuclear capabilities.

The country wants to be taken seriously and heard internationally, which is one of the reasons why its leaders have advanced its rocket and nuclear technology, making the world aware of its continued existence. This policy has been successful insofar as it earned Kim Jong Un a first historic face-to-face meeting with US President Trump in June 2018, followed by more meetings in the following months. However, it did not lead to concrete results: There was no relief from international sanctions and no reduction in the emphasis on self-reliance and the country's strength. The latter is on display through the country's development of advanced weaponry; again in 2022 an array of missile types underwent [testing](#) (CNN, 25 May 2022). This is the background for understanding why many members of the international community were [severely critical](#) of North Korea taking over the rotating leadership of the UN-backed "Conference on Disarmament" (AP News, 2 June 2022). In a long-anticipated move, North Korea declared itself a "[nuclear weapons state](#)" in September 2022 (BBC News, 9 September 2022). While the missile testing [continued](#) in the WWL 2025 reporting period, the country stopped short of carrying out its seventh nuclear test, prolonging a hiatus since September 2017 (BBC News, 20 March 2023). With ties with Russia warming up, President Vladimir Putin made his first state visit to North Korea since 2000, which resulted in the signing of a [mutual defense pact](#) (Reuters, 19 June 2024). This pact will encourage an increasing transfer of knowhow in ballistics and rocket technology and also mean more deliveries of weapons and ammunition to Russia in its ongoing war with Ukraine.

The small Christian minority in North Korea continues to hide itself carefully, especially now as political tensions are growing again, and a new South Korean leadership will lead to a tightening of the ranks in the North Korean regime. In times when security is particularly tight, Christians are in particular danger due to being viewed as enemies of both the leadership and society in general. (For a detailed report on the sheer cruelty of the North Korean prison system, see the "North Korea [Prison Database](#)", published by Korea Future on 27 March 2022. For a specific view on freedom of religion and belief, see the report "[Persecuting Faith](#)", published by Korea Future on 27 October 2021).

#### **A note about North Korea's response to COVID-19**

After months of denying the presence of any COVID-19 infections in the country, in May 2022, Kim Jong Un finally [admitted](#) that the COVID-19 virus had reached North Korea (Reuters, 18 May 2022),

although it was referred to as an unspecified "fever". He immediately mobilized the armed forces to support the country's health institutions. The health system in North Korea was notoriously fragile even before the arrival of the pandemic. The decision to close all borders with China in 2020 (although temporarily eased - Deutsche Welle/DW, 21 January 2021), had harsh consequences for the ailing economy and also for society at large. Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, later announced that her brother had been [infected](#) with COVID-19, blaming South Korea for sending the virus (BBC News, 11 August 2022). Kim Yo Jong also took the opportunity to claim victory in the country's battle against COVID and to praise her brother for tirelessly working for the people despite suffering from a high fever. North Korean borders did not [fully re-open](#) until 2023 (Washington Post, 5 September 2023) and tourism picked up only slowly from April 2024 onwards.

The pandemic may not just have worsened the economic situation, but also contributed to the levels of malnutrition and hunger North Korea is facing (see below: *Economic landscape* and *Social and cultural landscape*). Another result of the pandemic has been that the country built (and fortified existing) [border walls](#) at its Chinese and Russian borders, respectively (Reuters, 29 May 2023).

## Political and legal landscape

While Kim Jong Un has been demonstrating a different style of leadership from his father, his ultimate goal of seeking respect and safety for his regime does not differ at all. He is trying to emulate his grandfather by appearing communicative and benevolent in public. However, this does not mean any change in ideology or direction of leadership. Kim Jong Un has been proclaimed the "Great Successor" and has been given the titles "Supreme Leader" and "Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces". More importantly, he holds key positions in all important powerhouses (party, state and army) through his role as First Secretary of Korea's Workers' Party. The 8th Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Congress took place in January 2021, further cementing Kim Jong Un's leadership. He has been given the title of "[General Secretary](#) of the KWP" (AP News, 11 January 2021). This title is more significant than it looks at first sight. Kim Jong Un's father had been named the "eternal General Secretary" when he passed away. By taking on this new title in a time of (economic) hardship for North Korea shows how strong Kim Jong Un's position is and that he is consolidating his rule.

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would choose a path of reform diminished in the course of 2012 and 2013 after economic reforms were not pursued and after continued nuclear tests and missile launches. Tests of ballistic missiles and rockets continued at a high frequency (see above: *Recent history*) which shows that regime survival is the highest priority and Kim Jong Un will do anything to stay visible and of significance on the regional and international stage, especially after his 'diplomatic offensive' in 2018/19 largely failed to bring results: Beginning with a meeting with the Chinese president and secretary-general of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping, this also led him to meet several times with the US president and the South Korean president and once with the Russian president. This offensive was arguably caused by the effect of the international sanctions against the regime. In 2021, relations between North Korea and China seemed to [warm up again](#), not least illustrated by the fact that the two countries pledged to extend the 1961 'mutual friendship treaty' for a further 20 years (Jamestown Foundation, 17 August 2021).

A very visible sign of the inter-Korean 'new normal' was North Korea's [demolition](#) of the liaison office in Kaesong in June 2020, which Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, had threatened would take place

(BBC News, 16 June 2020). Kim Jong Un announced at the end of 2023 that “the two Koreas are separate ‘[belligerent states’ at war](#)” (NK News, 1 January 2024). Additionally, there was a public announcement at the end of 2023 that the long-stated goal of unification is also ‘impossible’ and that the Republic of Korea is thus to be regarded as an enemy state. The fact that that the two Koreas are [no longer to be regarded as compatriots](#) (NK News, 2 January 2024) did not come as a great surprise, but was nevertheless a major shift in politics. Debates about what this could mean in practice almost immediately set in. Some observers interpreted this shift as the country preparing itself for war, a view [rebutted](#) by others (38 North, 17 January 2024).

For a long time, speculations circulated about Kim Jong Un’s health and possible [measures](#) in case of a temporary or permanent incapacitation (NK News, 16 June 2021). The question then, of course, arises as to who would step in to take over the position of country leader. This remains to be seen, but it seems likely that ‘family blood’ will be the trump card. These thoughts coincided with speculation after pictures had shown that Kim Jong Un had [lost weight](#) (NK News, 8 June 2021). If this is related to a healthier lifestyle or a more serious health condition, is a question which is a vivid reminder that much of what goes on in North Korea is based on guesswork (see below: Trends analysis #4).

There is always a lot of speculation about promotions and demotions, and one example has been the widely noted fact that his sister has [not been given](#) a permanent seat in the Politburo as many observers had expected (Reuters, 11 January 2021). However, this is not necessarily to be seen as form of demotion: Kim Yo Jong remains an influential adviser and is the [only female member](#) of the State Affairs Commission (Daily News Brief, 1 October 2021). She does not need formal titles for wielding influence, due to her familial affiliation. The rumor mill started up again when Kim Jong Un was accompanied by his daughter at a rocket launch in November 2022. A flurry of speculation began about whether she is being presented to the public as a [potential successor](#), especially given her father’s alleged health problems (NK News, 18 January 2023). Kim Ju Ae, who is thought to be 10 or 11 years old, has acquired a [new title](#) in the state media, leading to speculation about her elevated status (Radio Free Asia, 29 November 2023). She is now being referred to as the “Morning Star of North Korea” by state media, making Western observers wonder if such a title has a special meaning. On the other hand, there are statements from high-ranking officials saying that a female successor, especially when she is still young, would be [‘impossible’](#) (Daily NK, 14 December 2023).

North Korean authorities ordered the [expansion](#) of the political prison camp system during the Eighth Party Congress (DailyNK, 19 February 2021) and while several camps had been closed or merged over the previous years, it was only since the imposition of COVID-19 quarantine measures that the [prison population](#) grew by at least 20,000 since March 2020, which was due to quarantine offenders landing in political prison camps (DailyNK, 28 July 2021). The order for expanding the prison system was first and foremost a reaction to the pandemic and quarantine measures. However, it seems that the camp population [fell](#) by 20,000 by August 2022 (DailyNK, 31 August 2022). This does not mean that they have been released, but rather that they may have died because of poor prison conditions, punishment and even torture. At the same time, the order for expanding the prison system coincided with the announcement of the [‘Anti-reactionary thought law’](#) (WWR, 28 January 2021), which was [enacted](#) in December 2020 (DailyNK, 31 May 2021).

Apart from trying to ban and punish everything South Korean (including accents, music and hair styles), Article 28 of this law calls for up to 10 years of correctional labor for the crime of importing banned material, and even death for importing large quantities. Of particular interest is that a source in the country told the news-site Daily NK that the Bible is included among the banned books mentioned in Article 28. This is no surprise, since it is well-known that the possession of a Bible in North Korea has frequently led to serious punishment, including execution, and just being in contact with Christians while in China leads to a place in a holding or detention center and each interrogation will invariably contain the [question](#) if the "defector" has been in contact with Christians" (DailyNK, 1 November 2023). North Korea has been intensifying its battle against all "capitalist tendencies", showing its unchanging [ideological resolve](#) (38North, 5 November 2021). At first sight it may be surprising that this campaign is being intensified at a time when the authorities are busy combatting the (back then, officially non-existent) pandemic and the resulting economic fallout. However, it does make sense because the regime's overarching goal is to secure its survival and that means keeping all citizens in line and all outside influences at bay. This ideological battle also targets the Christian minority, which is particularly affected where the campaign has been intensified in the regions bordering China.

This illustrates the fact that, if anything, the situation for Christians has become even more difficult, now that the 'honeymoon' of international diplomacy has ended and control has tightened again in society, particularly in the border region. At the same time, the diplomatic [exodus](#) from Pyongyang has continued and only a few embassies remain open (NK News, 11 March 2022); some observers estimate that a mere 300 foreign nationals are currently still in the country. In this respect, there was another sign of an economically and socially strained situation when the Russian ambassador made the frank announcement that the Russian embassy would be sending home several of its [diplomats](#) due to the "shortages in the country" and the fact that they had already been serving in the country for three years (NK News, 26 May 2023). With less foreign residents, it has once again become harder to get information out of the reclusive country and to support its Christians. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 made matters worse as it led North Korea to completely shut off its border with China (and Russia). This harmed the already hard-hit economy, but also effectively cut off all traffic and communication across the border. On the other side of the border, meanwhile, Chinese officials have been [searching the homes](#) of female North Koreans, looking for signs of possible contact with South or North Korea (Daily NK, 3 November 2021). At the same time, Chinese COVID-restrictions created severe [complications](#) for any groups helping escapees (NK News, 26 December 2022).

### **Gender perspective**

On paper, North Korea has developed legislation that seemingly protects women and girls from gender inequality in many areas. [The Criminal Law of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) (2009) criminalizes rape, trafficking and sexual abuse, and the country acceded to the CEDAW Convention in 2001. Domestic violence is also outlawed under the 2010 Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Women. According to a 2020 report by the [Borgen Project](#), however, such policies have not been successfully implemented. Human Rights Watch notes that violence against women, domestic violence and rape are [prevalent](#) across the country (HRW 2023, country chapter North Korea). The 2010 law does not provide for victim protection or for criminal liability of perpetrators, creating a means of legal impunity for the use of domestic and sexual violence as a form of religious persecution.



A context that further exposes Christian men and women to pressure are the armed forces; since 2015, it has become mandatory for females to be drafted into military service, which is a notoriously controlling environment and opposed to all religious practice. The length of service for men is currently 8 years (10 years if serving in missile and mechanized units) and for women 5 years ([Asia Press, 26 April 2024](#)).

## Religious landscape

No reliable data showing a statistical, religious break-down is available. The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is 400,000 but could be as high as 500,000. WCD data (accessed May 2024) lists the number of Buddhists at just over 517,000. A South Korean archbishop claimed in a recently published book that the Catholic church in North Korea [is growing](#) despite being underground and persecuted (UCA News, 17 May 2022). The categories "Ethno-religionist" and "Other" (which includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist and Zoroastrian) are listed at well over 3 million each.

Religion in North Korea means in practice the personality cult surrounding the leaders' family. Everyone has to attend weekly information meetings and self-criticism sessions and memorize more than 100 pages of ideological material, including documents, poems and songs which all praise the morals and majesty of the Kims. Allegedly, around 100,000 Juche 'research centers' – mostly comprising of a single room – exist throughout the country. Even pre-school children are indoctrinated at an early stage. Changes in nursery [education](#) were announced in August 2020 and sessions on the greatness of the leaders, especially Kim Jong Un, have now been extended to 90 minutes daily (Daily NK, 11 September 2020).

The fact that 'being a Christian' was explicitly mentioned in the 'Anti-reactionary thought law' shows the regime's continued strong anti-Christian stance. Party officials are obliged to study the political ideology for [two hours a day](#), on top of already existing weekly study sessions and self-criticism meetings (RFA, 13 July 2021). There are a host of programs to make sure they remain politically and ideologically 'nourished', a recent example being the 2023 reading campaign with the slogan '[Read 10,000 pages](#)' (RFA, 28 April 2023). Such programs aim at keeping all citizens loyal to the regime and help combat any 'enemy' influences, such as South Korean music and TV shows, as well as films of Western origin and Christian faith. This not only puts a huge burden on officials, but also shows how tense the situation for those regarded as 'hostile forces' has become.

There are still followers of Buddhism and Confucianism in the country, despite the fact that worshipping the leaders in theory leaves no room for any other religion. However, these religions belong to the cultural mind-set, adherents are able to live their faith without anyone noticing and these religions are thus tolerated. Christianity, on the other hand, is seen as a dangerous foreign religion which has to be combatted aggressively. There is consequently no room for Christians in North Korea, and they must live their lives in utmost secrecy. When it is occasionally reported that South Korean church leaders [met with their North Korean counterparts](#), such news should not be taken at face value (Ecumenical News, 23 June 2018). The official North Korean church – if it exists at all - can hardly be seen as being representative for all Christian witness in the country; indeed, some observers view such delegations as pure sham. Gathering in large groups is absolutely impossible for Christians and it is life-threatening even to be simply recognized as being a Christian.



In 2018, Moscow Orthodox Patriarch Kirill announced [plans for an official visit to Pyongyang](#) and its recently built Orthodox church (Pravmir, 4 September 2018), but this visit has still not yet taken place. According to the [US State Department \(IRFR 2023 North Korea\)](#): "The Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity operated in Pyongyang, purportedly to provide pastoral care to Russians in the country. The clergy included North Koreans, several of whom had reportedly studied at the Russian Orthodox seminary in Moscow. In 2021, Russian Orthodox Church officials called the church "a priceless gift of the DPRK state leadership to Russian Orthodox Christians residing in Pyongyang" but made no mention of North Koreans worshipping there." The fact that President Putin also visited the Russian Orthodox church in Pyongyang during his state visit in June 2024 can be seen as lending credibility to North Korea's claim that there are churches and even freedom of religion in the country.

## Economic landscape

No reliable economic data is available; the UNDP does not include North Korea in its analysis and the World Bank only issues limited country details. GDP per capita and the growth rate are not available, neither is the poverty gap. North Korea remained in the low-income status, according to the World Bank classification.

The country is under international sanctions and needs international aid, but the regime denies direct access to its citizens in need, an access which became even more restricted during COVID-19 lockdown measures. One observer described the North Korean economic policy as "[muddling through](#) with few options" (38North, 7 January 2022). Although humanitarian aid is exempted from the sanctions, the additional isolation caused by the country lock-down and by the fact that many international aid workers have left the country, has brought the few programs which were still running to a standstill.

As North Korea cracked down on most of the (technically always illegal) "jangmandang" markets sprouting up across the country, [nighttime markets](#) have been popping up to satisfy demand (Radio Free Asia, 28 February 2024). Kim Jong Un announced the implementation of a new rural development policy called '20x10'. This means that over the next ten years, the government plans each year to build one factory in 20 provinces. According to recent [satellite imagery](#) made available by 38North on 4 June 2024, North Korea's 20x10 program and other projects seem to be making good progress throughout the country (38North, 4 June 2024). Housing construction has been going ahead at over 190 locations in various counties. While little can be said about the quality of the new housing (or who is to be allowed to live in such residences), the sheer geographic scale seems to be a deliberate effort by the authorities to show as many citizens as possible how the state is successfully bringing modern development within reach of everyone.

It reflects a new geopolitical reality that North Korea does not feel isolated anymore, now that the ties with Russia and China are warming. The latter is also helping North Korea to earn much needed hard currency, e.g., by importing (and re-exporting) false eye-lashes, beards and wigs, a [business](#) worth 167 million USD in 2023 (Reuters, 3 February 2024).

At the 8th Korean Workers Party Congress, referred to above, the economy was one of the major topics, not least because COVID-19 and the related border closings derailed all economic planning. The decision was made to rein in the free-wheeling private sector and to bring back (more) [state control](#) (38North, 9 February 2021). And while it may be exaggerated to talk about a full return to old-style

Communist economics, this definitely means a [recentralization](#) of economic policy (East Asia Forum, 10 April 2021). Consequently, [state-owned shops](#) should benefit from this policy (RFA, 3 June 2021). While efforts were and are being made to strengthen a policy of [import substitution](#) (38North, 10 February 2022), not least due to the political situation, North Korea's economy is dependent on the country's big neighbor, China. And while the border trade with China [slowly re-opened](#) in 2022, including restarting the suspended freight train service between North Korea and China (RFA, 27 September 2022), it should be kept in mind just how dependent North Korea is on China as an export destination. According to a report, China imported coal from North Korea at 1/4 of the world market prize, capitalizing on its [de facto monopoly](#) (NK Econwatch, 25 April 2022). North Korean [missiles](#) have been used by Russian forces in the Ukraine war. This was confirmed by UN experts studying fragments (Reuters, 30 April 2024) and shows how political and economic relations with Russia have been strengthened.

Another important means of earning hard currency has been for the government to send migrant workers to other countries. However, there are now fewer countries accepting workers than in previous years and the COVID-19 pandemic has anyway effectively brought this financial boost to a halt. International sanctions are also limiting this way of earning currency. [The lifting of sanctions](#) has been the central goal of all North Korea's international diplomacy, but no such relief can be expected in the short-term (BBC News, 16 June 2020). The fact that North Korea decided to [cut all communication and liaison lines](#) with South Korea in June 2020 shows that it is not prepared to pursue economic development at all costs and that regime safety and ideology will always be prioritized over the well-being of its people (38North, 9 June 2020).

In May 2022, North Korea finally conceded that COVID-19 infections had begun to emerge, although it spoke of unclassified cases of "fever" (see above: Political and legal landscape). While Kim Jong Un himself had previously only spoken of challenges regarding the food situation, the North Korean government has openly acknowledged the continuing [food shortages](#) in the country, most recently in a statement by Kim Jong Un in February 2023 (Reuters, 27 February 2023). Reports have emerged that the country has now approached the [World Food Program](#) (WFP) for help (Wall Street Journal, 2 March 2023). However, the only solution being propagated by the North Korean leadership to combat the shortages seems to be a [reform](#) of the agricultural sector (Reuters, 28 February 2023) and a call for [stronger ruling party control](#) (NK News, 2 March 2023). While the food prices in North Korea seem to have stabilized, they have done so at a [high level](#), making it very hard for people to make ends meet (38North, 25 June 2023). The population is being kept in the dark about the reasons and the small Christian minority will doubtless remain in hiding as much as possible, especially as efforts may increase to crack down on potential defectors and on all perceived and real dissent.

### **Gender perspective**

All North Korean men and unmarried women are assigned workplaces by the government and their attendance is strictly controlled, even if they do not get paid ([HRW 2017, country chapter North Korea](#)). Free from government-assigned positions, married women have greater freedom to assume the role of main actors in informal markets. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women were estimated to contribute more [household income](#) than men (in part due to low wages in state-assigned workplaces for men) – yet also take the lead with domestic chores (Medium, 26 February 2022). The

COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, deemed excessive by critics, further exacerbated social and economic pressures in the informal [Jangmadang market sector](#), where women make up the vast majority of the workforce (NK Hidden Gulag Blog, 4 October 2021).

## Social and cultural landscape

Little reliable data is available. According to the [World Factbook North Korea](#), accessed 24 June 2024 (all numbers should be treated with caution):

- **Main ethnic groups:** ethnically homogenous Korean, there is a small ethnic Chinese group and a few ethnic Japanese
- **Main languages:** Korean
- **Urbanization rate:** 63.2%
- **Literacy rate:** 100%

The [World Bank North Korea data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024) also contains a limited amount of information, but all numbers have to be treated with caution:

- **Population/Age:** 19% of the population is below the age of 14, 11.6% is above the age of 65
- **Education:** The primary school enrollment is 93% (2018, the completion rate is 99.3% (2009)
- **Unemployment:** 3%, 81.2% are in vulnerable employment (modeled ILO estimate) and the rate of people employed in the agricultural sector is 44% (2019, ILO).
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 72.9 years
- **Health:** 18% of all children under five years of age have a prevalence of stunting (modeled estimate, 2020). There are 36.8 physicians and 143 hospital beds per 10,000 people.
- **Student-teacher ratio at primary school level:** 20:1
- **Forest:** The forest area in North Korea is an estimated 49,000 sqm, a decline of 40% within just 30 years.
- **Urban population growth:** 0.85%

Korean society is influenced by Confucianism, a Chinese ethical and philosophical system going back to the 6th century BC. Out of this system, North Korea developed a social classification which includes every citizen and keeps records in the Resident Registration File. This system, called Songbun, divides society into three classes - the core (28%), the wavering (45%) and the hostile class (27%). This classification is further divided into 51 sub-categories. Christians and their descendants are recorded in the hostile class and even have two sub-categories of their own. This system remains in operation and still very much influences every day life. However, reports from North Korea show that [bribes can make a difference](#) and cause officials to look the other way (NK News, 5 September 2019). Such bribes are potentially dangerous as the regime has been cracking down on corruption and it is not an option for Christians anyway, whose opportunities for earning money are limited.

North Korea is a mountainous country with limited space for arable land. Due to its geography, it faces a high potential for [natural disasters](#): Torrential rains, typhoons, flooding and storm surges occur annually. Soil erosion and sedimentation, landslides, droughts and dust and sand storms pose serious threats to life and livelihood in the country (HRNK Insider, 2 November 2020). UN reports continue to show that millions of North Korean people suffer from chronic food insecurity (to varying degrees),

high malnutrition rates and deep-rooted economic problems. Young children, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. According to a 2021 report, [one fifth](#) of North Korean children under five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition (NK News, 5 May 2021). According to a report published on 23 May 2023 jointly by UNICEF, WHO and the World Bank entitled "[Levels and Trends in child malnutrition](#)", more than 285,000 children below the age of five suffer from stunted growth in North Korea (page 19). Joining the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the first ever visit of a United Nations Special Rapporteur (on that topic) has been seen as a modest sign of improvement, but more recent research shows that the treatment of [disabled people](#) still falls short of international standards (NK Hidden Gulag, 3 August 2020).

The strong decline of forest areas (as shown in the World Bank's country profile reported above) is another illustration of the difficult circumstances the population finds itself in. Not just food is scarce, but also energy and any kind of heating material. Although North Korea is resource-rich and has, for instance, a considerable amount of coal, much of it is used for exporting to China. Therefore, people are forced to chop wood in order to survive. The fact that North Korean authorities and Kim Jong Un publicly admitted that the country is facing food security problems shows how grave this challenge has become. The WFP is seeking to [triple](#) its funds for food assistance programs in North Korea (NK News, 28 February 2023). Christians suffer from the dire situation as well and have the added danger of not just being classified as hostile (according to Songbun) if their faith is discovered, but also of being interrogated, brought to camps or sometimes even killed on the spot. This is why they carefully hide their Christian faith as much as possible.

In June 2021, North Korea submitted a [Voluntary National Report](#) on the implementation of the "2030 agenda", the sustainable development goals as set out by the United Nations. Whereas it seems safe to say that most of the data provided paints a rosy picture (and the report was submitted well before the regime admitted the existence of COVID-19 in the country), it is remarkable that North Korea seems to be trying to implement these goals. The COVID-19 crisis has reportedly further exacerbated economic and social pressures in North Korea ([DW, 12 April 2021](#)). As late as January 2023, North Korea's capital city, Pyongyang, was placed under '[lock-down](#)' due to a "respiratory illness" (Reuters, 25 January 2023).

The regime seems to realize that something has to be done about the huge and growing gap of living conditions between the capital Pyongyang and the provinces. It is well-known that residents of Pyongyang have a very comfortable life, at least in the eyes of their compatriots in the provinces. It seems that with the implementation of the 20x10 policy the regime now sees the need to [adjust the balance](#). This may become a challenge as it will be paramount not to diminish the quality of life for the privileged people in the capital (The Diplomat, 13 February 2024).

If asked what this means for the hidden Christians in the country, then it must be said that any help is welcome, since they suffer from the absence of care and opportunities just like the majority of the population. But for those banned to the prison camps, there is no access to proper medical facilities of any sort, and it is more or less certain that any humanitarian or medical aid will not be allowed to reach them.

## Gender perspective

North Korea's strong system of control suppresses the freedom of both men and women. While women are afforded equality in legislation – at least on paper – they are considered socially subservient to men and treated as inferior. According to Human Rights Watch, they are exposed constantly to stereotyped gender roles ([HRW 2023 North Korea country chapter](#)). At school, boys and girls are even given different curricula, designed according to traditional gender roles ([The Borgen Project, 9 May 2019](#)).

A report by NGO Global Rights Compliance shows how vulnerable [North Korean women and girls](#) in China have become. Having been helped across the border to China, these refugees are prone to become victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse and even slave-like conditions (GRC, 26 March 2023). This is especially true for the northeastern provinces of China (in the report referred to as the 'red zone'). These are lawless zones for such women, a number of whom have become Christians.

## Technological landscape

Reliable data is again hard to come by when considering the technological context. According to [DataReportal Digital 2024/North Korea](#) (updated 23 February 2024), North Korea operates its own intranet and the standard Internet remains unavailable to everyday citizens: "[A]vailable data suggests that fewer than 10,000 people in the country are able to access international websites, and it seems likely that a sizeable proportion of this small group will be made up of foreign expatriates and the country's political elite." Based on GSMA Intelligence, Digital 2024 reports there being 7.51 million cellular mobile connections in North Korea in January 2024, the equivalent of 28.7% of the population. As the regime sees it as vital to control the flow of information, only domestic cell phones can be bought and used. It has become increasingly dangerous for anyone to bring Chinese-made phones into the country, which can connect to the Chinese mobile system in the border areas. The authorities have done everything they can to scramble the signals and have used sophisticated [technical systems](#) to hinder and monitor such calls (Daily NK, 23 October 2020). A report in July 2019 by '38North' highlighted the security- and surveillance-orientation of the complete mobile phone system and called it "[one of the most restrictive cellular environments in the world](#)".

A report by HRNK published in December 2019 entitled "[Digital Trenches](#)" also explains the technical counter-measures the regime is taking against the influx of foreign information. A different way of countering what is perceived as 'fake news' was highlighted in a report in May 2020, explaining how [video blogs](#) are being used by the regime to explain North Korea (and especially life in Pyongyang) to a young international audience (NK News, 18 May 2020). At the same time and at high personal risk, there are North Korean citizens [circumventing](#) the technical restrictions which the government employs to control smartphone usage (Reuters, 28 April 2022; see the full report from Lumen, "[Project Reveal](#)", 27 April 2022). Another report estimates the ratio of students from Pyongyang using [circumvention programs](#) on their phones at 10%, despite the high personal risk (DailyNK, 17 August 2022).

North Korean authorities have been investigating technical methods of surveillance for decades. It is important to realize that North Korea is not as backward as some would think, especially in the cities. One example is the growing relevance of smartphone-based payment systems. And while much of the

surveillance carried out in North Korea is still being done by humans, mostly as part the notorious inminban neighborhood watch system, [digital surveillance](#) is increasingly being utilized (Stimson Center, 16 April 2024).

North Korea has experienced what one observer described as a "[revolution](#)" in TV media, since the number of TV channels now available for the general public has increased, although all are still state-run (38North, 16 December 2020). Indeed, the technological landscape is probably the area which has seen the greatest amount of change over the last few years. Nowadays, most North Koreans have been in touch with Western (especially South Korean) culture, often in the form of soap operas, films on DVD or pop music. A vivid illustration of this is the report of a soldier who ran into trouble when caught doing [dance moves](#) copied from famous K-pop band BTS (Daily NK, 13 August 2020). These unofficial opportunities also benefit Christians and their access to Christian material. However, this is a double-edged sword: Better access also means increased supervision by the authorities. When Christians dare to access and store material electronically, the risks are considerable.

An abandoned North Korean web server showed that North Korean [web creators](#) are participating in creating animation shows for children even for Western audiences, most likely as sub-contractors from China (38 North, 22 April 2024). This also contributes to the efforts of earning foreign currency.

## Security situation

Technically, North Korea is still at war with the United States of America, since only a ceasefire agreement was reached at the end of the Korean War in 1953. Consequently, this has been one of the issues on the table in the bilateral talks. As this matter is also connected to the presence of US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula in South Korea, it is not as easy to resolve as it may seem at first sight. A much bigger challenge is North Korea's nuclear capability. Although there is still some debate as to whether North Korea would indeed be able to mount a nuclear device on a long-range ballistic missile and target - for example - US territory, the technological advances are serious enough to cause international tension, including making neighboring China nervous. Hence, the UN Security Council agreed on tough economic sanctions which were by-and-large implemented strictly. However, implementation and control ceased when Russia [did not agree](#) on an extension in March 2024 (Reuters, 28 March 2024). In his first state visit to North Korea since 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin not only reaffirmed friendly relations with North Korea, but also signed a [mutual defense pact](#) (Reuters, 19 June 2024). This pact enables North Korea to benefit from knowhow transfer in ballistics and rocket technology, and presumably justifies more weapon and ammunition deliveries from North Korea to Russia in its ongoing war with Ukraine. Highly threatening, is also the fact that North Korea has considerable conventional firepower to target Seoul in any possible escalation. Seoul is only 56 km from the North Korean border.

In recent years, the official number of North Koreans fleeing the country and reaching South Korea has been [decreasing](#); the number in 2019 was 1047, a decline of 8% against 2018 (1137), which had been an increase of 10 escapees compared to 2017 (Korea Times, 10 January 2020). The fact that the borders were shut down due to the COVID-19 crisis had an influence on the numbers for 2020, as only 229 people made it out of North Korea to South Korea in that year. Particularly closely watched by the authorities is the number of border guards defecting, as this may indicate the situation in the wider country. Thus, it was noteworthy that at the beginning of March 2021, a group of [six border guards](#) left



for China (RFA, 24 March 2021). However, in 2021, a [record low number](#) of only 63 North Koreans made it to South Korea (NK News, 20 January 2022). Although there is a [continuing flow of escapees](#), just 67 North Koreans made it to South Korea in 2022, which was the second lowest number ever recorded (NK News, 10 January 2023). While the total number in 2023 was 196, despite the recent opening of North Korea's borders, the [number of escapees](#) from the country is still not picking up (NK News, 30 April 2024). According to the ministry of reunification in South Korea, in the first quarter of 2024, a mere 47 escapees reached the country. While this is an increase compared to the first quarter of 2023, the numbers decreased when compared to the previous quarter (October to December 2023) and are a far cry from pre-pandemic levels. [Facial recognition technology](#) in use in China is increasing the risk of North Korean escapees being tracked and caught, especially if they use public transportation. As a result, the prices charged by smugglers assisting them are rising steeply and, according to data from the South Korean Ministry of Unification, the number of North Koreans arriving in the South is likely to remain a mere double digit trickle (RFA, 22 June 2023).

Particularly interesting is the fact that 85% of all defectors in 2018 were female, confirming a long-term trend; one reason for this is the fact that women usually have more freedom of movement if they are not expected to appear at a set workplace. Another reason, however, is the sad fact that women are the main target for human traffickers, be it for work or for marriage purposes. According to the most recent US Trafficking in Persons Report, the government has not taken steps to prevent such trafficking and has reportedly subjected victims of trafficking who return to the DPRK to gross human rights violations ([Tracking in Persons Report 2022, pp.326-327](#)). Reports say that secret service agents from North Korea are [infiltrating](#) Chinese and South Korean churches in China and the Chinese government has also been cracking down on Korean citizens in China and ethnic Korean Chinese, which is having an effect on [North Korean refugee networks](#) (DailyNK, 11 January 2019 and Reuters, 17 June 2019). China publicly and [fiercely opposed](#) the UN Special Rapporteur's critical stance on its repatriation policy of North Korean citizens (NK News, 19 March 2024), showing a growing determination to defend the regime in Pyongyang.

### **Gender perspective**

A [2020 UN report](#) has highlighted the particular gender-specific human rights violations suppressing women in these camps, which include sexual violence, forced nudity, rape and forced abortion (see also: [HRNK report, 2022](#)). Christian men, too, experience physical violence and maltreatment within labor camps. Greater cooperation between the North Korean intelligence agency and Chinese police has resulted in increasing numbers of defectors - usually women - being identified and forcibly repatriated to North Korea, where they, too, face severe punishment ([Trafficking in Persons Report 2022, p.176](#)). Escaping these atrocious conditions reportedly became more difficult over recent years following the border-closure in 2020 due to COVID-19 ([The Borgen Project, 29 August 2022](#)). In 2021, China restarted its [forced repatriation](#) policy despite the pandemic (HRW News, 22 July 2021).



## Christian origins

In 1603 a Korean diplomat returned from Beijing carrying several theological books written by a Jesuit missionary in China. He began disseminating the information in the books and the first seeds of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form were sown. In 1758 King Yeongjo of Joseon officially outlawed Christianity as an evil practice and Korean Christians were subjected to severe persecution, particularly in 1801 and 1866. In this last wave, approximately [8,000 Catholics](#) were killed across the whole of Korea (Christian Today, accessed 14 August 2020).

When the first Protestant missionaries settled permanently in Korea in 1885, they found a small community of Christians already there and two years later the first Bible was published in Korean. The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1905 (made official in 1910) unintentionally caused a great upsurge in the numbers of Christians as Christianity became linked with movements supporting Korean nationalism. In 1907 the Great Pyongyang Revival began, and the capital became known as the “Jerusalem of the East”. Hundreds of churches sprang up and there were numerous revival meetings. Missionaries also set up educational institutions throughout the country.

Under Japanese rule the Church was increasingly persecuted and Christians and other civilians were forced to bow before the altars of the emperor. After the defeat of Japan in World War II, Kim Il Sung came to power in the Soviet-controlled sector of the Korean Peninsula north of the 38th Parallel. In 1948 he was able to impose a Communist (atheistic) regime. During the Korean War (1950-53) many Christians fled and after the war, tens of thousands of Christians were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas. The rest of the Church went underground. It is estimated that before the Korean War there had been more than 300,000 Christians in the northern part of Korea. Just ten years later, there was no visible presence of them anymore.

## Church spectrum today

No information can be made available for publication.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=North Korea>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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