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Christians murdered, sources state

By Magda Hornemann

Forum 18 News Service (14.10.2004)/HRWF (21.10.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - 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.

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 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.

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."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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Aid group to set up church in Pyongyang

by Moon Gwang-lip

Korea Times (08.10.2004)/HRWF (12.10.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A relief agency is to establish a church exclusively for foreigners in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital.

When opened, foreign visitors and diplomats will be able to attend English prayer services in Pyongyang.

The Korean Foundation World Aid, a group working for aid in North Korea, said Friday that it has agreed with eight U.S.-based missionary groups to join hands in establishing the church for foreigners in Pyongyang.

If North Korea grants permission to its foundation, the church, tentatively called the "Pyongyang International Harvest Church," will be the third official church in the North.

The representatives of the joint team will soon visit Pyongyang to seek the government's permission for the church," said Lee Soo-jung, a member of the foundation.

The first official church in North Korea, Pongsu Church was founded in 1988. Chilgol Church, was set up in 1999.

Missionary groups participating in the plan include the Campus Crusade for Christ and the Love Network for Korea in Los Angeles.

According to the plan, a total of \$6 million will be invested to construct a four-story building with lodging facilities. The church will also run a school for foreign students, the foundation said.

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Will local Orthodox dare to regularly attend new church?

by Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 News Service (27.09.2004)/HRWF (28.09.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Consecrated on 24 June 2003 by then Archbishop Kliment (Kapalin) of Kaluga and Borovsk, the Holy Trinity Orthodox church in Pyongyang was "65 per cent finished" by the end of this summer, Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev, a Russian Orthodox priest who ministers to foreign nationals in the North Korean capital twice a year, told Forum 18 News Service from Hong Kong on 18 September. Construction thus appears to be slightly behind schedule - a 23 June 2003 report by Russian state news agency RIA Novosti reported Chairman of North Korea's Orthodox Committee Ho Il Jin as saying that it would take between nine and 12 months to build.

When finished, the 300-square-metre (3,230 square feet) church should be able to accommodate up to 200 worshippers. It remains unclear if the North Korean authorities will allow local people to attend or whether the church will only serve locally-based Orthodox foreigners. Pyongyang has two Protestant churches and one Catholic church, but many believe these are "show churches" for the benefit of foreign visitors with no regular worship services.

Completely unknown is how many North Koreans remain Orthodox after decades of state-enforced atheism and whether any would dare to attend the church once it is opened.

According to Fr Dionisy, who led the first ever Orthodox service in the Russian embassy in Pyongyang on 9 October 2002 by invitation of the official Korean Council of Religionists, the new church was largely funded by the North Korean state, with some donations from South Korean Orthodox believers and the governor of Russia's Far Eastern Primorye region. According to the June 2003 RIA Novosti report, construction is taking place under the direction of the Orthodox Committee within the Korean Council of Religionists, with Russian technological assistance employed in the production of its two domes and bells.

In February 2004 the state news agency in Russia's Primorye region covered a two-week visit to Moscow and Vladivostok by a delegation of North Korea's Orthodox Committee led by its chairman, Ho Il Jin. In Russia at the invitation of Patriarch Aleksii II, members of the delegation reportedly "held working consultations with specialists on questions of church construction and Orthodox traditions in church decoration".

In an interview with Russian newspaper Vremya Novostei on 15 October 2002, Fr Dionisy said that the Pyongyang church was "entirely the initiative" of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, who requested a visit to an Orthodox church while touring Far Eastern Siberia in August 2002.

Present at the June 2003 consecration, Dmitry Petrovsky of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations told Forum 18 in early 2004 that North Korean representatives had said in their addresses that it was important that Orthodox believers in Pyongyang should have the opportunity to practise their faith and expressed hope that the church would strengthen ties between Russia and North Korea.

Quoted in the June 2003 RIA Novosti report, Russian ambassador to North Korea Andrei Karlov commented that the foundation of the new church was most significant for the development of relations between Russia and the DPRK and marked "the return of Orthodoxy to Korea after a long break". Reporting the 26-28 November 2002 visit by a delegation of the Korean Council of Religionists to Vladivostok diocese at the invitation of Patriarch Aleksii, a local university website quoted Council chairman Jang Jae On – who also heads that body's Catholic Committee – as similarly saying that North Korea's leadership had decided to build an Orthodox church in Pyongyang "as a sign of Russo-Korean friendship".

Cited in the same report, however, Bishop Veniamin (Pushkar) of Vladivostok and Primorye expressed hope not only that the Pyongyang church would become "a basis for spiritual communication" between the two countries, but that Orthodoxy would "develop in the DPRK". In his 15 October 2002 Vremya Novostei interview, Fr Dionisy Pozdnyayev maintained that - if the North Korean authorities were not opposed - "we will respond to the wishes of Koreans who would like to visit the church" and cited Jang Jae On's promise to do his utmost "to ensure that the Korean people are familiarised with Orthodoxy in depth".

On 18 September he told Forum 18 that it was too early to say whether local North Koreans would be able to visit the church, since it was not yet finished. "I think there will be services in Russian and Korean, but in what form – in a single or in separate services – will depend upon what is most convenient." In his Vremya Novostei interview, Fr Dionisy said that a Russian priest would initially conduct services in the new church in Church Slavonic – the Russian Orthodox liturgical language – and minister to the several hundred Russian, Bulgarian and Romanian expatriates working in Pyongyang.

During his packed three-day visit to Pyongyang as part of the Moscow Patriarchate delegation in June 2003, Petrovsky was unable to get to know Orthodox Committee chairman Ho Il Jin particularly well and did not meet any other indigenous North Korean Orthodox believers, he told Forum 18.

Fr Dionisy similarly told Forum 18 that he does not know any of the Orthodox Committee within the Korean Council of Religionists particularly well, the creation of which approximately 18 months ago he took to be a sign of official recognition of Orthodoxy by the North Korean state. "I don't know when those on the Committee became Orthodox, but I think it was due to personal choice, not family tradition."

The only North Koreans he has mixed with to any extent, Fr Dionisy told Forum 18, are the four who have been studying at Moscow Theological Seminary since April 2003. "While Orthodoxy is not in their family tradition, they are educated, speak Russian, English and Japanese. Their teachers are happy with their progress and it is possible that they will become priests." Although he did not know the North Korean students' religious background, Petrovsky similarly remarked to Forum 18 that they were displaying "zeal and a genuine interest in Orthodoxy".

In a September 2003 interview with a Reuters journalist, Petrovsky remarked that they "mostly concentrate on two things – Russian language, including Church Slavonic, and the catechism to prepare for baptism." Two Russian students from Moscow Theological Academy are also currently studying Korean language and culture at Pyongyang's Kim Il Sung University.

By the early twentieth century an estimated 10,000 Koreans had converted to Orthodoxy due to Russian missionary activity in Seoul (now the capital of South Korea), the eastern coastal town of Wonsan (now in North Korea) - some 150 kilometres (95 miles) east of Pyongyang - and several villages, under the auspices of neighbouring Vladivostok diocese.

Petrovsky believes that links with this past remain in the North as well as in South Korea, where there are currently six Orthodox churches with approximately 2,500 parishioners. These are under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, whose Archbishop Sotirios (Trambas) was appointed head of the refounded diocese of North and South Korea on 20 April 2004 and visited Pyongyang the same month. (An overseas parish of the Moscow Patriarchate, the new Orthodox church in Pyongyang is not part of a local diocese.) Forum 18 has so far received no response from a priest in the Ecumenical Patriarchate Korean diocese to a July query regarding this development.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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