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Russian Orthodox Church opens

AFP (13.08.2006) / HRWF Int. (14.08.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - North Korea's first ever Russian Orthodox church conducted its inaugural mass Sunday, the North's official news agency said, although there was no sign the hardline communist regime has eased its tight controls on religion.

Vice Premier Kwak Pom Gi and other government officials attended the service at the Trinity Church in Pyongyang, the Korean Central News Agency reported.

The North Korean government will "successfully manage and operate the church," said Ho Il Jin, the chairman of the Korean Orthodox Church Committee, KCNA reported. He did not elaborate, but added the inauguration of the church will boost relations between North Korea and Russia.

In theory, North Koreans enjoy the freedom of religion, according to their constitution.

But in practice that right is severely restricted. Last year, the U.S. State Department pinpointed North Korea as one of a number of nations whose citizens cannot freely practice their religions, and North Korean defectors to the South have said some are persecuted for their beliefs.

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church's foreign relations, Metropolitan Kirill, who also attended mass Sunday, nevertheless praised North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il for his "initiative and deep care" in building the church on the bank of the Taedong River.

North Korea's late founder Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il, are revered as demigods and enjoy a massive personality cult.

In addition to the new Russian Orthodox church, Pyongyang has also one Catholic and two Protestant churches, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

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First Russian Orthodox Church to open in North Korea

AFP (08.08.2006) / HRWF Int. (09.08.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The first Russian Orthodox Church will open in the North Korean capital Pyongyang next Sunday, foreign diplomats in the North said Tuesday, in an apparent attempt to show that the reclusive communist state tolerates religious freedom.

The opening ceremony of the Holy Trinity church will take place on August 13, the Russian embassy in Pyongyang said.

"We will invite our (North) Korean friends, diplomats in Pyongyang and members of international organizations," said an official, who declined to be named.

A European diplomat, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said the church was "a kind of symbol which can be used as an argument that there is no problem with religion at all here."

Construction started in 2003 when its grounds were blessed by Kliment Kapalin, Archbishop of Kaluga and Borovsk, according to an earlier report on the Vatican-based AsiaNews website.

The Russian embassy said the church would be open to all followers of Russian orthodoxy, irrespective of their nationalities.

"It is for all orthodox believers, it is open to everybody. If there are any orthodox (believers) in (North) Korea, they can come and participate," the Russian official said.

She declined to speculate on why North Korean authorities have supported the establishment of such a church.

Pyongyang has two official Protestant churches and one Catholic cathedral, according to South Korean government information.

There are also hundreds of unofficial "home churches" which are under strict government surveillance.

North Korea approved its first official Roman Catholic church in October 1988 and its first official Protestant church, Bongsu, in November 1988. They serve as the center of Christian activity in the country.

But some regard these as showcase churches built for the benefit of foreigners since they do not offer any regular liturgical service, said AsiaNews in its earlier report.

Russian Orthodoxy has a long history in Korea, stretching back before the country was split into two political regimes in 1945.

According to AsiaNews, some 10,000 Koreans converted to Orthodoxy in the early 1900s as a result of Russian missionaries work.

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Caritas Korea holds first National Congress: giving a helping hand to poor brothers and sisters in the North

Agenzia Fides (17.07.2006) / HRWF Int. (19.07.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A service to man which as the Gospel teaches is a service to Christ. This awareness was the starting point for the work of Korea's 1st National Caritas Congress held recently in Daejeon.

The title of the Congress was "We are Caritas operators" and it was organised by the Korean Bishops' Commission for Caritas Korea. Participants included representatives of 15 diocesan Caritas Centres and various Catholic aid agencies, experts, students and men and women religious.

The participants renewed their commitment to "serve the poor and Christ" and listened to a talk by the president Caritas Commission Bishop Lazzaro. The Bishop reminded those present of the sense of calling which should animate a Christian involved in serving the poor and he commented Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, underlining that: "the Church is charity, love and Caritas workers must live their identity in love and be light of the world for those around them".

Two other interventions were given at the Congress: Christian Social Service by Mr Do Geon-Chang, a researcher of Caritas Korea Academy; and Social Service in the Church and in Society by Prof. Park Seok don, a former teacher at Gyeongbuk University.

The participants expressed their commitment to continue the service of the poor and the needy and in particular the people of North Korea who suffer hardship and hunger. Caritas Korea recently became the official referent for humanitarian aid to North Korea and in 2007 will assume the task of co-ordinating aid to the North hitherto the work of Caritas di Hong Kong. The North recognised Caritas Korea as the new channel for relations with the Rome based Caritas Internationalis. Since the 1990s Caritas Hong Kong had been the referent for cooperation programmes. The Church in the South looks with new hope to the North of the peninsula thanks to various signs for a new season of dialogue and good relations with North Korea generating cautious optimism in the community.

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European Parliament adopted resolution on human rights violations in North Korea

HRWF Int. (19.06.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - At its plenary session in Strasbourg on 15 June 2006, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights violations in North Korea. The Resolution was tabled by MEP Dr. István SZENT-IVÁNYI (Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) as a matter of urgency under Rule 115 of the EP Procedures.

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The European Parliament ,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on North Korea,

- having regard to the guidelines on EU policy towards third countries on the death penalty (1998) and on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (2001), and EU guidelines on human rights dialogues (2001) and on human rights defenders (2004),

- having regard to the resolution of 16 April 2003 adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights,

- having regard to the statement issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the UN Special Rapporteur on the question of torture and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) of 31 May 2006,

- having regard to Rule 115(5) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the resolution of the UN Commission on Human Rights expresses deep concern at the existence in the DPRK of "torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, [and] public executions", as well as "all-pervasive and severe restrictions on the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, opinion and expression",

B. whereas the government of the DPRK continues to deny access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, as well as to non-governmental human rights organisations, which hampers investigation of the human rights situation; whereas, however, multiple reports, notably by victims who have managed to flee the country, suggest a most serious pattern of violations, including executions, torture, detention of political prisoners and inhumane prison conditions,

C. whereas opposition of any kind is not tolerated and any person who expresses an opinion contrary to the position of the ruling Korean Workers' Party faces severe punishment, as in many cases do their families,

D. whereas Mr Son Jong Nam, who has lived in China, where he attended church and became a Christian, was reportedly tortured by the National Security Agency, and was then sentenced to death for alleged treason without a trial, and without the benefit of any of the procedural safeguards required by international human rights law,

E. whereas four United Nations human rights experts, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, who have called upon the government of the DPRK to postpone the execution and review the conviction, are dismayed by the response of the government, which described the experts' letter as "a product of conspiracy undertaken in pursuit of the ill-minded aim of spreading fabricated information while following the attempts of those hostile forces to defame, disintegrate and overthrow the state and social system of the DPRK on the pretext of human rights",

F. whereas the DPRK has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,

G. whereas, since 2001, the government of the DPRK has reduced the number of grounds for imposing the death penalty from 33 to 5, but whereas 4 of those grounds are essentially political in nature,

H. whereas the domestic news media are strictly censored, and access to international media broadcasts is restricted; whereas radio and television sets are tuned to receive only state broadcasts and those who listen to foreign radio stations risk being punished,

I. whereas any unauthorised assembly or association is regarded as a "collective disturbance", liable to punishment; whereas religious freedom, although guaranteed by the constitution, is in practice sharply curtailed; whereas there are reports of severe repression of people involved in public and private religious activities in the form of imprisonment, torture and execution,

J. whereas witnesses estimate the number of people confined in "re-education (labour) camps", "detention camps" and prisons at up to 200 000, and reports, notably by those released from camps such as Kang Chol Hwan, suggest that torture and ill-treatment are widespread and conditions very harsh,

K. whereas many people in the DPRK are short of food and are dependent on the humanitarian aid the country receives from donors such as the EU, which decided to allocate the sum of EUR 13 715 000 to the DPRK in 2005, and the UN World Food Programme, which reached an agreement with the government on 10 May 2006 to provide 150 000 tons of commodities to 1.9 million North Koreans over two years,

L. whereas tens of thousands of North Koreans have fled to China, leaving the DPRK because of repression and widespread hunger,

1. Deplores the lack of cooperation of the DPRK with the international human rights institutions, and particularly its refusal to follow the procedures of the UN Commission on Human Rights;

2. Calls on the government of North Korea to:

- comply with the principles set out in the international human rights treaties it has ratified (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and incorporate these principles into domestic law;

- abolish the death penalty;

- release all people detained or imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of fundamental human rights;

- guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of movement for all North Koreans; and

- review existing legislation to ensure that it conforms with international human rights standards, and introduce safeguards to provide citizens with protections and remedies against human rights violations;

3. Urges the government of the DPRK to provide information on the case of Mr Son Jong Nam and not to proceed with his execution;

4. Calls on the Commission and the Council to urge the government of the DPRK to end these human rights violations and to provide information on the case of Mr Son Jong Nam and not to proceed with his execution;

5. Calls on the government of the DPRK to review carefully the situation of all those condemned to death and to grant them a stay of execution, and calls for the UN Special

Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in North Korea, Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn, to be allowed to visit them;

6. Urges the government of the DPRK to end the severe human rights violations, including imprisonment and execution on account of religion or belief, against citizens not affiliated to the state-sponsored religious federations, and to allow religious believers to meet freely for worship, build and maintain places of worship and freely publish religious literature;

7. Recognises that the EU was the first and only party to engage in human rights dialogues with the DPRK after the Troika visit in 2001, led by Swedish Prime Minister and President of the European Council Göran Persson, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union Javier Solana, and External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten, and that the dialogue was discontinued as of 2003, when the Council of Ministers sponsored a Human Rights resolution at the UNCHR without informing the North Koreans; urges both sides, therefore, to endeavour to restart the human rights dialogue between the EU and the DPRK;

8. Calls on the government of the DPRK to fulfil its obligations under human rights instruments to which it is a party and to ensure that humanitarian organisations, independent human rights monitors, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief have free access to the country;

9. Welcomes the agreement between the World Food Programme and the government of the DPRK to support 1.9 million of the most vulnerable people, especially women and young children; deplores the ongoing and unnecessary suffering of the North Korean people as a consequence of their government's policies; stresses that there should always be a targeted and fair distribution of food in the country; urges the government of the DPRK to end discrimination in its distribution of food in favour of high-ranking Workers' Party officials and military, intelligence and police officers;

10. Calls on the government of the DPRK to hand over finally and completely all information on the citizens of South Korea and Japan who were abducted during recent decades, and to release immediately those abductees still being held in the country;

11. Calls on the government of the People's Republic of China to stop repatriating North Korean citizens to the DPRK, where, regardless of their reasons for leaving, they face harsh treatment, ranging from detention to torture, long prison terms and even executions; calls on the Republic of Korea (ROK) to assume its responsibility for North Korean refugees in China and calls on the government of the ROK to allow them to travel to South Korea;

12. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the government of the DPRK, the government of the ROK, the government of the People's Republic of China, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK.

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South Korean Catholic delegation visits communist North

Reuters (26.04.2006) / HRWF Int. (15.05.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A group of South Korean Roman Catholics left for North Korea on Wednesday, a Church official said, the first such official delegation to visit a country Washington has criticized for suppressing religion.

The visit comes after Pope Benedict installed a second cardinal for South Korea earlier this year. Cardinal Nicholas Cheong Jin-suk is interested in rebuilding the Church in the communist country and having a priest installed there.

Cheong also heads the Roman Catholic diocese in the capital of North Korea, although it is mostly a symbolic title since there are no practicing Catholic priests in the country.

He has not visited the North but Church officials in Seoul said he was preparing events to mark the 80th anniversary of the Pyongyang diocese in 2007.

The 61-member delegation from the Archdiocese of Seoul will inspect how the more than \$10 million it has sent to North Korea for humanitarian aid has been used.

The South Korean delegation will stay in North Korea until Saturday and is being led by the director of the archdiocese's Reconciliation Committee, spokeswoman Ahn Sun-young said by telephone.

Some human rights groups in South Korea have urged the Pontiff, a German, to visit the North and deliver a message about uniting East and West Germany. The two Koreas have been divided for more than 60 years.

South Korea estimates there are about 3,000 Catholics in North Korea and about 12,000 Protestants, while in the South there are about 4.5 million Catholics.

The State Department last year placed the North alongside China and Myanmar on a list of countries that "regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state."

Refugees from the secretive state have told human rights groups that some people who tried to practice their religion were thrown into prison camps along with their families then tortured and, in some cases, executed.

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North Korean priests to conduct joint Buddhist ceremony

Kyodo (23.04.2006) / HRWF Int. (24.05.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Raitei Arima, a prominent figure in Japan's Buddhist world who is a head priest at Kyoto's Golden Pavilion Temple, or Kinkakuji, will visit North Korea on Tuesday to conduct a ceremony with North Korean priests to commemorate the restoration of the famed Ryongtong Temple in the city of Kaesong.

Arima also heads the Shokoku School of the Rinzai Zen sect of Buddhism. According to his delegation, Arima arrived in Beijing on Monday. It is the first joint Buddhist ceremony performed by priests from the two countries.

The temple, which dates back to the Koryo dynasty period (A.D. 918-1392), was restored last October in the city that once was the capital of the dynasty.

Sources close to the delegation said Arima could be delivering messages regarding Japan-North Korea normalization talks while in North Korea but Arima denied any political role, saying he will go to North Korea just to perform the Buddhist ceremony. Arima greeted U.S. President George W. Bush last November when the president visited Kinkakuji at the invitation of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

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Religious freedom non-existent but much still unknown

By Magda Hornemann

Forum 18 News Service (29.03.2006) / HRWF Int. (30.03.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Given the draconian restrictions on individual freedoms in North Korea, the most reliable knowledge available on religious freedom and other human rights in the country has to be based on insights garnered from North Korean nationals outside the country, interviews with refugees from North Korea - most recently those conducted by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom - and informed foreigners who have visited the country.

Pooling these insights with Forum 18 News Service's own findings, what can be reliably known about the current state of religious freedom?

First, there is no religious freedom. The personal accounts of interviewees suggest that organised religious life outside state control does not exist in North Korea.

None of the interviewees had "experienced, seen, or known" of any authorised religious activity by North Koreans.

Those who professed some awareness of religious activities, especially those of the three Christian churches in the North Korean capital Pyongyang, asserted that they involved only foreigners. Others who knew of the existence of other religious buildings, such as Buddhist temples, said they were perceived as cultural relics.

Second, and related to the first finding, all interviewees had apparently heard or witnessed state-sponsored acts of religious persecution. This finding is in keeping with the long-held understanding that the North Korean state sees religious believers as a threat to state security who therefore deserve the worst punishments.

Third, to the extent that there is approved religion in North Korea, it is the state ideology of Juche, or self-reliance, which is synonymous with the cult of the deceased North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, or Kimilsungism.

According to the interviewees, all North Koreans are subjected to indoctrination sessions about Kim Il-Sung and the Juche ideology. In this regard, the North Korean totalitarian regime has similarities with a few other states which rely on a political ideology. For example, as is widely acknowledged, Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims under Chinese control are required to attend regular political sessions. But one crucial difference is that most people in China are no longer subjected to political indoctrination of the intensity that is imposed on North Koreans.

The closest parallel with North Korea in this respect is undoubtedly Turkmenistan. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in November 2005 released a lengthy report on the state of religious freedom in North Korea, known officially as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), http://www.uscirt.gov/countries/region/east_asia/northkorea/NKwitnesses.pdf.

The report was based on the interview accounts of 40 former North Koreans who now live in South Korea. As USCIRF acknowledged in the report, the sample of interviewees was not randomly chosen. All the interviewees originated from the northern or north-eastern parts of the DPRK, but were of varying ages and occupations.

Although each interviewee had left North Korea between 1998 and 2001, their backgrounds mean that the findings of the report should give us as good an estimate of the current conditions in North Korea as is possible to attain, given the extreme limitations in gaining reliable information.

The report confirmed a few long-held views about the state of religion in North Korea which have been reported by various nongovernmental organisations.

For example, in December 2002, the UK-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) published a report based on interviews with 50 North Koreans over a two-year period <http://www.csw.org.uk/Countries/NorthKorea/Resources/NKHumanRightsReport.pdf>. The USCIRF report and the CSW report share many similar findings.

These scrupulously conducted interviews have yielded interesting and potentially new insights. First, if the opinions of the interviewees do indeed reflect those of the general North Korean population, it seems that the North Korean people are increasingly disenchanted with the Kim Jong-Il regime.

Naturally, this conclusion can only be tentative since one must take into account that the interviewees were those who wanted to leave North Korea and had been living for many years in South Korea, a country of considerable freedom and prosperity.

These defectors may have only become aware of concepts such as "repression", "freedom" and "human rights" after coming into contact with non-North Koreans.

As the Christian organisation Open Doors <http://www.od.org> has noted, North Koreans arriving in China are usually very opposed to religion in general and Christianity in particular as a result of the long-term and regular state indoctrination to which they had been subjected. Nonetheless, as North Koreans continue to cross the border between China and the DPRK, one can be relatively certain that new ideas, including ideas about religious freedom and other human rights, will continue to trickle into North Korea. Completely unknown, though, is how far such ideas have spread and how much impact they have had on North Koreans' views of themselves and their country.

Second, the USCIRF interviews suggest that the intensity of religious persecution in North Korea varies from place to place. While some interviewees claimed that they had witnessed or heard of extreme punishments, even death, for religious believers, others recounted how some religious believers were spared such punishments. Particularly for those who were repatriated from China, it appears to be considered a much more serious political crime to associate with South Koreans than to associate with Korean-Chinese churches.

This is important for, as one interviewee asserted, most North Koreans have sought refuge in those churches when in China. Yet, it is also clear from various reports that under increasing pressure from the Chinese authorities, some Korean-Chinese churches have "cooperated" with the Chinese government in apprehending North Korean refugees for later repatriation.

In addition to these "positive" findings, the USCIRF report rightly notes that there is much about which we do not know about religious conditions in North Korea.

For one thing, we still have little wide confirmation as to whether the rumoured existence of an underground Protestant Christian community in North Korea is true. The interviewees for the USCIRF report certainly could not confirm its existence. However, this does not mean that such a community does not exist, merely that this set of interviewees was ignorant of its existence.

This is quite plausible, given the totalitarian nature of North Korean society. Yet, one of the two lead South Korean researchers for the USCIRF report, Professor Philo Kim, in a 2003 analysis suggested that over 500 underground house churches existed in North Korea. It remains unclear whether these are the same as the 500 "family worship centres" that the North Korean government has claimed.

More recently, on 4 January 2006, the South Korea-based The Daily NK <http://www.dailynk.com>, which is affiliated with the South Korean organisation, the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights, published a press release by Open Doors about the state of Protestant Christianity in North Korea. The press release quoted a "Brother Peter", who stated that there are 200,000 to 400,000 Christians in North Korea.

These numbers, if accurate, represent an increase of at least 100 percent on the numbers reported to Forum18 in early 2004.

Brother Peter also claimed that 200,000 prisoners are incarcerated in North Korean concentration camps, approximately 50,000 to 75,000 of whom are Christians.

As the USCIRF report indicates, well-founded disagreement about these figures persists and they remain impossible to conclusively confirm or deny. While one source for the Forum 18 report in early 2004 indicated that there were 100,000 Protestant Christians in North Korea, other sources for a later Forum 18 report in 2004 asserted that there was no reliable estimate for the number of Christians in North Korea.

If we still know so little about the state of Protestant Christianity in North Korea, we remain even more ignorant of the activities of the other three state-recognised communities - Catholic Christianity, Buddhism and Chundokyo.

One visitor several years ago to a former Buddhist monastery close to the border with South Korea told Forum 18 that although it was open, it was dirty and empty and with "no monks and no sign of being used for religious practice". A sign in Korean on the wall noted that this had been a monastery and gave a little of the history, but the site is now a museum.

A Polish Catholic cleric visiting Pyongyang declined to say Mass in the government-controlled Catholic church and confined his services to the chapel of the Polish Embassy.

Orthodox Christian worship is held at some foreign embassies; indeed, the two Russian Orthodox seminarians sent on exchange to North Korea attended services in the Russian Embassy.

The Russian Orthodox church being built at the Russian military cemetery is still not complete.

One foreigner who has visited the three Pyongyang official Christian churches told Forum 18 that despite official claims, no regular worship takes place in them, even on Sunday mornings.

"The people who run these churches just pretend to be believers," the foreigner claimed. The foreigner added that those arriving are always asked what embassy they are from.

Diplomats, who live in complete isolation from the local population, are allowed to hold worship services undisturbed.

Although the USCIRF report indicates that traditional shamanism, or fortune telling, is on the rise in North Korea, based on what we know about this religious tradition this cannot on its own be taken as evidence of a religious revival. Its emergence may simply be a reflection of the dire living conditions of ordinary North Koreans - and to some extent of the elite.

Worth noting is that shamanism has not been incompatible with communist societies in Asia. In Vietnam, Laos, and even China, government officials are known to engage in regular fortune-telling activities, even if these are formally disapproved of by central authorities. If the USCIRF report is right to indicate that traditional shamanism is on the rise in North Korea, then this suggests that it has never been completely eradicated or controlled by the regime. However, in order to gauge the extent to which this rise in traditional shamanism is a significant phenomenon, we need to know far more than we can know at present about shamanism in North Korea.

A number of religious organisations exist in North Korea, such as the Christian League, the Buddhist League, the Catholic Association, the Chondokyo Central Guidance Committee and the Association of Religious Practitioners.

However, as the South Korean government's Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) <<http://www.kinu.or.kr>> stated in its 2005 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea, "These religious organizations have been organised primarily as counterparts to foreign religious organisations or international aid agencies, rather than as instruments to guarantee and support free religious activities."

According to KINU, religious buildings in North Korea such as churches, cathedrals, and temples also serve the state's "propaganda and political purposes". These are not new insights, but they do reflect the current informed consensus on the functions of these religious organisations.

Along the Chinese-North Korean border the Open Doors press release published by The Daily NK indicated that the situation is worsening. Under pressure from the Chinese government, many Chinese and Korean-Chinese churches have cooperated with the Chinese authorities to capture North Koreans who have entered China illegally.

There are also many North Korean agents who disguise themselves as North Korean refugees, in order to capture and repatriate real refugees.

One thing is regrettably certain: the North Korean regime is not loosening its stranglehold on religious freedom or other human rights.

Last year, The Daily NK obtained an alleged 200-page North Korean document that included instructions on repressing and eliminating religion in that country. It used the Falun Gong movement in China as a negative example of superstition and cited with approval China's effectiveness in cracking down on the movement.

It is the informed consensus that widespread human rights violations continue in North Korea. But, even though securing reliable up-to-date information on religious freedom in the country is immensely difficult there are at least two inter-related reasons why the search for the most reliable current information should be intensified.

Firstly, given the systematic state-driven decline of human rights and even access to basic human needs - such as food - in North Korea, better understanding of the state of

human rights including religious freedom in the country will increase the effectiveness of outside efforts to help North Korea's people.

Secondly, accurately knowing the state of religious freedom in North Korea can enable an accurate estimate of the extent to which political and social changes can be initiated by North Korea's own people.

Religious communities played a significant role in the political changes in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in South Africa, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

They have also effected similar changes in other places, such as the Philippines during the 1980s. In places such as China and Vietnam, religious communities play an increasing role in meeting social needs and are potential vehicles for political and social change.

There is every incentive to devote considerable efforts to understanding the state of religious freedom and other human rights in North Korea, because this may materially influence the future of that country, its people, and even the peace of the world.

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

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