NORTH KOREA

THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF NORTH KOREA [DPRK] IS PROBABLY THE MOST CLOSED COUNTRY IN THE WORLD. WHILE THE LAST 20 YEARS HAVE SEEN THE DRAMATIC COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM IN THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE AND THE STEADY OPENING UP OF ASIA'S OTHER COMMUNIST COUNTRIES, NORTH KOREA HAS FOUGHT HARD TO REMAIN TIGHTLY SHUT.

population

- Population: 22.5 million
- Density: 186 per square km

North Korea, like South Korea, is ethnically homogeneous, with a few ethnic Japanese and a small Chinese community beside the Korean majority.

religions

- Non-religious 64.3%
- Traditional ethnic 16%
- Chondogyo 13.5%
- Buddhist 4.5%
- Christian 1.7%

All religions have been heavily repressed and few autonomous religious activities continue. Christians meet in secret, in small house churches gathering in fields, attics, caves, dugout areas and enclosed spaces inside houses. It is difficult for more than eight people to meet together at one time. Any unauthorized assembly is regarded as a "collective disturbance." A few government-sponsored churches exist to provide the illusion of religious freedom.

language

Korean: similar to Japanese in grammar and contains many borrowed Chinese words.

geography

Korea is a mountainous peninsula jutting south-eastward from the border of Manchuria, China. It also borders the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea. North Korea's terrain is dominated by steep mountains and deep, narrow valleys.

climate

North Korea has a temperate climate with rainy summers. The winters are cold, with snowstorms and northern/northwesterly winds from Siberia. Winters are especially harsh in northern regions. Average high and low temperatures in Pyongyang are -3°C [27°F] and
-13°C [9°F] in January; 29°C [84°F] and 20°C [68°F] in August.

history

Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910-45 and partitioned after the Second World War between the occupying forces of the U.S. in the south and Russia in the north. North Korea invaded the South, beginning the Korean War, in 1950. North Korea was supported by the Chinese; South Korea by the U.S. and UN forces. An armistice was signed in 1953. Today there is a fortified border between the North and South; one of the most impenetrable borders in the world.

The history of North Korea is dominated by Kim Il-Sung, who ruled for nearly 50 years and introduced the Marxist-Leninst philosophy of "Juche."

Juche [pronounced "ju-chay"] has been promoted by the North Korean government since Kim Il-Sung used the term in a speech in 1955. Juche means "self-reliance." The basic premise is that man is the master of everything; the master of his own destiny. Kim Il-Sung said, "The Juche Idea means, in a few words, that the owner of the revolution and construction are the masses." In the early years of the DPRK, this ideology was a strategic means of developing a sense of national independence among the people of North Korea; ie, that they did not need China or Russia. In the 1960s the government put the military in control of the economy, attempting to build it up without Soviet support.

The Communist basis of Juche became intertwined with the cult of personality developed by Kim Il-Sung. In 1977 "Juche" replaced "Marxism" in the North Korean constitution. Kim Il-Sung's charisma was a result of repetitious and indoctrinated educational efforts. Talking of North Korea without mentioning Kim Il-Sung is like speaking of Christianity without God. Kim Il-Sung taught the North Koreans that he and the Communist Party provided for all their needs. He was seen as the almighty absolute being and savior. All university students attend classes in Juche and Kim Il-Sung's ideas are taught to the whole population.

During the 1970s and 1980s Kim Il-Sung began training his son, Kim Jong-Il, then the head of North Korea's special forces, to be the next ruler. After Kim Il-Sung died in 1994, the post of president was assigned to him "eternally." Footage of Kim Il-Sung's memorial ceremony showed the North Koreans lamenting as if their savior had died. His birthday is still celebrated as a public holiday in North Korea. The respect that North Koreans still hold for him is similar to religious worship through brainwashing. Kim Jong-Il is now head of state.

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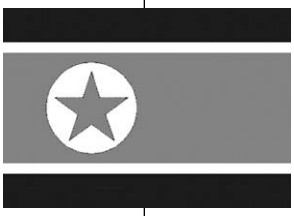
reunification

Relationships with the strongly anti-communist South Korea began to improve in the mid-1980s, and the border was opened to allow family visits. In 1994 relationships were severely strained as North Korea began saber-rattling about nuclear-weapons development. As part of the pact resolving this, North Korea agreed to resume high-level talks with South Korea. In August 2000, the governments arranged a reunion of 100 elderly relatives from each side. It is hoped that this is part of a wider move towards reunification. However, North Korea's expectations of reunification include its own terms, including unification under one leader who rules all politics, allegiance, religion education and finance.



famine

Up to three million people are thought to have died of starvation in North Korea since 1994.

The outside world became aware of a serious food shortage in North Korea in 1991. Natural disasters including floods in the 1990s and droughts in 1996, 2000 and 2001 led to failed crops, the loss of agricultural land and livelihoods and the displacement of an estimated 5.4 million people. During the late 1990s the authorities were unable to supply food. As well as the numbers starving to death, the shortage has led to malnutrition and stunted growth in children and attempts by citizens to steal food or defect to China or South Korea. Reports of cannibalism have also emerged.

how to pray

- Praise God for the faith of Christians in North Korea. Pray that they will be able to share the good news with trusted friends and family. Pray for grace, mercy and perseverance for persecuted Christians.
- Praise God that some food aid is reaching the country. Pray that it will get to those who need it, and that the Bread of Life will accompany it.
- Praise God that some medicinal aid has been accepted by North Korea.
- Pray that NGOs will feel burdened to serve in North Korea and help to improve the health system. Pray for the safety and effective witness of Christian NGOs in the country.
- Pray for all those in prison camps in North Korea. Prison staff are taught to regard prisoners as lower than animals and unworthy of respect, mercy or kindness. Pray that God would convict the hearts of prison guards who have been cruel, and that he would pour down his grace and mercy on those suffering in unbelievably harsh conditions.
- Pray that non-Christian prisoners would be struck by the faith of Christian prisoners and hunger to know more.
- Pray that Kim Jung-Il would discover the reality of the true God. Pray that he will care and work for the good of the North Korean citizens.
- North Korea is beginning to open up. Pray for wisdom for the South Korean church in outreach and support to Christians in the North.
- Praise God for how North Korea has tried to open up to other countries. Pray that it would become a country that can be trusted by the international community.
- Pray for North Koreans who have defected to South Korea via China and other countries, that they will be treated with mercy and kindness. Pray for Christians helping to shelter or rehabilitate defectors.
- Pray for reunification under a just government that honors God.

christianity

The gospel came to Korea in 1866. The first Protestant church was planted in 1884.

Revival occurred in Korea from 1903-1908, largely centered on the North, but influencing many parts of the country. One reason suggested for the greater response in the North is that the northern Koreans were traditionally more independent and less bound by Confucian morality compared to their cousins in the south, and therefore more open to the gospel. The Korean church grew rapidly from 1906-1910 and by 1912 there were about 300,000 Korean church members out of a population of 12 million. Careful Bible teaching was also a mark of the revival.

Japan colonized Korea in 1910 and many Christians were reportedly martyred.

Another outpouring of the Spirit occurred in Pyongyang in 1945-1947 after the Communists had seized power in the north. By the end of 1946 the revival had spread widely but the Communists arrested its leaders.

Today there are a few "show churches," but most Christians worship in underground house churches. FEBC radio broadcasts from South Korea can also be heard by North Koreans using special radios (most radios have been pre-tuned to government stations to prevent people hearing outside broadcasts).

As many as 100,000 Christians are reportedly being held in prison camps in North Korea, treated as political criminals because of their beliefs. Christians have reportedly been martyred, are said to be treated more harshly in some cases and receive an indefinite sentence (ie, they will be released when they recant their faith), rather than a fixed term.

The unswerving faith of Christians poses a threat to Kim Jong-Il. Many observers consider Juche to be a religious movement.