




Light in the Darkness

by Steven Lear

The line of death—the Tumen River flows between China and North Korea. North Koreans read the Gospel.



“I watched as the dead bodies slowly floated down the river. They were mostly women and children. A Chinese soldier stood at the bank and, using a long wooden pole, guided the bodies away from the Chinese bank and back over to the North Korean shore. It was becoming a frequent occurrence. The next day a woman’s body had washed up on my leased farmland that borders the river. As I approached her, I noticed a hole in her stomach. A small fish was still inside eating at her flesh. It was then the Lord spoke to me. And in that moment I knew what I had to do...”

—Pastor “Kim”

During the last 15 years that I have worked with The Voice of the Martyrs, I have had the honor of visiting many restricted nations to interview hundreds of persecuted Christians. However, none of those trips prepared me for what I would experience along the Chinese border of North Korea.

Years ago while working on an article about Sudan, I remember speaking with our founder, Richard Wurmbrand. I asked him, “Pastor, what are your thoughts on Sudan?” He replied, “I cannot tell you anything about Sudan.”

I was confused by his answer but sat quietly waiting for him to explain.

“No matter what I told you about Sudan, it would be a lie. It is far more horrible than I could ever describe. And if I were to tell you even a little, you would not sleep this evening.”

I now feel the same way as I assemble this article on North Korea. No matter what I write, in comparison with the gross reality, it will appear as a lie. There is no way I can

The Martyrs Cross of North Korea



North Korean escapees used to be dragged back across the bridge by China's Public Security Bureau (PSB) or North Korean security agents. Now they are held in Chinese prisons (like the Tumen Prison above) and trucked back across the border every month.



NO. 22 CAMP HQ

Prisoners transferred to its federal detention centre rarely survive.

1. Kim Il Sung memorial hall
2. Theatre
3. Weapons store
4. Family quarters for prisoners
5. Propaganda bureau
6. Supplies depot
7. Guards' quarters
8. Pigsty
9. Greenhouses
10. Detention and torture centre
11. Armoury
12. Administration offices
13. Guards' restroom
14. Guards' night duty room
15. Office of camp director
16. Camouflaged anti-aircraft guns

Aerial photo of one of the labor camps. All known Christian leaders were murdered or imprisoned after the revolution in 1948.

©2003 AFP

accurately describe the gravity of the situation facing our brothers and sisters in North Korea.

This isolated nation of 20 million has become, without question, the most hostile place on earth—a nation that imprisons, tortures and publicly executes its citizens without the slightest regard for human life.

On the Banks of the Tumen River

On the first day of my trip, I am standing on the banks of the Tumen River, which divides North Korea and China. At first glance it appears peaceful. It is not very wide (in places less

than 100 feet), and there is a gentle current. However, the Tumen River has probably witnessed more deaths than any other river in the world.

There are armed guards in hidden bunkers every 100 to 200 feet along the North Korean side of the river. They are instructed to stop anyone trying to leave the country, by whatever means necessary. Those attempting to escape do so at night and face the added risk of drowning, which is not uncommon with small children. In the winter the frozen river is easier to cross, but escapees risk freezing to death. Most North Koreans do not even own a winter coat.

Heavy fines (and even imprisonment) are levied against any Chinese citizen who offers the slightest assistance to a North Korean escapee. A simple bowl of rice offered to a starving child can cost a year's salary if caught.

In contrast to this, bounties are now offered as a reward for capturing a North Korean.

China's Public Security Bureau (PSB) is also on the constant lookout for North Korean refugees and has allowed North Korean agents to assist in the search. A new prison has been built near the river to house the escapees before transporting them back over the bridge to North Korea. (See photo above.) The prison was built after the PSB received too many complaints about how the refugees were being treated. (Previously, the PSB/North Korean agents inserted metal wire through refugees' noses or under their collar bone, literally tying them together.

Light in the Darkness



They were also frequently beaten; some who resisted were executed on the spot.) Now the atrocities are confidently hidden behind a 12-foot concrete wall.

The treatment in China is nothing compared to what they face when they are returned to North Korea. There are three primary

“An average North Korean is nearly 8 inches shorter and weighs half as much as his counterpart in the south.”

—Nutritional Survey of the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea

crimes at the top of the list in North Korea. The first is speaking against the regime. The second is belief in God. And the third is attempting to escape North Korea.

In spite of the risks, thousands of North Koreans flee to China every year. The bottom line is they are hungry. They have no hope. Children have forgotten how to laugh or even cry.

With the aftermath of the famine that began in the 1990s, and lack of government rations, starvation is an everyday fact of life. An estimated 10 to 12 percent of the entire North Korean population has starved to death in less than a decade. The Tumen River has also become a “passage of salvation,” as many Christian groups have set up a support system for the escaping refugees and



State nurseries are filled with malnourished children who are taught that they must worship the two Kims. (See page 6.)

an opportunity to share the love of Christ. One of these workers is a Chinese Korean named Pastor “Kim.”

Who Will Help My People?

Pastor Kim was born into a very poor family of atheists. As a young child, he watched as a group of Christians was publicly tortured and killed. His father told him, “Those Christians are so stupid!”

In 1984, at the age of 25, Kim married a young and very attractive girl named Yong Soon Lee. She came from a wealthy family and as Kim put it, “She was a bit on the wild side.” But tragedy struck their family when in 1993, Kim’s wife was brutally raped and murdered. He was devastated and did not know where to turn. Yong Soon Lee had become a Christian just a year before her tragic death. He thought she was foolish and blamed the God he never believed existed.

Kim began to read the Bible and visited the small house-church service his wife had previously attended. Within a few months, God had softened his heart. Soon after accepting Christ, Kim attended a secret seminary and sensed the Lord leading him to plant a church among the Korean communities of northeast China. It was this move that led him to relocate along the Tumen River, where Kim received his true calling. (Read quote on page 3.)

“After seeing the dead bodies float down the river and the woman who had washed up on my farmland, the Lord brought the story of Esther to mind. Mordecai had told Esther, ‘For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this?’ To which Esther replied..., ‘I will go to the King, which *is* against the law; and if I perish, I perish!’

“These words burned in my heart, and I knew if I didn’t help my own people, God would bring salvation another way. And I believed it was ordained for ‘such a time as this.’ He wanted to use Koreans living in China to bring the gospel to North Korea.”

I would soon learn that Pastor Kim’s call to serve North Korea is not unique. Numerous Chinese Korean pastors and lay workers received this call at approximately the same time. And many of these workers, including Pastor Kim, have been pushed out of their own churches for this work. Their fellow leaders say it is just too dangerous and want no association with a missionary to North Korea. While those caught helping North Koreans are fined severely, mission workers are frequently imprisoned. Pastor Kim has been imprisoned twice for this work. But a passion burns in the workers’ hearts as they serve their people of the North.

Public Executions and “Fair Treatment”

On the third day of my visit, I am brought up a winding road to the top of a small mountain overlooking a North Korean city.

We are close enough to see Koreans in the North walking along the roads, although very few citizens of North Korea leave their homes, and rarely would one see a group walking together. We can see a park, but no one is there. There is also a large factory, but it appears rundown and unoccupied.

Everything in North Korea is gray and drab. We are



To view clip from a video, smuggled out of North Korea, of a public trial and execution, log on to www.persecution.com. Go to Media Rooms, and enter the passcode, “NKexec” after September 1st.

The Martyrs Cross of North Korea

surrounded by mountains on both sides of the border. Those on the Chinese side are lush with growth, and the sun lights up the leaves on the trees. In contrast is the barren hillside of North Korea less than a few hundred yards away. The regime has stripped every tree off the mountains for firewood and to increase farming. Needless to say no firewood remains; and no farming ever took place, as the tree removal caused erosion, making it impossible.

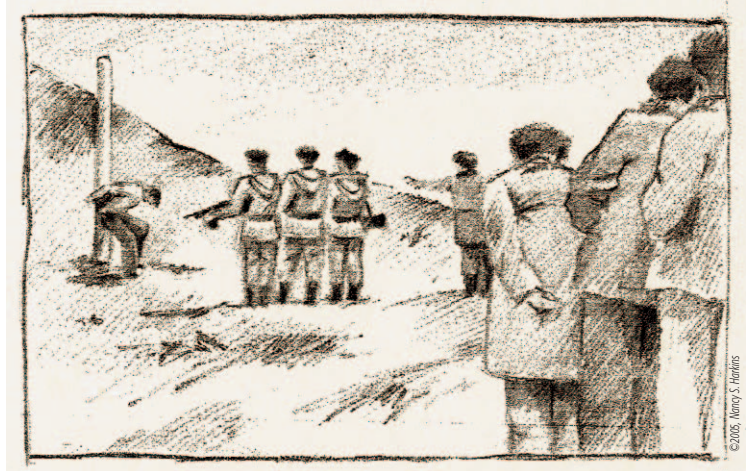
I am standing beside a longtime VOM co-worker who handles much of VOM's ministry inside North Korea. As he looks over the city, he is pointing just beyond the empty park and tells me that recently the North Korean government publicly executed 30 people. A truck went through town playing loud and festive music, inviting everyone to come and witness what happens to "enemies of the regime." Our VOM co-worker then sadly tells me that 18 of the 30 were Christian workers and part of his network.

As we continue looking out over the city, I couldn't help but imagine the horror and again wondered how, in today's world, North Korea could get away with such atrocities. I had read reports of horrific executions within the labor camps by the most gruesome of methods. One report told of the condemned being tied to a stake while their family members were forced to light the fire. All the while North Korea has claimed to have no labor camps and to treat each citizen fairly.

Meeting the Escapees

The next day I am joined by two VOM field directors, and we travel to one of the many safe houses VOM supports.

We leave as the sun begins to go down and travel two hours up



An illustration of a public execution. These have become more frequent in North Korea, and many Christian workers have met this fate. (See page 5 to learn how you can view footage of an execution recently smuggled out of North Korea.)

THE TWO KIMS: Kim Il Sung came to power in 1945, with the help of the Soviet Union, and introduced the "worship of Stalin." By 1949, relationships with the Soviet Union were crumbling, and he introduced his own cultic dictatorship under a philosophy called *Juche* ("self-reliance"), further splitting relations with the rest of the communist world. In 1970, *Juche* was formally adopted by 5th Party Congress as the sole guiding principle for all actions. Starting at the age of 2, *Juche* teaches everyone to think, speak and act as Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and encompasses one-third of all educational curriculum. By the time Kim Il Sung turned 80, the country was littered with 70 bronze statues, 40,000 half-length plaster figures, 250 monuments, 350 memorial halls, 3,500 "towers of eternal life" and a 70-foot high bronze statue reportedly cost \$800 million.¹

Kim Jong Il came to power in 1994, and is believed to be more ruthless than his father. It is

The Father—The deceased "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung is painted as the God and provider of his country.



North Korea



A VOM contact from the West stands in one of many shelters where North Korean families hide out each night.



into the mountains. The safe house appears like a typical Chinese home from the outside: small wooden structures with thatched roofs.

As we enter, there are a number of women cooking on the floor. A small boy with a round face and big eyes nervously looks at us. I ask how old he is, and I'm told he is 12. There are three or four others, none older than 25.

We gather around, sitting on the floor. They are preparing the food for us, and we are reminded that they have never met a Westerner. For years they have heard Westerners kidnap Koreans and harvest their organs. They now know it is not true, but it appears the 12-year-old boy still has doubts. His face continues to reveal his anxiety about us being there.

Little is spoken as we eat. Our guide translates a few words, and we learn there are a number of families currently in this safe house. They have all become Christians and are studying the

Bible. They are being prepared to go back as secret evangelists into North Korea. We ask where the others are and learn they are hiding further up the mountain. They take turns coming down. None of the refugees can sleep in the safe house. If they

“(North Korea) is arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.”

—President George W. Bush

are raided at night, they will have no place to run.

After dinner, one of the VOM field directors tells me he has brought a cross (The Martyrs Cross) with him from an American donor who asked it be given to a North Korean Christian. (See page 14.) “Perhaps you could just give it to the home.” I suggest.

reported that Kim Jong Il's basement is stocked with 10,000 bottles of French wine, and he opens three every day to decide which bottle to drink.² He is rumored to run drugs, slave labor and weapons to other nations. He is known to spend millions on food, homes, automobiles, personal servants and all forms of entertainment, including spending \$15 million U.S. to bring America's top professional wrestlers to North Korea, and further indulge his self-centered lifestyle.

For decades Kim Il Sung and now his son Kim Jong Il have escaped the world's attention as they created their own “utopia” in the midst of mass suffering. The two Kims are personally responsible for the tragic death of millions. Today an estimated 1 million North Koreans are forced to labor in the dozens of death camps built by the regime. Of the estimated Christian population, 10 percent or more are in prison. The average prison term is 15 years; but the average life expectancy for a prisoner is only five.

¹ *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea* by Jasper Becker (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) p.69.

² Shigemi Sato, “Tell-all sushi chef in hiding” Agence France Press, Tokyo, July 24, 2003.

Truth or Lie?

교회 / 종교의 탈을 쓰고 인민들을 착취하도록 반동적 상상독소를 퍼뜨리는 거점의 하나
성경책 / 예수교의 허위적이며 기만적인 교리를 적은 책.
천당 / 죽은 뒤 잘산다며 거짓으로 꾸며진 허황된 세상
예수 / 하늘의 아들이라 하여 신앙의 대상으로 삼는 우상.
신 / 자연과 사회의 모든 것과 사람의 운명을 지배하는 가상적인 허황된 존재
십자가 / 예수쟁이들이 들고 다니면서 이른바 위선과 박애의 위장물로 삼는 모양의 표막대기

A page of propaganda from a North Korean dictionary.

Church—An organization that spreads poisonous anti-government ideas to take the people's rights away, disguised as a religious activity.

Bible—A book written of the false Christian religion to deceive.

Heaven—A false world created to trick or lie that a person will live better after death.

Jesus—An idol of this faith who is proposed to be the son of God.

God—Falsified One who said that He created nature, society and destiny.

Cross—A wooden symbol that resembles the grace and love that the uncouth believers of Jesus use.

The Son—Kim Jong Il, son of the “Great Leader,” with the title “The Dear Leader” maintains brutal control of his people.

The Holy Spirit—The Juche Tower with an electric flame can be seen across the capital city. The Juche cultic national religion was designed with the help of a traitorous Protestant minister.

In spite of the lies printed above—North Koreans hunger for the truth.



Any remaining Bibles from before the communist revolution are hidden in the walls of houses or under the floors. The Bible pictured above was hidden in a North Korean home for more than 15 years.

The Martyrs Cross of North Korea

He thinks that is a good idea and offers it to the leader of the safe house. After a quick exchange between our guide and the house leader, we are told that he could never accept it. At first I thought he was being modest, but he reminds us: "If we are caught with this cross, they would know we are Christians. Helping the North Koreans comes with its own risk. If we are caught teaching the Bible...."

He doesn't have to say any more. The cross will have to remain with us.

Then one of the young men from North Korea looks at us and says something to our translator. He would like the cross.

We are now nervous about the idea of giving the cross to any of them. It is just too dangerous. But the young man says he knows the risk and is not afraid, and we watch quietly as he puts the cross around his neck. His bravery encourages us; however, we can't help but wonder what it might cost him.

Those in the safe house seem to be warming up to us, and we are invited to look at one of the shelters where they sleep. The small, once apprehensive boy jumps into the vehicle with us. (Perhaps he doesn't think we are going to cut his organs out any longer.)

We drive as far as we can through 2 feet of mud and walk the rest of the way into the woods. The makeshift shelter is well hidden and built into the side of the mountain. It is made from large branches and covered with a plastic tarp to keep the rain out. Two families have been living in the

small shelter for three months.

When we return to the safe house, two candles and a flashlight are brought out as well as a few Bibles. The Korean refugees take turns using the candles and flashlight to read their Bible. The 12-year-old

boy reads The Lord's

Prayer out loud, very slowly.

Our guide tells us this is a big event because he has never been to school and just started learning how to read. We later learned (after

visiting a secret home for orphaned refugees) that this is not uncommon. Families are too poor to even afford shoes for the children to walk to school. They do not have money for paper or pencils. They have no hope of a future, so education takes a backseat to survival.

We sing "Amazing Grace" (in English and Korean) and conclude a very powerful service. Even in the dimly lit room, I can see the conviction and commitment in their eyes. Since the North Korean Christians were nervous about speaking to us, we were not able to communicate much. We can only imagine the hardships they have been through and what awaits them, as they will soon graduate as secret missionaries, returning to their homeland.

Freed From Prison

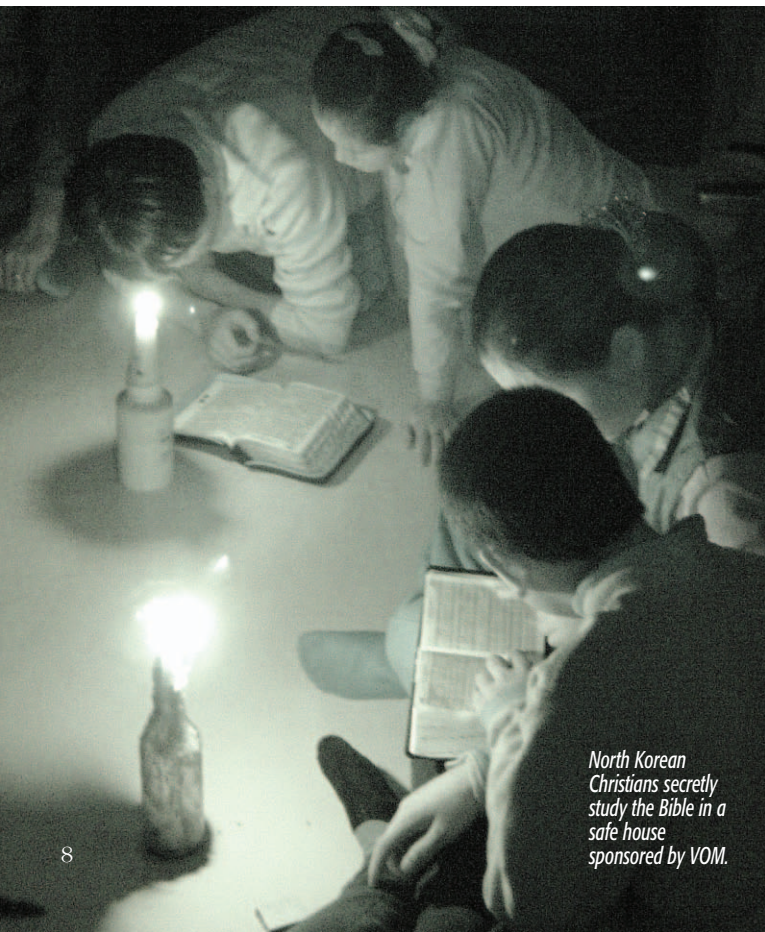
I spend a few more days interviewing, and the more I meet with the workers the more consistent the message: The horrors inflicted on North Korea's people, especially Christians, are unknown by most of the world. The only remaining hope is the gospel.

One night I meet Missionary "Lee," who is a Korean American. After the introductions, Lee thanks one of the VOM field directors for the help VOM gave to their co-worker "Wonsan," who had been imprisoned in North Korea.

Wonsan was raised a simple farmer in a poor interior part of China. But after becoming a Christian, his heart, like so many others, started to burn for North Korea. Wonsan made many trips into the North, and established a strong network of believers but recently was caught and imprisoned inside North Korea.

When VOM first learned of Wonsan's imprisonment, we were told he could be released if he paid the large "fines" charged against him. With no way to secure that much money, Wonsan had little hope. But now I learn our VOM field director (through the Families of Martyrs Fund) paid the debt, and Wonsan was set free. Missionary Lee gives us a written report of Wonsan's incredible testimony. (We will share more about Wonsan's testimony in a future issue.)

The more we speak about Wonsan the more I am encouraged by the growing number of Korean Christians who are serving in the North. They are unsung heroes who do not fear what mere man can do to them.



North Korean Christians secretly study the Bible in a safe house sponsored by VOM.



The Woman With the Cross

The next day Missionary Lee invites two Christians to speak with us. The first is a younger North Korean woman who had been arrested during her attempt to escape. She was not a believer at that time.

"I was caught trying to escape and sentenced to one month and 10 days along with 15 other women. We went to a special prison camp that was just for those caught trying to escape North Korea. It is a miracle I am alive. I did not think I would survive the prison. They treated us worse than animals.

"We had no water. We began work at 5:00 a.m. and worked until 4:30 p.m. Then we immediately went into 'training' and more work until 11:00 p.m. and then more training. We still had no water during this time. And if they got mad at us, they took away the little food that we were supposed to receive. (They were fed bare corncocks.)

"They liked to beat us with rubber whips, which were



A picture at the "hate America" museum—In this photo the first Western missionaries are called "intruders with religious facemasks who have come to take over the land."

about 3 feet long and flat on one side. Those who were too weak to meet their quota were whipped more, making it more difficult for them to work; and the cycle repeated. We felt very bad for them."

She tells us that after serving their term of one month and 10 days, the group was released—all except one woman. That one woman, when she was arrested, was wearing a cross. Her current whereabouts are unknown, but she is probably in heaven.

"Tell the World!"

The second woman we interview is in her mid-70s. "Roli" has never shared her story with a Westerner. I was told she is the most unique of all workers traveling into North Korea and no other known worker has come close to establishing a network like hers. Roli can't remember how many times she has been over the border, but she has a network of 100 house churches and has personally carried a Bible to each one.

Halfway through our interview, she begins to cry. The joy she expressed when telling me of the many believers has been replaced by anguish as she tells me about three of her workers who were executed and eight who remain in prison. I reluctantly ask her if those who were executed were done so publicly, and she nods her head *yes*. She worries most about a young man who has suffered so severely in prison that she actually wished they had executed him as well.

At the end of the interview, I ask her what we can do. First, she asks us to pray. The second answer catches me off guard as she looks intently at me with watery eyes: "Tell the world. Please tell the world about our brothers and sisters in North Korea. Please."

"I will do my best," I promise.

This incredible woman reminds me of Corrie ten Boom or Sabina Wurmbrand. She displays a beauty that radiates her love for Christ and for her people in North Korea. I ask her if



These schoolchildren line up to visit the "hate America" museum south of Pyongyang. Pray they will experience the love of Christ.

The Martyrs Cross of North Korea



she is afraid, and she just smiles and says: “Why would I be afraid? I have already been arrested five times. What can they do to an old woman like me?”

As we gather together to say our good-byes, she peers into my eyes again with a now familiar look. Then she reaches up and grabs my neck and pulls my head tight to hers. (This is extremely out of character in Chinese Korean culture.) Without voicing a word, I can hear her pleading: “Tell the world! My work is nearly over, but yours is just beginning. Tell the world!”

Sending More Light

One has to wonder how the world turns a blind eye in the face of the tragedy in North Korea. And even when there are reports on the situation, retaliation usually comes in the form of more arrests and executions. Some of the labor camps were built as a direct result of public criticism against Kim Jong Il and his regime, creating an even greater dilemma: empowering an evil and ruthless ruler to gain more control over the people in his rogue nation.

While the world offers no answer, perhaps God does as He stirs the hearts of Korean Christians in northeast China. As stated by Queen Esther: “For how can I endure to see the evil that will come to my people? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my countrymen?” (Esther 8:6). But it doesn’t stop there. As children of God and fellow workers in His kingdom, we have a role. For North Korea, it could prove to be a role of international and historic proportions, as only an invasion of the gospel can topple Kim Jong Il’s unopposed and demonic rule.

After the three of us returned from the Chinese Korean border, we met with the Executive Director and other leaders of The Voice of the Martyrs. Together we committed to greatly increase our efforts into North Korea. The existing work among the safe

houses (and other undisclosed projects) will continue, but VOM has committed to research and launch massive new campaigns into North Korea. Our purpose for these is threefold: One, we must let our brothers and sisters in North

Without voicing a word, I can hear her pleading: “Tell the world! My work is nearly over, but yours is just beginning. Tell the world!”

Korea know they are not forgotten; two, we must increase the presence of the gospel in North Korea; and three, we must tell the world.

The Voice of the Martyrs has now launched the **Light to North Korea Fund**, and we invite our friends to contribute if they feel led. The use of the fund will be as stated above and will continue until the current leadership and situation in North Korea makes a substantial change. In the last decade, God has clearly been calling the Chinese Koreans and American Koreans to reach their own people. And as fellow workers in the Kingdom, we wish to join with them in their commitment. God does not need the media or government intervention to bring the message of the cross to North Korea. He needs us. 🌍



What VOM is Doing

for Christians in North Korea

Korean Bibles and Gospels

Using methods that we cannot disclose, we continue to provide special small-size Bibles that include commentary at the bottom of each page for private study. (There are only two open "church" buildings in North Korea, mainly as a show for tourists.) In the past we have dropped Gospels using helicopters from Russia. Pray as we continue to find ways to enter this closed nation.



Radio Broadcasts and Radios

We have financed radio broadcasts and loudspeaker broadcasts set up on hills along the border, and now we supply special radio receivers. Anyone caught listening can be killed. Parents share the gospel with their children when they are old enough (wise enough) not to mention this in school.

Food, Shelter and Clothing

Northeastern China has been historically populated with millions of ethnic Koreans. As desperate, starving North Koreans flee across the river to China, some are hidden from police by Christians in homes, on farms, and in crude safe houses. We provide funds for secret safe houses maintained by Chinese or Chinese Korean Christians.

Gospel Balloons

To this prison nation, once called "The Hermit Kingdom," we float thousands of Gospel balloons. We used large, hydrogen balloons in the 1970s. We now use small, helium balloons with different books of the New Testament or "How to Know God" (by Watson Goodman) printed on the polyethylene balloon. (See photo on back cover.) The balloons do not show up on radar. We have photographs of North Korean families spreading these balloons out on the floor of their apartment and reading them.

What You Can Do

for Christians in North Korea

Pray

This month you have read the chilling account of the situation for our brothers and sisters in Christ in North Korea. Pray God will give them creative ways to meet for fellowship and remain unseen by authorities and others who would bring them harm. Ask the Lord to give His people wisdom as they share the gospel and minister in North Korea. Pray for God's hand of protection on the safe houses helping North Korean escapees. Pray escapees will find Christ in the safe houses. Pray God will draw Kim Jong Il into a relationship with Him.



Support the safe houses—read the back cover for more opportunities.

Plead

Go to VOM's prisoneralert.com where you can send a letter of protest to North Korean government officials at the United Nations. These prisoners for Christ may be "faceless," unknown to us, however, they need our letters pleading for their release. If you do not have Internet access, you may send your letter to:

**Permanent Representative of the
Democratic People's Republic of Korea
to the United Nations**
820 Second Avenue, 13th Floor
New York, NY 10017
Telephone: (212) 972-3105/3106/3128
Fax: (212) 972-3154