

PRISONER PROFILE

Prisoner Name: **Pastor Kim Kuk-gi**

Location: **North Korea**

Arrested: **December 2014**

Sentence: **Life imprisonment**



Arrest and background

One of two South Korean men detained late last year by the North Korean government on charges of espionage is Presbyterian pastor, Kim Kuk-gi, who has dedicated much of the past 13 years to helping North Korean defectors in China.

In a dispatch on March 26, 2015, North Korea's official KCNA news agency described the two men, Kim and Choe Chun-gil, as 'heinous terrorists' who operated from a base in the Chinese city of Dandong. 'They zealously took part in an anti-DPRK [anti-North Korea] smear campaign', said KCNA, alleging their activities were organised by US intelligence and the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS). The two men were presented at a 'press conference' in Pyongyang attended by journalists and foreign diplomats.

In Seoul, the NIS said the charge that the two men were working for the agency was 'absolutely groundless'. Lim Byeong-cheol, a spokesman at South Korea's Unification Ministry, confirmed Kim and Choe were South Korean citizens but denied they were engaged in espionage operations. 'We strongly demand North Korea to quickly release our citizens Kim Kuk-gi and Choe Chun-gil and repatriate them without hesitation,' Lim said. Ministry officials could not explain exactly how the two men ended up in the North, nor is it clear when or where the two men were arrested.

Kim was also accused of spreading 'religious propaganda' from an 'underground church' he ran in Dandong, which has a large ethnic Korean community and is a hub of both official and illicit cross-border trade. Following the North Korean state news agency's announcement, the Seoul-based General Assembly of Presbyterian Churches in Korea (GAPCK) identified Kim Kuk-gi as one of their own registered pastors and demanded that he be released. A representative from the Presbyterian assembly said, 'He was carrying out missionary works for North Korean defectors in [the Chinese port city of] Dandong. He bought noodle and tofu-making machines to send to the North, as well as sewing machines'. South Korean authorities tried to deliver a written request for the two men to be released. However, North Korean officials refused to accept the request.

In a further statement GAPCK provided some detail on who Kim's ministry in Dandong was helping and contended that North Korea had clearly violated international human rights laws by detaining the pastor against his will. 'Kim Kuk-gi was sent as a missionary... to Dandong in China in 2003, and since then, he has been operating a "shelter for refugees," and has been taking care of refugees, Kotjebi (North Korean homeless children) and Korean immigrants living in China,' GAPCK stated. They also asked if people would pray for Pastor Kim's safe return.

Update

June 2015 - Sentenced to life imprisonment in North Korean labour camp

The South Korean Ministry of Unification reported that two South Korean citizens Kim Kuk-gi and Choe Chun-gil, detained in North Korea on charges of spying, have been sentenced to hard labour for life. North Korea's Korean Central Broadcasting Station broadcast that both men had been given life sentences on charges of espionage for the South's state spy agency. 'The North's supreme court held a court session for the two South Koreans who were arrested for suspected spying for the United States and the South,' it said. 'Kim and Choe were sentenced to hard labour for life on charges of spying.' The two are among four South Koreans detained in North Korea; the others are missionary Kim Jung-wook and Joo Won-moon, a 21-year-old South Korean student. The North's announcement came as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights opened its office in Seoul last week, which will be tasked with monitoring the human rights situation in North Korea.

Please write

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Send a card of encouragement to Pastor Kim's family

Please consider sending a card or letter of encouragement to Pastor Kim's family to let them know that Pastor Kim and the family are being prayed for. Release will endeavour to forward these cards and letters to Pastor Kim's family and ministry partners.

Mark cards for Kim Kuk-gi and send to: Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington, BR5 4RT.

To find out more about persecution in North Korea see the country profile at releaseinternational.org.

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