

Pastor Kim Kuk-gi

Country: **North Korea**

Charges: **Espionage and spreading 'religious propaganda' from an 'underground church'**

Date of arrest: **December 2014**

Sentence: **Life imprisonment with hard labour**



Arrest and background

12 years imprisonment (Sentenced July 2014)

Life imprisonment with hard labour (Sentenced June 2015)

One of two South Korean men detained in 2014 by the North Korean government on charges of espionage is Presbyterian pastor, Kim Kuk-gi, who had dedicated much of the 13 years prior to his detention in 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 tofumaking 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.

UPDATES

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.'

May 2023 - Still detained in North Korea on charges of spying with sentence of 'hard labour for life'.

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