

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

NORTH KOREA

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List North Korea	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	94	1
WWL 2018	94	1
WWL 2017	92	1
WWL 2016	92	1
WWL 2015	92	1

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note:

1. The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding North Korea

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>

Recent country history

Understanding North Korea means understanding its leadership and personality cult. In its early years, from independence in 1945, the country followed the Communist path and faced an early war against UN troops in the Korean War 1950-53. Soon after that, it became clear that North Korea would not be a Communist country led by a collective leadership, but rather by one person, Kim Il Sung. After his death in 1994, he was succeeded by his son Kim Jong Il, who was in turn succeeded after his death in 2011 by his son Kim Jong Un. The country has two ideologies as its basis. One is called “Juche” which basically says that man is self-reliant (although this philosophy seems to be less pronounced in recent years). The other is “Kimilsungism”, the worship of the leaders who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea and helping it flourish, unchallenged by outside forces. The country wants to be taken seriously and it wants to be heard internationally, which is one of the reasons why its leaders have strived to advance its rocket and nuclear technology, making the world aware of its continued existence. This policy has been successful and earned Kim Jong Un a historic face-to-face meeting with US President Trump in June 2018.

The religious landscape

Religion in North Korea basically means the personality cult related to the leaders’ family. Everyone has to attend weekly information meetings and self-criticism sessions and memorize more than 100 pages of ideological learning materials, including documents, poems and songs which all praise the morals and majesty of the Kims. Even pre-school children become indoctrinated at an early stage. Approximately, 100,000 Juche “research centers” – mostly comprising of one room – reportedly exist throughout the country.

There are still followers of Buddhism and Confucianism in the country, although worshipping the leaders in theory leaves no room for any other religion. However, these religions belong to the cultural mind-set and are easier lived in secret without anyone noticing. Christianity, on the other hand, is seen as a dangerous foreign religion which has to be viciously fought against. Therefore, Christians have no room in North Korea and consequently must live their lives in utmost secrecy. When it is reported that South Korean church leaders [met with their North Korean counterparts](#), such news should not be taken at face value. The official North Korean church – if it exists at all - can hardly be seen as being representative for all Christian witness in the country; indeed some observers view such delegations as pure sham. Gathering in large groups is absolutely impossible for Christians; indeed it is life-threatening to be even recognized as being a Christian.

The political landscape

Kim Jong Un has been demonstrating a different style of leadership from his father. Instead he is trying to resemble his grandfather by appearing more communicative and benevolent in public. However, this does not mean any change in ideology or leadership. Kim Jong Un has been proclaimed the “Great Successor” and given the titles “Supreme Leader” and “Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces”. More importantly, he holds key positions in all important powerhouses (party, state and army) through his role as First Secretary of Korea’s Workers Party.

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would choose a path of reform diminished in the course of 2012 and 2013 after economic reforms were not pursued and after continued nuclear and rocket tests. Nevertheless, informal private economy flourishes and helps the country and its people to survive. In addition to the nuclear tests mentioned above, Kim Jong Un seems keen to isolate the country from the few remaining “friendly” nations. He did not mince words in denouncing China’s current development, when opening the 7th Party Congress in May 2016, by saying: “Despite the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and reform and openness blowing in our neighborhood, we let the spirit of songun [military-first] rifles fly and advance according to the path of socialism that we have chosen.” However, he came back to reality when in preparation for his summit with the US president, he met first with President Xi Jinping of China, acknowledging his most likely only ally, although an unhappy one.

The [assassination](#) of Kim Jong Un’s half-brother Kim Jong Nam in public at the airport in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017 shows the recklessness of the regime once it perceives itself as threatened. US American student Otto Warmbier’s [death](#) (after a surprise release following 14 months in a labor camp) highlighted the dire situation of the country’s camp system.

The socio-economic landscape

Influenced by Confucianism – a Chinese ethical and philosophical system – North Korea developed a social classification system which includes every citizen and keeps records in the Resident Registration File. This system, called “Songbun”, divides society into three classes: the core (28%), the wavering (45%) and the hostile class (27%). These categories are further divided into 51 sub-classes. Christians and their descendants are recorded in the hostile class.

North Korea faces a high potential for natural disasters since torrential rains, typhoons, flooding and storm surges occur annually. Soil erosion and sedimentation, landslides, droughts and dust and sand storms pose serious threats to life and livelihood in the country. UN reports continue to show that millions of North Korean people suffer from chronic food insecurity (to various degrees), high malnutrition rates and deep-rooted economic problems. Young children, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. In 2018 nothing changed for the better, as the first [evaluation visit](#) by a high-ranking UN official since 2011 showed. The country needs international aid, which causes new problems as the regime restricts access to the citizens in need and is under international sanctions, although humanitarian aid is exempted. On the other hand, a growing informal [private sector](#) with markets are in existence, especially in the larger cities. People are getting increasingly used to this sort of trading, which at least in theory runs counter to the country’s teachings, but is acknowledged as being badly needed and runs country-wide with the help of bribes.

One other important means of earning hard currency is the sending of migrant workers to other countries, even to [Europe](#). But this has its challenges for the regime as well. This was well illustrated by a group defection of 13 North Korean waitresses working in North Korean [restaurants](#) in April 2016. International sanctions are increasingly preventing this way of earning currency. On the other hand, it seems that the tightly guarded Chinese-North Korean [border](#) is becoming more penetrable again, not for defections of course, but for goods.

Concluding remarks

When it comes to protecting its ideology, North Korea does not care about international reputation or even diplomatic and economic fallout - as with Malaysia (following the presumed assassination of Kim Jong Un’s half-brother in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017), which had been one of the few nations on relatively good terms with the country. Also, the Warmbier case showed to a shocked world how dire the situation in North Korea’s labor camps must be – publicity which the country usually tries to

avoid at all costs. However, even these recent incidents will change neither its politics nor the international community's response. On the contrary, an increasingly bold North Korea is determined to claim its place on the world map and continues to play different countries off against each other. Christians will remain in hiding, trying to survive, just as they did over the last decades.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding North Korea

- The religious landscape: met with their North Korean counterparts
<https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/north-and-south-korean-church-leaders-share-table-issue-call-to-lift-sanctions-on-dprk/60567.htm>
- The political landscape: assassination
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/15/exclusive-two-female-secret-agents-behind-murder-kim-jong-unsbrother/>
- The political landscape: death
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/anger-tears-otto-completes-journey-home/>
- The socio-economic landscape: evaluation visit
<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-northkorea-un-aid/clear-evidence-of-humanitarian-need-in-north-korea-u-n-aid-chief-idUKKBN1K10KG>
- The socio-economic landscape: private sector
<https://www.dailynk.com/english/daily-nk-releases-groundlevel-repo/>
- The socio-economic landscape: Europe
<https://news.vice.com/article/cash-for-kim-how-north-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death-in-europe>
- The socio-economic landscape: restaurants
<https://www.nknews.org/2016/04/13-n-korean-restaurant-workers-defect-to-s-korea-mou/>
- The socio-economic landscape: border
<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/customs-06152018140404.html>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
25,611,000	300,000	1.2

Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2018.

Estimates of the number of Christians vary from around 30,000 to “several hundred thousand”. Naturally, it is difficult to verify any figures due to the highly restrictive environment. Based on information from inside the country, Open Doors estimates a range between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians. Whatever statistics are used, all accounts show that the number of Christians is slowly but steadily growing.

How did Christians get there?

In 1603 a Korean diplomat returned from Beijing carrying several theological books written by a Jesuit missionary to China. He began disseminating the information in the books and the first seeds of Christianity in its Roman Catholic form were sown. In 1758 King Yeongjo of Joseon officially outlawed Christianity as an evil practice and Korean Christians were subjected to severe persecution, particularly in 1801 and 1866. In this last wave approximately [8000 Catholics](#) were killed across the whole of Korea.

When the first Protestant missionaries settled permanently in northern Korea in 1886 they found a small community of Christians already there and a year later the first Bible was published in Korean. The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1905 (officially in 1910) unintentionally caused a great upsurge in the numbers of Christians and Christianity became linked with movements supporting Korean nationalism. In 1907 the Great Pyongyang Revival began and the capital became known as the “Jerusalem of the East”. Hundreds of churches sprang up and there were numerous revival meetings. Missionaries also set up educational institutions throughout the country.

Under Japanese rule the Church was increasingly persecuted and Christians and other civilians were forced to bow before the altars of the emperor. After the Japanese defeat in World War II, Kim Il Sung came to power and imposed a Communist (atheistic) regime. During the Korean War (1950-53) many Christians fled and after the war, tens of thousands of Christians were killed, imprisoned or banished to remote areas. The rest of the Church went underground. Before the Korean War there were about 500,000 Christians in North Korea. Just ten years later, there was no visible presence of them anymore.

What church networks exist today?

No church networks can be listed. In the capital Pyongyang, one official Catholic church, two Protestant churches and, since 2006, a Russian-Orthodox church have been built and currently hold services. Defectors testify that these churches serve as showpieces. There is no public information available concerning the underground networks.

Religious context

No reliable list of religions is available, but see "Religious landscape" in the "Keys to Understanding" section above.

Notes on the current situation

Since 2001, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom labelled North Korea a country of particular concern; this was repeated in each report until today.

- There has been a religious studies program at Kim Il Sung University since 1998. The graduates are sent to work for officially recognized religious federations, the foreign trade sector or with border guards to identify clandestine religious activity. Many are recruited as spies in order to denounce Christian activities in the country.
- The border to China has become more tightly controlled making the situation for Christians on both sides of the border difficult. If the recent ease of border controls will change much on the ground for Christians has to be doubted as the regime is adamant in retaining ideological control.
- It can be dangerous for Christians from the USA (or countries affiliated with the USA) to travel to North Korea. In 2017, two US-Korean citizens working for the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) were arrested on trumped up charges. Consequently, the US issued a travel ban. Three US citizens with Korean ethnicity were released prior to the US-North Korea summit in June 2018, including the two professors at PUST.

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- How did Christians get there?: 8000 Catholics
https://https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Korea

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

What type of persecution dominates?

Communist and post-Communist oppression: North Korea is run according to (anti-Christian) Communist administrative customs.

Dictatorial paranoia: Since 1948, North Korea has been ruled by a single family, now in the third generation. The god-like worship of the rulers leaves absolutely no room for any other religion.

Who is driving persecution?

The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state. For three generations, everything in the country focused on revering the leading Kim family. The paranoia of the leader has increased with the country's growing isolation due to the recent series of nuclear and missile tests and resulting sanctions. This paranoia remains, despite the tests having turned out largely successful. Christians are seen as hostile elements in society which have to be eradicated. Due to the constant indoctrination permeating the whole country, neighbors and even family members are highly watchful and report anything suspicious to the authorities. Especially children can believe in the indoctrination so strongly that they report their own parents, convinced that they are doing something good and right. Therefore, many parents prefer not to tell their children anything about their Christian faith.

What it results in

If Christians are discovered - no matter if they are heirs of the Christian communities from before the Korean War or if they found Christian faith in other ways (e.g. during the great famine in the 1990s which caused tens of thousands of citizens to seek help in China, often finding it in Chinese churches) – not only are they deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot, their families will share their fate as well. Christians do not even have the slightest space in society, on the contrary, they are publically warned against. Meeting other Christians in order to worship is almost impossible and if some believers dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy. The churches shown to visitors in Pyongyang serve mere propaganda purposes.

Violence

WWR has decided not to publish violence details for this country.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

There have been raids against Christians and killings, but no details can be published for security reasons. Pastor Dong-cheol Kim (arrested in 2015) and two Korean-American Christian lecturers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim (arrested in April and May 2017 respectively) were all accused of espionage but released ahead of the US-North Korean summit in June 2018. In a [change of hiring policy](#), PUST is now reportedly looking for non-US staff, a logical consequence of USA's travel ban.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: change of hiring policy
<https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/pyongyang-university-no-longer-seeking-american-volunteers/?c=1508909752924>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

North Korea has been No.1 since WWL 2002. In WWL 2018 it was very closely followed by Afghanistan at No.2. WWL 2019 does not see much change in this respect. Although the situation for Christians in the two countries is very different, in terms of scoring they are very similar. As in previous years, Christians in North Korea face extreme levels of pressure in all *spheres of life*, combined with a very high level of violence directed against them. The country's sudden increase in diplomatic activities (starting with Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in South Korea in February 2018) did not change anything for the Christians. On the contrary, reportedly, raids in order to identify and uproot citizens with deviating thoughts increased.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: North Korea	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

While in theory North Korea still is a Communist country, in practice a personality cult dominates. However, since the country is still run according to Communist administrative customs this is still indicated as the main persecution engine. Additionally, the emphasis of its leader (and the means by which the country is ruled) is shifting away from the army and more towards the Korea's Workers Party. This shows as well that (Post-)Communism still holds a strong influence. The outcome of the 7th Congress of the Korea's Workers Party in May 2016 – the first for 36 years – did not change anything visibly, whether concerning economic or ideological issues. Christians not only continue to be seen as dangerous and their religion as “opium for the people” – as in classical Communist ideology – but they are also part of the hostile class, according to the country's social stratification system called Songbun.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

Since 1948, North Korea has been ruled by a single family, now in the third generation. As mentioned above, while originally Communist ideology was followed, this influence has almost faded away in recent years, although the Communist style of controlling society lives on. North Korea is now a clear example of a country ruled by Dictatorial paranoia. Everyone has to revere the leadership and because of this personality cult, Kim Jong Un is an irreplaceable figure in society - not least because he rules the Worker's Party, the army, the country's administration and all strands of society.

The reporting period saw the first signs of a [growing personality cult](#) surrounding Kim Jong Un. The [first official painting](#) of Kim Jong Un has also recently been unveiled, when Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Cane visited Pyongyang. It was well noted that the painting shows Kim Jong Un dressed in a dark suit and tie, not in a Communist-style uniform.

Even though his power may not be as absolute as his father’s or grandfather’s, no one can challenge his authority and Kim Jong Un has consolidated his power, not the least by achieving de facto nuclear power status. The god-like worship of the rulers leaves absolutely no room for any other religion and anyone daring to revere anything or anybody besides the Kim dynasty is seen as dangerous and a threat to the state. Especially Christians, who confess believing in and following a higher authority than humans and who trust that their Lord is instituting and destituting kings and rulers are seen a a threat and are consequently fought against and tracked down, where possible. As will be detailed below, they (naturally) belong to the "hostile class" in North Korea’s social system.

The full title of Kim Jong Un sounds impressive: “Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army”. Kim Jong Un amended the national oath by shortening references to his father’s and grandfather’s achievements and giving extra emphasis to [his own accomplishments](#), clearly showing his consolidation of power. In October 2017, Kim Jong Un promoted his sister to the Party’s politburo, allowing her to become part of the country’s ruling elite. She was also the one attending the Winter Olympics in South Korea and took part in several summits. This emphasizes the North Korean reality where ruling the country and Party is [family business](#), even though it does not mean that she has any power of her own.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: North Korea	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	-	VERY STRONG	-	VERY STRONG	-
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	Strong	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-	Very strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression:

The main driver of persecution in North Korea is the state, in government and party. The government is run according to Communist doctrine and consequently, the government is the strongest driver of persecution in this respect.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

For three generations, everything in the country is focused on revering the leading Kim family and this has not ceased with the youngest generation, when Kim Jong Un took over power in December 2011. The highest goal of all authorities is the survival of the country and its leader. Christians are seen as hostile elements in society which have to be eradicated in one way or another. Due to the constant indoctrination permeating the whole country, neighbors are watchful and are expected to report suspicious activities to the authorities. Even own family members report a Christian to the authorities, as especially children can believe in indoctrination so strongly that they report their own parents, convinced that they are doing something good and right. Therefore, many parents prefer not to tell their children anything about their Christian faith.

Context

The country's political system is based upon two ideologies. One is called *Juche*, basically saying that the state is self-reliant. The other is *Kimilsungism*, the worship of the leaders, who are the all-powerful entities guiding North Korea. Everyone has to attend weekly meetings where all citizens from every age are ideologically trained and indoctrinated. Attendance of self-criticism sessions is mandatory. No one is allowed to develop deviating ideas, be they religious or other. The system of strict social control results in high self-censorship and self-control on what to say to whom, even in the most private and family relationships. There is a North Korean saying which illustrates the mindset of society well: "Wherever two or three are gathered together, one is a spy."

Hopes that Kim Jong Un would be more open for improvements in economic, social and diplomatic conditions, when he took over power in December 2011, have faltered. The regime focused everything on continuing its missile and nuclear tests and uttering more war rhetoric. Just before the Winter Olympic Games in South Korea all this stopped and was replaced by diplomatic offers and initiatives. Three lessons can be learned from this: North Korea was willing to pay the prize of heavy international sanctions which were enforced by their all-decisive neighbor China as well. Second, achieving nuclear power status – be it recognized or not – remained the number one goal. Once this was done, signs of relaxation could be sent and the focus could be shifted to [developing the economy](#). Third, this policy bore surprising fruits.

Whereas in the WWL 2018 reporting period, Kim Jong Un had still (in his 6th year of leadership) neither visited any foreign state nor received any official visit by a foreign head of state, this has now changed with a flurry of activity. In March 2018, Kim Jong Un [travelled to Beijing](#) and met with major ally China. Within the next four months he had visited China three times. This is the same Kim Jong Un who did not mince words in denouncing China's current development, when opening the 7th Party Congress in 2016 by saying: "Despite the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and reform and openness blowing in our neighborhood, we let the spirit of Songun [military-first] rifles fly and advanced according to the path of socialism that we had chosen." In April 2018, both Korean presidents met and issued the "[Panmunjon Declaration](#)", a remarkable step after several years of silence and hostility. The biggest achievement, however, was to become the first North Korean ruler to meet with a ruling US president at the Singapore summit on 12 June 2018. Although many observers viewed the meeting as a [propaganda victory](#) for the former and a seasoned expert on North Korea pointed out the [summit](#)

[statement](#) is remarkably nebulous, only time will tell if this meeting was more than just a photographed handshake. Tangible changes in the country are not yet visible. On the contrary, sources in the country say that there is an increased crackdown against all "anti-socialist elements" and that the cooperation with China in repatriating defectors has deepened. The issue of human rights is seen as being a barrier to progress and an unwanted interference in internal affairs by both China and North Korea, it seems. It should be kept in mind that North Korea did not hesitate to kill Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong Nam very publically at the airport in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017. This illustrates to what lengths the regime is prepared to go to keep its hold on power.

Although most North Koreans are not suffering from starvation as they did in the 1990s, the supply of basic needs remains a challenge due to geographical and weather conditions. Hunger is an ever present enemy, day in and day out. Large percentages of the population are undernourished and the percentage of stunted children remains high. The situation is further aggravated by the regime's refusal to cooperate with international organizations and to grant them access to the areas most affected. In July 2018, a rare evaluation visit by a high-ranking UN official (the first since 2011) revealed the [dire living conditions](#) of many citizens. Another indicator for this is the soldier who crossed the DMZ in November 2017 and was seriously wounded. During a medical check, [many parasites](#) were found in the defector's digestive tract. Given that he was an elite soldier tasked with guarding the inner-Korean border, he should have had a better diet than the average citizen. The World Food Program published a [report](#) on stunted children and severely undernourished adults in North Korea in October 2018.

In other respects, the economic situation has improved slightly since the government granted a certain level of "marketization". This does not, of course, mean anything close to introducing a market economy, but it at least leaves people with more room to maneuver. A comprehensive [report](#) by Daily NK published in August 2017 reveals that an estimated 5 million people (roughly 20% of the population) either directly or indirectly rely on the market system in North Korea. Although tighter controls along the Chinese border had a negative impact, this [impact](#) seemed to decrease towards the end of the WWL 2019 reporting period, not least due to the fact that such [controls](#) are implemented by local authorities who often put their own interests first.

The "marketization" project brought results, albeit limited ones, and now the regime is apparently emphasizing the role of the army less and is shifting to focus more on economic development and improving its citizens' lives. This may be due to an increasing exposure of North Koreans to Western consumerist lifestyles as can be seen on illegally imported DVDs of South Korean TV shows which are in high demand. This does not mean that the dominant role of ideology, party and leader can be expected to be relaxed anytime soon. Christians would most likely benefit from an improved economic situation, just as any other citizens. But difficulties in the supply of basic needs probably affect them more since Christians tend to belong to the poorer classes of society. Another particular challenge for them is the ubiquitous use of bribes, which goes against their Christian faith.

One important means of earning hard currency is to send migrant workers to other countries, even to [Europe](#). The North Korean authorities then extort from these workers almost everything they are earning. If this is how they are dealing with the population's loyal class, which can be "trusted" enough to be sent abroad, it is hard to imagine what they are doing with the hostile class to which Christians belong. But this practice constitutes an increasing challenge for the regime in times of tightening international sanctions. The [international sanctions](#), set up in 2017 as a response to the country's continued nuclear and missile tests, did bite hard and will have contributed to North Korea's diplomatic offensive. Surprisingly, the flurry of international meetings has reportedly been

accompanied by an even tighter net of surveillance and an even stronger crackdown on everyone perceived as deviant.

Defection in general has become more complex due to China reinforcing its stretches of border fencing, although, according to reports, the border became more permeable again in mid 2018. China continues to [arrest and repatriate](#) North Korean refugees and this practice could also endanger Christians. The prices which [brokers](#) charge to North Koreans seeking to enter China illegally have “skyrocketed” in the last months. Whereas the price at the end of 2016 averaged \$8,900 per defector, charges have been as high as \$16,000 in 2017. The number of [defectors](#) from North Korea has dropped since Kim Jong Un came to power. According to official data from South Korea's Unification Ministry, there were 1,127 defections in 2017, compared to 2,706 in 2011. Updated numbers for 2018 were not available, but the first half of 2018 saw a 17.7% decrease in [defectors](#) arriving in South Korea.

Christian communities and how they are affected

There are neither communities of expatriate Christians, nor non-traditional Christian communities in North Korea; all Christians belong to one of the two following groups and are experiencing the strongest persecution imaginable:

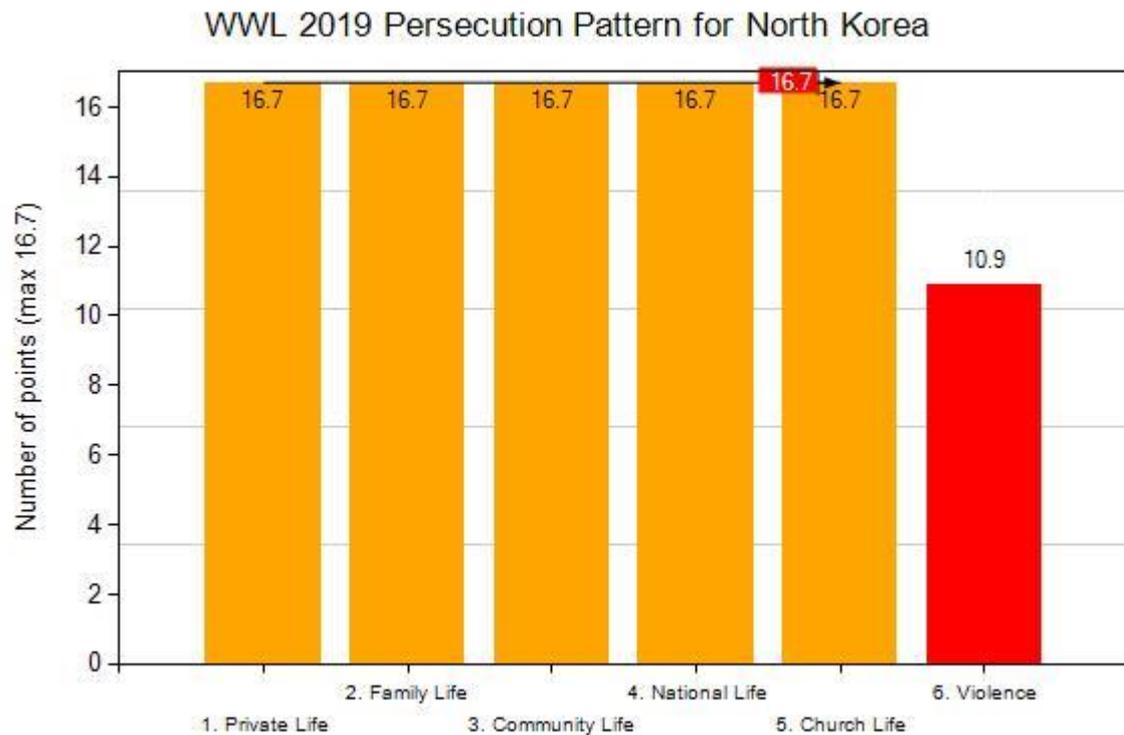
Historical Christian communities:

They originate from the time before the Korean War (1950 -1953). While many Christians either died in the war or fled to the South, others stayed and they and their descendants make up these communities. Every citizen is classified into a social system called *Songbun*. Christians are classified under the “hostile” classes and even have two subclasses of their own, namely class 37 for Protestant Christians and 39 for Catholic Christians. These classes generally apply to those Christians whose parents or grandparents were known to be Christians. For the largest part they were banished to isolated villages as a punishment for having the wrong *Songbun*. Only a small percentage of the historical Christian communities were able to hide their faith and form an underground church. Due to the guilt-by-association principle, the descendants of those Christians face insurmountable social and other obstacles and are watched with suspicion.

Converts to Christianity:

These converts all come from a Communist or a Kim Il Sung/Kim Jong Il-background. Many of them are North Koreans who came to the Christian faith during the 1990s, when countless people crossed the border to China during the years of famine and found help in Chinese churches. (Many also crossed the border after the year 2000, but not in such large numbers.) After [returning](#) to North Korea, they remained true to their new-found faith.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in North Korea has stayed at an extreme level over all *spheres of life*. Despite all the regime's diplomatic activities over the reporting period, each *sphere of life* has retained the maximum possible score of 16.7 points. The meetings in 2018 with international heads of state brought no benefit to Christians in the country.
- This pattern of maximum scores in all *spheres of life* reflects the reality of a state where the Persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia* is evident in every segment of society. There is probably no other country on earth where the term paranoia fits better; it affects everything in North Korea.
- The violence score increased from 10.6 in WWL 2018 to 10.9, remaining on a very high level. If someone is discovered as a Christian, he or she will be arrested, interrogated and brought to the camps. Killings have also been reported.

Private sphere:

Given the situation outlined above, it is no wonder that North Korea scores maximum points in the *private sphere*. It is highly dangerous to read the Bible or to express Christian faith in any way whatsoever. Bibles and other materials are carefully hidden and only used when the believers are sure they are really alone. Christians tend to divide Christian materials up (or destroy them) after memorizing the content in order to avoid storing whole copies. Meeting with other Christians is highly dangerous, talking about one's faith to non-Christian family members (let alone to others) is virtually impossible. Family members are taught that their prime loyalty is to the Kim family. Since even children are willing to denounce their parents because of this high pressure to be loyal to the Kims and they are taught so (as reports continue to show), most parents do not even dare to tell their own children that they are Christians.

Family sphere:

The maximum score in this *Sphere of life* is reflected in one commentator's statement: "Children are taught the name of Kim Il Sung before they are taught their parents' names." If Christians are discovered, they will lose everything. They will not only be interrogated to find out about their networks, their families will also be arrested due to the guilt-by-association principle and all will face years of misery in labor camps. Families are deliberately broken up if someone's faith is discovered. If both husband and wife are Christians, they may be sent to different labor camps. In any case, men and women are very often separated, although some camps do have family barracks. Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activities will be subjected to discrimination, arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture, and/or public execution. Because of the high risks, it is impossible for Christian parents to teach their children according to their faith, for not only would it be dangerous, they would also have to work against the weekly indoctrination sessions, which even start in the nurseries. Celebrating Christian weddings, funerals or Communion service openly is out of the question, as is, of course, any public Christian baptism.

Community sphere:

Everyone is under strict social control as North Korea applies the old Communist neighborhood watch system called *inminban*, whose local leaders have been given more authority in the WWL 2019 reporting period. Everything that happens within a housing unit will be reported to the authorities by trained neighbors, so that virtually no activity, no visit, basically no deviation will pass unnoted. Children of Christians are usually not aware of their parents' faith, for most parents prefer to share their faith only when the children are older, if at all. But if they know about it, they have to be very careful not to reveal their faith for this will lead to immediate denunciation, not only of themselves, but of their whole family. Similar caution is necessary in the workplace and at home, especially in all self-criticism sessions (which have intensified according to reports obtained, reflecting an increasing pressure from the state and reliance on ideology).

National sphere:

Everything is aligned with the ideologies of *Juche* and *Kimilsungism/KimJongilism* (as explained above). Media reporting against Christians is biased - if there are any reports at all - as state media refer to Christian missionaries as terrorists and regard Christianity as a threat to the state. Christians can never expect a fair trial when they have to appear in court. Even expatriate Christians will not get a fair trial when arrested by the authorities. Consequently, the *national sphere* scores maximum points. North Korean police officials will hunt down and vigorously prosecute North Koreans who convert to Protestant Christianity while in China or those who attempt to bring Christian literature, primarily Bible verses, back with them to North Korea. Every defector caught and repatriated will have to answer a lot of questions. All reports confirm that these include questions like: "Did you meet any Christians in China?" and "Have you visited a church in China?" According to the Korean Institute for National Unification (quoted by the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2017): "citizens continued to receive education from authorities at least twice a year emphasizing ways to detect and identify individuals who engage in spreading Christianity".

Church sphere:

Churches cannot exist in a visible fashion. There are four government-controlled church buildings in Pyongyang but these are used by the regime to convince international visitors that freedom of religion exists. One is Catholic, two are Protestant and one is Russian Orthodox. These do not function as church congregations in the true sense of the word as they do not have any space to move beyond the

limits set by the government. Outside of these "show-churches", it is not possible to produce or import Christian materials legally or to set up any Christian organization. Reports that South Korean church leaders [met with their North Korean counterparts](#) show that not all details coming out of North Korea can be trusted. The official North Korean church – if it exists at all - can hardly be seen as being representative for all Christian witness in the country; indeed some observers view such delegations as pure sham. The same is true for the legal training of church leaders: There is a seminary of sorts in Pyongyang, but churches are not allowed to train their leaders or ministers freely. Youth work cannot be done at all.

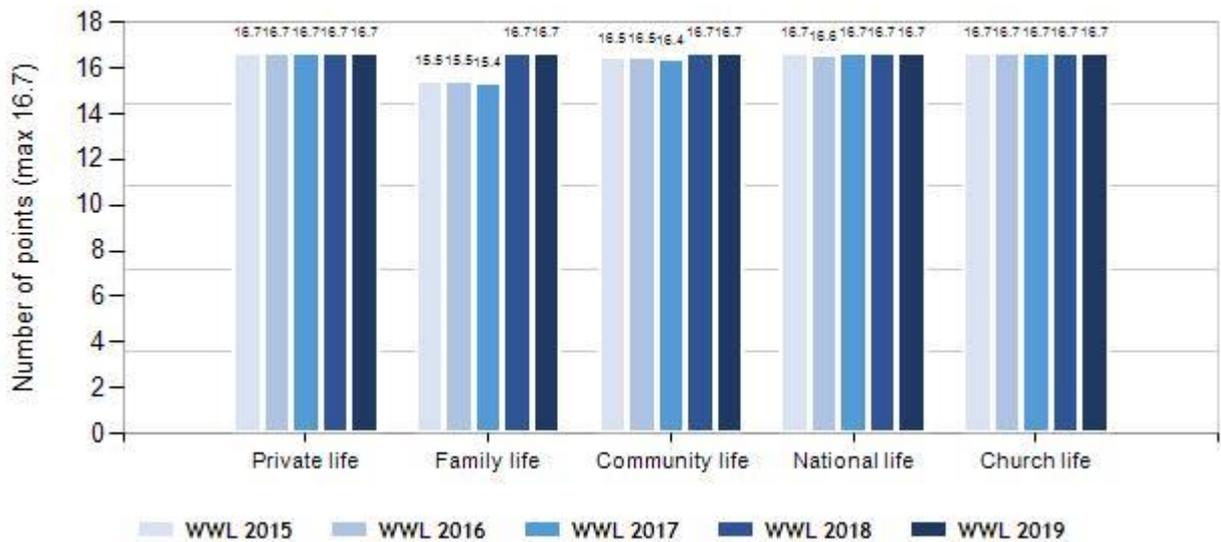
Violence:

Persecution in North Korea remains violent. There have been raids against Christians and killings, but for security reasons no details can be published and it is difficult to obtain reports from the labor camps. Pastor Dong-cheol Kim as well as the two Korean-American Christians and lecturers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), Tony Kim and Hak-song Kim, were released before the Singapore summit in June 2018 took place, as a gesture of good will. North Korea had accused them of behavior opposing the regime.

5 Year trends

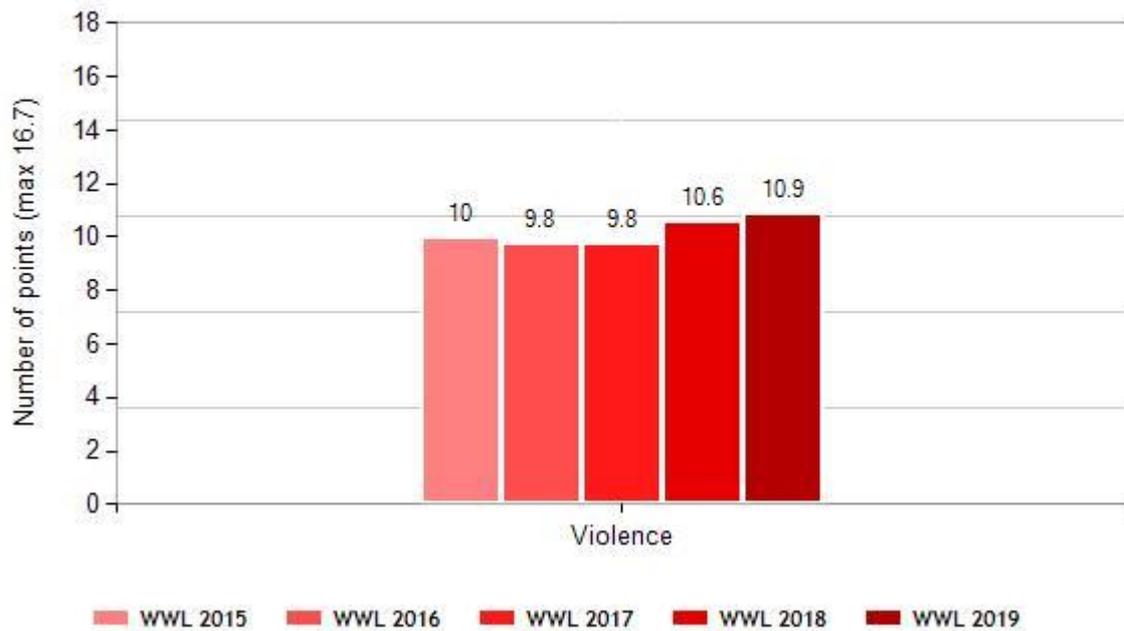
The Persecution profile for North Korea does not show much variation over the last five years. The average pressure on Christians has risen to the maximum level in the last two reporting periods, showing that Kim Jong Un is proving to be a worthy successor to his father and grand-father as far as persecution is concerned. The violence score is slowly increasing for the third consecutive reporting period.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for North Korea (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: North Korea	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	16.7
2018	16.7
2017	16.4
2016	16.4
2015	16.4

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for North Korea (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

When Christians are discovered in North Korea, most are imprisoned, interrogated, tortured and many are finally killed. Given this very harsh reality, there is no distinction of treatment between women and men. However, women fleeing across the border to China have often been abused and ended up in forced marriages. Since these women are considered illegal migrants by Chinese authorities, they are repatriated when caught. Women have been defecting more often than men - and have been turning to Christian faith in China more often than men. If they are found to be pregnant, North Korean security personnel frequently force them into abortion by the most violent and abhorrent means, according to reports. This has been the case for both Christian and non-Christian women. However, the steady stream of defectors has decreased over recent years due to stronger security measures on both sides of the border and due to a better food security situation in North Korea.

Human Rights Watch have published a report entitled ["Sexual Violence Against Women by Officials"](#) in October 2018. Without mentioning any possible religious affiliation, it highlights the pervasive (sexual) abuse of women in North Korean society, also showing that the attitude of regarding women as inferior is deeply rooted in Korean culture.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Although the worship of the North Korean leadership in theory leaves no room for any other religion, followers of Buddhism and Confucianism are known to exist in the country. However, these religions belong to the cultural mind-set and are basically lived privately without drawing any attention from the authorities.

Future outlook

The political outlook:

It has been surprisingly easy for the North Korean leader to celebrate diplomatic victories in 2018, but over the next years the talks need to be translated into tangible political results for both sides. Whereas for the international community and South Korea, de-nuclearization is among the top priorities, Pyongyang is more interested in sanctions being lifted and in developing the country according to its own terms and conditions. This involves a plethora of details which - if discussions do indeed continue - will be discussed far away from the limelight of international attention.

The killing of Kim Jong Nam at a Malaysian airport and the quickly warming ties with its traditional ally China testify to an increased self-confidence. At the same time, the country's biggest challenge remains its relationship with China. It still depends heavily on China economically and therefore needs close ties with the only country it shares a significant border with (excepting South Korea). China still may be unhappy with the regime's behavior but showed its strong position by making Kim Jong Un visit it three times in a very short time-span. China still has reasons to keep North Korea afloat. These reasons are: i) the unpredictability of any scenario if the Kim regime did collapse: ii) the question whether North Korea's nuclear weapons could be a potential danger for China itself and regional stability, and iii) the fact that, after any form of re-unification, it is likely that US troops would be stationed directly at China's border.

Kim Jong Un still tries to warm up the country's friendship with China, but up to December 2018, President Xi Jinping has still carefully avoided visiting Kim Jong Un on northkorean soil. However, it seems that relations have improved and with the emerging US-China trade war, the latter has less incentives for strictly implementing sanctions. Additionally, the new South Korean government with its strong interest in making closer ties with North Korea may also make it much more difficult for the [US government](#) to implement tough international sanctions.

The outlook for Christians:

Persecution resulting from the engines of *Communist and post-Communist oppression* blended with *Dictatorial paranoia* is fanned by a growing ideology of self-reliance and self-confidence, now that the regime has gained the (unofficial) status of being a nuclear power. Kim Jong Un strengthened his rule in the WWL 2019 reporting period and managed to get what none of his ancestors ever achieved: a meeting with a ruling US president. If and how this relationship between the countries and their leaders develops, remains to be seen. Disappointments are likely as details now need to be negotiated. North Korea sees its human rights situation as an internal matter and may even choose to use this issue as potential [spoiler for talks](#), should these not proceed according to Pyongyang's wishes. In any case, significant improvements for the country's Christians are not to be expected. On the contrary: China continues to repatriate every North Korean who manages to defect, despite having signed the United Nation's Refugee Convention and despite the fact that China could send all defectors to South Korea without any cost and effort.

Conclusion:

There are many signs indicating an even more severe persecution of Christians in North Korea in the future:

- The increased number of arrests and abductions of (South Korean and Chinese Korean) Christians and missionaries in China.
- The strengthened border control and harsher punishment of North Korean citizens who are repatriated from China.
- The increased number of South Korean missionaries being expelled by [China](#).
- The increased activities of the North Korean government in its attempts to eliminate all channels for spreading the Christian faith.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: growing personality cult
<https://www.dailynk.com/english/efforts-ramp-up-to-promote-kim-jong-un-personality-cult/>
- Persecution engines: first official painting
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46106393?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cywd23g0gz5t/north-korea&link_location=live-reporting-story
- Persecution engines: his own accomplishments
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/23/kim-jong-un-introduces-new-mandatory-national-oath-erasing-father/>
- Persecution engines: family business
<https://www.nknews.org/2018/05/what-will-become-of-kim-yo-jong/>
- Context: developing the economy
<https://www.38north.org/2018/08/rfrank080818/>
- Context: travelled to Beijing
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/03/28/chinas-official-release-on-kim-jong-uns-visit-annotated/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e708572b61cf
- Context: Panmunjon Declaration
https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/korean-peninsula/korean-presidents-meeting-memorable-step-forward?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=e82b0d18d0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_04_27&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-e82b0d18d0-359283577
- Context: propaganda victory
<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/12/asia/kim-trump-success-for-north-korea-intl/index.html>

- Context: summit statement
<https://www.nknews.org/2018/06/was-that-it-the-remarkably-nebulous-singapore-agreement/>
- Context: dire living conditions
<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-northkorea-un-aid/clear-evidence-of-humanitarian-need-in-north-korea-u-n-aid-chief-idUKKBN1K10KG>
- Context: many parasites
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-defection-soldi/injured-defectors-parasites-and-diet-hint-at-hard-life-in-north-korea-idUSKBN1DHORL?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29
- Context: report
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- Context: report
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- Context: impact
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- Context: controls
[http://www.kinu.or.kr/2018/eng/0712/co18-28\(e\).pdf](http://www.kinu.or.kr/2018/eng/0712/co18-28(e).pdf)
- Context: Europe
<https://news.vice.com/article/cash-for-kim-how-north-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death-in-europe>
- Context: international sanctions
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/workers-08242017140117.html>
- Context: arrest and repatriate
<http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01500&num=14671>
- Context: brokers
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/defectors-05182017161546.html>
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https://www.nknews.org/2018/07/north-korean-defections-to-south-down-17-7-in-first-half-of-2018-mou/?c=1531471933621&utm_source=drip&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2018-07-13+MORNING+BRIEFING+EST&utm_source=drip&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2018-07-13+DAILY+UPDATE

- Christian communities and how they are affected: returning
<http://https://apnews.com/d04acf4a138545b692ebd530d832c218/Missionaries-at-border-spread-Christianity-to-North-Korea>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: inminban
<http://english.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01500&num=15211>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: met with their North Korean counterparts
<https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/north-and-south-korean-church-leaders-share-table-issue-call-to-lift-sanctions-on-dprk/60567.htm>
- Gender specific persecution: "Sexual Violence Against Women by Officials"
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/31/north-korea-sexual-violence-against-women-officials>
- Future outlook: US government
https://www.nknews.org/2018/07/after-the-pyongyang-debacle-where-can-u-s-policy-go-from-here/?utm_source=drip&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2018-07-09%20DAILY%20UPDATE
- Future outlook: spoiler for talks
<http://www.hrnkinsider.org/2018/04/kim-jong-un-and-xi-jinping-as-close-as.html>
- Future outlook: China
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2017/march/china-kicks-out-korean-missionaries-south-north-thaad-jilin.html>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

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