

Faith groups concerned about North Korean leadership of UN group

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Geneva, August 3 (ENInews)--Christian advocacy groups are among a 28-strong international coalition calling for North Korea, criticized by many for its human rights abuses and nuclear threats, to step down from the presidency of the United Nations Conference on Disarmament (UNCD).

For North Korea--"the undisputed home of international arms control" according to UN chief Ban Ki-Moon--to lead the group is terribly wrong, said the Christian groups in a statement.

Faith groups backing the initiative include Norwegian Church Aid; International Christian Concern (ICC), a Washington D.C.-based human rights watchdog; and Jubilee Campaign USA, which advocates for Christians worldwide. A number of these groups are concerned about the treatment of Christians in North Korea. On its website, ICC claims they "face regular harassment by authorities and can be arrested or imprisoned for even owning a bible."

The Christian groups hope to convince the 65 member states in the UNCD to register their protest against the rotating North Korean presidency, based on the country's restrictions on freedom of religion, opinion, expression, and peaceful assembly. The groups also condemn North Korea's use of the death penalty for political and religious reasons, as well as the use of torture and inhuman prison conditions.

Another concern is that, as North Korea faces another famine, the government might impede aid efforts. An estimated two million people were killed by famine by the 1990s, while Kim Jong-Il and his regime kept foreign aid for themselves.

Frances Kennedy, a spokeswoman for the World Food Program, said the agency's operations in North Korea are designed to reach 3.5 million people, of which over 80% are women and children. She said the county "is highly vulnerable to a food crisis."