

International NGOs Warned the South Korean Human Rights Crisis in the Coronavirus Outbreaks

The facilitation of the Coronavirus in South Korea has raised the concern of human rights violation in the country as the attention from the Korean society and international media to a religious organization called "Shincheonji Church" was paid with the increasing virus confirmation cases from the church members focused in Daegu.

Some South Korean local governments attributed the responsibility to the church and many Korean media reports aimed at Shincheonji without fact-checking information. NGOs around the world began to make their voices regarding the need for international support to warn human rights concerns in the country.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently stated that the commission is "concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members are being blamed for the spread of the Coronavirus" and urges "the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak."

NGOs Take Actions

Named "Coronavirus and Shincheonji: Stopping the Witch Hunt," European NGOs on February 28 issued a joint statement that the current Coronavirus in South Korea has become the target of hatred and human rights crisis since the 31st confirmed case from a member of Shincheonji.

In the statement it said, "Some Korean politicians scapegoated Shincheonji for the virus epidemic, perhaps to dodge accusations against their own mishandling of the crisis," and "the lists of Shincheonji members supplied to the authorities have been partially leaked, and Shincheonji devotees have been publicly insulted and beaten, and some have been fired from their jobs."

The participating NGOs include CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions), ORLIR (International

Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees), FOB (European Federation for Freedom of Belief), CAP-LC (Co-ordination of Associations and Persons for Freedom of Conscience), EIFRF (European Inter-religious Forum for Religious Freedom), FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom Europe), LIREC (Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience), HRWF (Human Rights Without Frontiers), Soteria International (See the statement at https://www.cesnur.org/2020/shincheonji_appeal.htm)

Cases of Human Rights Violations in South Korea

Some government agencies in South Korea are taking the lead in identifying if their officials are Shincheonji members. The Ministry of Justice instructed nationwide investigation of government employees in correctional facilities to self-report whether they or their family are Shincheonji members.

On February 27, Jeonbuk Provincial Government sent citizens in the province text messages with the title of "Emergency Disaster Text", saying, "The government is calling every Shincheonji member to identify the Coronavirus symptom. We ask cooperation. If anyone knows Shincheonji members around, please call us."

Family violence against Shincheonji members is also reported. On February 26, a female Shincheonji member from Ulsan fell down from her apartment after she reported the police that she had been exposed to violence from her husband. The husband admitted that he assaulted the wife for months on religious issues. The police are investigating the cause of death.

As for the 31st confirmation case from the first Shincheonji member with the virus, fake news reports that she disturbed the hospital work by fighting with nurses spread through online platforms with her personal information leaked. The Daegu Regional Police Department said that the business interruptions were not true.

Shincheonji church stated that human rights violation issues in relation to the Coronavirus exceeded 7,000 cases.

Comments from International Religious Leaders

"We expect Korea to be a heaven of peace and tolerance and acceptance of others as it is. We deplore very strongly to hear that certain groups of people are persecuted because of their faith. I hope that Korea would adjust and ratify this infringement of human rights. We deliver our full solidarity with all the religious group under discrimination," said H.E. Elias Chacour, Founder of Mar Elias Educational Institutions and former Archbishop of Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Israel.

"I am concerned by the stand taken by certain church leaders in South Korea against the leader of Shincheonji Church of Jesus. The (Shincheonji) church leader has been discriminated against, persecuted and criticised since he founded his church due to its popularity in working for harmony among all religions in the world. Please do not use Coronavirus infection in Korea as a means to justify your discrimination against any individual or group," said Fr. Peter Parlad Kumar, Priest of Anglican Archdiocese of Polynesia.

"Although it's something which is concerned for the world but it's not on the basis of any religion. But It is a human calamity and we should all together fight this with our own ability. And in such crisis, the whole world is also trying to find out the solution and medicine. It does not have any link with any religion, any church or any group. It's just a natural process which happened to the industry. Let us take it as a natural calamity, not by any human being or any organization," added Amir Aziz, Imam of Ahmadiyya-Moschee of Wilmersdorf in Germany.