

Coronavirus and Shincheonji: Stopping the Witch Hunt

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES, March 3, 2020

/EINPresswire.com/ -- In recent days the COVID-19 outbreak has not only caused issues related to public health and global markets, but religious freedom. This letter was addressed to H.E. Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, and H.E. Ambassador Sam Brownback, US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom by Center for Studies on New Religions on March 2, 2020.



Shincheonji congregation currently facing surge of religious persecution due to COVID-19 outbreak in Daegu, South Korea

“Dear President Bachelet and Ambassador Brownback:
Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) is an international NGO specialized in the defense of religious liberty. We are deeply concerned with a growing number of instances of intolerance and discrimination against Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, a new South Korean religious movement. This concern has grown after a number of its members were diagnosed with COVID-19.

Shincheonji was founded by a Korean preacher named Man Hee Lee. There is persecution from mainstream religious groups because they say Lee regards himself as God, or as the second coming of Jesus. Rather, he refers to himself as the “promised pastor.”

Arch-conservative Protestantism is the largest segment of Protestant Christianity in South Korea. It has promoted campaigns against Shincheonji and has labeled it a “cult.” Shincheonji has been particularly targeted because its growth has largely led to a decline in Protestant churches.

Several thousand Shincheonji members have been detained by or on behalf of their family members in order to compel them to renounce their faith through “deprogramming.” After Ms. Gu Ji-in died during a programming attempt, more than 120,000 Koreans took to the streets and demanded a halt to the practice. The protests were mentioned in the 2019 U.S. State Department Report on Religious Freedom, under violations of religious freedom of the previous year.

Opponents have effectively demonized Shincheonji through South Korean media outlets. As a result, many members of Shincheonji in South Korea chose not to disclose their membership in Shincheonji in their workplaces, schools, and other social circles in fear of negative repercussions. To avoid prejudice, certain activities of Shincheonji were advertised under alternative names and therefore accusations of dissimulation have been made. More recently Shincheonji participated in “open evangelism,” disclosing its name when organizing both religious and non-religious events. Regardless, members of Shincheonji have faced

discrimination. Some have lost employment when their affiliation with the church becomes known to their supervisors.

It is important to note, Coronavirus had spread in South Korea before Patient 31. Patient 31 is a female member of Shincheonji from Daegu, South Korea. She was not aware of her condition and was diagnosed as positive to the virus only when hospitalized after a car accident. Meanwhile, she had attended several Shincheonji events, which led to spreading the virus to fellow congregants, who now account for a significant percentage of those infected in South Korea.

After Patient 31's condition became known, Shincheonji halted its religious gatherings all over the country, and supplied to the authorities the list of national congregants (which exceeds 200,000 members) on the condition their personal information would be protected. It also tested many of its members at its own expense. Some authorities have complained that lists were not complete, this has resulted in misunderstandings and animosity. However, Shincheonji supplied what was requested, i.e. a list of its members, not including persons, referred to as "students," who have expressed an initial interest in Shincheonji and visit its (Bible) centers, but are not members. When the authorities requested the lists of students, they were also submitted.

Korean politicians scapegoat Shincheonji for the virus epidemic, perhaps to dodge accusations against their own mishandling of the crisis. South Korea will have general elections on April 15, and blaming Shincheonji is a convenient way both to avoid a wider debate on how the authorities handled the epidemic and to court the bloc vote of Protestants, for whom combating Shincheonji is high priority on the agenda.

Protestants are also spreading fake news about Shincheonji and the virus. They include claims that infected Shincheonji members were ordered not to report to hospitals. The opposite is true. In addition, reports that the church believes that its members cannot really be infected as they are protected by God is also not true. The idea that devotees regard infection as something good, as suffering can be offered to the Lord is untrue. Finally, the heinous idea that infected Shincheonji members go around and try to infect others is untrue. These misconceptions have led to unnecessary violence.

In Daegu, government workers distributing masks were beaten after a chain-text message falsely informed the population that those workers were Shincheonji members trying to infect others. In Ulsan, on February 26, a female Shincheonji member died after falling from a window on the 7th floor of her apartment building. There was a history of domestic violence related to her involvement in Shincheonji. The police are investigating foul play. The lists of Shincheonji members supplied to the authorities have been partially leaked, and Shincheonji devotees have been publicly insulted and beaten, or lost employment.

Rather than apologizing for the shortfalls of the government, they call for the dissolution of Shincheonji and the criminal prosecution of its leaders, with the pre-electoral support of politicians. The hysteria is growing every day, further violence is imminent and we believe that the only way of stopping it is to bring international awareness of the dire situation. We call on the United Nations, the United States, and supporters of religious liberty to denounce the discriminatory treatment of Shincheonji. The South Korean government, societal leaders, and citizens must continue to put effort into containing and managing COVID-19. Energies must not be used shifting responsibility, but working cooperatively to mitigate this global crisis."

Representative from these organizations signed this letter: The Center for Studies on New Religions, International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees, European Federation for Freedom of Belief, Coordination of Associations and Persons for Freedom of Conscience, European Inter-religious Forum for Religious Freedom, Forum for Religious Freedom Europe, Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and Conscience, Human Rights Without Frontiers and Soteria International.

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