

# Stop Blaming Shincheonji for the COVID-19 Outbreak, says The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

*The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom expresses concern over Shincheonji Church of Jesus being scapegoated coronavirus outbreak.*

NEW YORK, NY, USA, March 12, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed deep regret and concern Shincheonji, Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Shincheonji) is being blamed for the spread of the coronavirus.

On Friday, USCIRF said on Twitter “We are concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members are being blamed for the spread of the coronavirus and we urge the South Korean government to condemn

scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak.” The commission’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the U.S President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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*Eun-kyung Jung, Head of Disease Control Division*

Since the outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China by the World Health Organization (WHO) December 31, 2019, the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus has surpassed 100,000 globally. According to a report released by Johns Hopkins University on Friday, there were 100,330 confirmed cases and 3,409 deaths internationally. As of Saturday, the confirmed cases reached 6,767 in Korea, which is the second most affected

country after China. Of these, 5,084 were from Daegu City, accounting for 75 percent of all confirmed cases in Korea. The number cases spiked in South Korea in mid-February when a 61-year-old woman known as “Patient 31” tested positive after attending religious services at a branch of the Shincheonji.

Public uproar against Shincheonji and accusations the church is spreading the coronavirus is high. Public opinion says Shincheonji should take responsibility for the spread of the outbreak when Patient 31, attended two services, one on February 9 and the other on Feb 16, prior to her diagnosis. Public criticism of Shincheonji has increased dramatically as the number of infected



people increased in Daegu.

On February 22, a petition was submitted to the Blue House website, titled 'I request the shutdown of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, by force.' Citing a report saying that the spread of the disease in the area of Daegu and Gyeongbuk was caused by Shincheonji's unethical teachings and its anti-cooperation attitudes toward the prevention of infectious diseases. The petition claimed that Shincheonji instructed its members to disturb the prevention of epidemics and tracking coronavirus cases. As of Saturday, the petition has 1,245,708 signatures.

Fake news is being poured out daily and fanning the flames of religious discrimination. The media is partly responsible for the spread of this discrimination because there is a lack of fact-checking and a surplus of republishing sensational stories that garner higher ratings. On Thursday, the Korea Communications Commission held a meeting to discuss the role of the press and ways to report the news on the public health crisis more effectively. At this meeting, Hyun-Jae Yoo, a professor of the School of Media, Arts, and Sciences at Seokang University, mentioned the problems the Korean media outlets are now facing. They included excessive framing, reports that do not help resolve the current problems, and excessive generalization.

In fact, fake news about Patient 31 was reported several times and rampant on the internet. The rumors alleged the patient refused treatment in a hospital and struggled with medical staff, demanding to get discharged. Rumors also alleged Shincheonji members made a disturbance at the hospital. The Head of Disease Control Division, Eun-kyung Jung, cleared the rumor in a briefing and stated, "I checked with the police and the team in Daegu and they [the rumors] turned out to be untrue." Ms. Jung also stated, "It is fake news with no evidence, and Patient 31 is being successfully treated."

In addition, an alleged picture of a middle-aged woman spread on the internet. The Daegu Police Department revealed it was not a real photo of her. A statement on their official facebook account informed the public that "Not only initial writers, but also the distributors of the fake news about coronavirus will be tracked and face severe consequences"

"There are so many allegations that highlight and vilify Shincheonji," Ji-yun Jeon stated in Media Today. She is an executive member of Another World, a non-profit organization that prevents discrimination against minorities and fights for social justice. "Poor handling and mistakes can happen in any group and Shincheonji members are also the victims of the outbreak. The responsibility for the spread of coronavirus doesn't lie only with Shincheonji", she added.

On March 2, the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) based in Italy, as well as eight other human rights organizations, sent an open letter to Michelle Bachelet, chief of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Ambassador Sam Brownback, US Ambassador-at Large for International Religious Freedom to urge them to assist in resolving the religious discrimination against Shincheonji. The open letter was titled "Coronavirus and Shincheonji: Stopping the Witch Hunt." It called upon the the United Nations and the U.S. government to urge the South Korean government to take appropriate measures regarding the discrimination and violent acts against the members of Shincheonji.

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