

# **SOUTH KOREA/CHINA: Anti-refugees “demonstrations” in South Korea: the real story**



*On September 2–4, 2018, Austrian journalist Peter Zoehrer was an eyewitness to false “spontaneous demonstrations” staged by the CCP and Korean anti-cultists against asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God in Seoul. He tells the whole story to Bitter Winter.*

By Rosita Šorytė

Bitter Winter (09.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2ylHERg> – Bitter Winter reported extensively about the false “spontaneous demonstrations” organized in South Korea between August 30 and September 4 by the Chinese Communist Party and Korean anti-cultists against the asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God, a Chinese Christian new religious movement heavily persecuted in China.

We also reported that an Austrian journalist, Peter Zoehrer, was an eyewitness to the events. Zoehrer is also the secretary of FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom Europe) and has uploaded

on FOREF's YouTube channel videos of the events. We have interviewed Zoehrer in Warsaw, where he was attending the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).

***You interviewed several members of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) about persecution and torture, what was your experience?***

Yes, I can tell honestly, that the last four days of my stay in Korea were some of the most intense, exhausting but at the same time enriching days in my entire lifetime. During this period, I interviewed 17 members of The Church of the Almighty God. Not only this: five of them were victims of physical torture. All of them have been persecuted in China. They fled to South Korea to escape permanent surveillance by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and in desperate search for religious freedom.

I was shocked when I saw members of an anti-cult group demonstrating outside their church in Seoul and asking their members to be deported back to China where everybody knows they will be arrested, jailed, interrogated and tortured.

During these few days I had the extraordinary chance to meet the members of a religious community that has experienced severe persecution by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the early 1990s. It is said that on the CCP index of the twenty most "dangerous cults" The Church of the Almighty God is ranking among the top seven.

Through the interviews, I also had the unique opportunity to

hear very personal, often tearful stories of the members who suffered unspeakable persecution because of their faith. The CCP established a nearly perfect system of thought-control by using countless spies as well as their state of the art observation technology. Additionally, they observe believers through neighbours, teachers, and even relatives and family members. Already at elementary school, the CCP instills fear of punishment into children, should they start to believe in God.

Each person I interviewed has a different, unique story, which could probably fill an entire book. Originally, I intended to interview only a handful of people. However, soon more and more would come forward, once they heard from their peers how liberating it is to get things off their chest. They told their story straight, without getting lost in details. The heinousness of the CCP's big lies that CAG is breaking up families by fleeing to South Korea and other countries made some of the interviewees really angry. With powerful indignation in their voice, they explained their own narrative: if the CCP would grant them religious freedom and basic human rights, they would never have fled from their country. So, who is causing the breakup of families? It is the atheist Communist regime.

Some of them still have family and relatives in China, who could be punished as a consequence of these testimonies. When I asked them if they really want to take this risk, they expressed that it would be more important to let the world know about the atrocities and crimes of the CCP and the unspeakable suffering of believers in China.

***For a coincidence—but a believer would call it providence—you were in Seoul when Chinese agents and local anti-cultists organized demonstrations against CAG. What happened, exactly?***

Originally I went to Korea to attend an international conference at the Lotte Hotel. My second purpose was to attend the TNKR Speech contest. TNKR, “Teaching North Korean Refugees,” is an NGO that helps North Korean refugees to master the English language so that they can tell their story to the world. My friend Michael is one of the teachers and he invited me to attend their annual speech contest. This was a deeply moving experience for me.

My departure date was September 3. Just two days before my intended departure I got a message from my friend Willy Fautré (the director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, HRWF) that I should meet the members of the CAG. He told me there would be demonstrations against them, organized by the CCP (he had been alerted, in turn, by an article on Bitter Winter). Our human rights coalition in Europe would urgently need photos, videos, and interviews. So, I prolonged my stay in Seoul for another three days. A delegation of the Chinese refugees came to meet me at the hotel and briefed me about their complex situation.

In my capacity as a reporter, I attended three demonstrations against the CAG. The first one was held in front of the CAG premises in Seoul. On the following day, they demonstrated in front of the Blue House, which is the residence of the President of the Republic of Korea; and the third demonstration was held in front of the CAG worship center, which lies to south of Seoul, in the countryside.

These demonstrations were organized by agents of the CCP in collaboration with South Korean anti-cult activists. The narrative they are trying to convey to the South Korean media and politicians is totally twisted and the opposite from reality. The CCP propaganda is claiming that the CAG is a dangerous cult that is breaking up families. Therefore, they bring some relatives of the CAG refugees from China to join into these demonstrations. It is estimated that only half of the demonstrators were relatives and the other half were paid South Korean "professional protestors," and anti-cult activists from five different groups.

I was made aware of the hidden agenda of these atrocious actions through articles published by Bitter Winter, which gave me valuable background information; i.e. about the secret CCP strategy memos, which revealed an outline of how the anti-CAG protests should be organized in South Korea, etc. Especially Mrs. O Myung Ok (오명옥, a Korean anti-cultist who served as the local organizing agent of CCP) followed the outline to the letter. She operated with remarkable frankness. We have video footage that shows how she instructed the protesters on where to go, what to do, and even what to shout.

On Sunday afternoon, three members of the CAG picked me up from my hotel and took me to their church. They told me that the protests had already started in front of their premises. When we arrived at our destination, I almost could not believe my eyes. There was shouting, screaming, yelling and waving of posters in front of the entrance gate by around twenty people. They barred the entrance so that our car could not enter the Church's parking area. I stepped out into the mad crowd, wearing my press-card on my chest. This worked like magic.

Being a foreign journalist, they didn't dare to stop me from entering. However, two young women were still in the car, which was surrounded by the raging mob. Some demonstrators would even lay down in front of the car. Others, including Mrs. O, banged with their fists on the car, shouting that those trapped inside should open the windows. They tried to identify the ladies who were helplessly waiting in the vehicle in fear of what might happen next. Finally, when the police arrived, they could drive unhindered through the gate into the parking lot. Evidence of this can be seen on our videos on YouTube.

On Monday, the protestors gathered in the open area near the Blue House. Their numbers were much less than the day before. The reason for that may have been the pouring rain. I went there with two cameramen, both members of the CAG. One of them wore a white mask over his face, because if he was identified, his parents and relatives back home in China would definitely be in danger to receive reprisals by the CCP. In fact, Mrs. O turned up and very aggressively pushed the young man, challenging him to identify himself. She also turned to me, taking pictures of my press-card and demanding that I hand her my business card, which I of course refused to do. I called her by her name and told her that I knew who she was, and she was not amused. Some media representatives were there as well. Soon the demonstration broke up because of the rain. It was a total flop for the organizers. On the other hand, that again was rather satisfying for the refugees of the CAG.

The next day, on Tuesday, we drove to the CAG worship center lying to the south of Seoul, the location of the final "demonstration." It was an impressive compound, which included much more than just a hall for worship. There were numerous flats for members, a big kitchen with a spacious canteen, an

arts center, a media center, and the lot. The buildings were located at the foot of a hill, near a river with an impressive panorama as a backdrop.

After a delicious lunch, we prepared for the arrival of the demonstrators. In a small facility near the main house, we were able to see on a large screen TV all that was going on in the street outside the security fence.

Although the lawyers had told us that the demonstration was officially registered from 2:00 pm until 4:00 pm, already at 1:45 pm they arrived and started to chant and scream through their loudspeakers turned on maximum volume. That was their first mistake. Their second mistake was to exceed the legal limitation of demonstration, trespassing on the premises of The Church of Almighty God to stage the demonstration. And they even raised banners there to cover the banner with the appeal of the nine NGOs that the Church had exposed. Their third mistake was to park their pickup truck illegally on the private premises of The Church of Almighty God. The two young Korean lawyers hired by the CAG were brilliant. They went out the gate and told the organizers to pack up, since they were violating Korean law. The anti-cult pastor, standing on the pickup, yelled back, refusing to follow the lawyer's advice. That was their fourth mistake. Without hesitation, the attorneys called the police. The protesters had to take down and roll up their posters, remove the cars, and finally they even stopped screaming.

***You were interviewed by the Korean national television KBS and other media. So far, the media coverage of the***

***events has been very much coloured by anti-cult stereotypes. What is your impression of the Korean media?***

Interestingly, there were more people from the media than there were demonstrators. I asked the lawyers to negotiate with the KBS (the Korean National TV) a meeting with me. They agreed, and as I went out to meet them, a crowd of journalists encircled me. The reporters fired all kinds of questions at me. I told them that in their previous news coverage they had treated CAG badly by repeating only the narrative of the CCP ("dangerous cult," breaking up families, etc.). Therefore, I would not talk to them anymore. Only KBS would receive my exclusive interview. That was the end of the demonstration. Together with the national broadcasting team and my translators, we entered the premises and started the interview, which lasted no less than 90 minutes. They asked very good questions and I was happy that I could explain to them that I am representing nine European NGOs, whose members are gravely concerned about the fate of the persecuted Chinese Christians who fled their country in search for religious freedom. Also, I could explain to the journalists about the urgency of granting political asylum to the members of this Church. Should the South Korean government deport them back to China, they would end up in jail or "transformation through education camps" with certainty.

Before this quite positive experience, the members of the CAG told me how distrustful they were towards the media in South Korea. The reason is that several times their story has been totally twisted. They felt totally slandered and betrayed by the journalists who seemed to be taking the side of the CCP and the Korean anti-cultists. This really shocked me. Is the Korean media really becoming a victim of Chinese propaganda?

Why are they kowtowing to fundamentalist anti-cult groups? Although I can understand the distrust of the CAG refugees, I still encouraged them to seek contact with the media and give them another chance.

***What can NGOs in the West do to support refugees in Korea who flee from religious persecution?***

This is a very important question indeed! Most people underestimate the long arm of China. The tremendous influence the CCP is exercising through their economic power and their propaganda... It is a sad fact that the Korean government issued already 187 deportation orders against Chinese refugees who are members of CAG. Time is really against those refugees and so far, in the Korean media, they have no voice to speak in their defence. Therefore, the international human rights community as well as the international media is challenged to put the spotlight on their pitiable situation.

First of all, we should spread the story of these refugees to the European mainstream and social media. Next, we should make the human rights community in Europe and the United States aware of this serious problem. Another step would be to inform the European Parliament and Dr. Jan Figel, who is the EU special envoy on FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief). Our colleagues in the USA could inform the US State Department. Last not least, we should make interventions at the UN in Geneva. Although Korea is in many ways economically and culturally dependent on China, they do respect Europe and the United States.

Our organizations, HRWF and FOREF Europe, had positive experiences with regard to religious freedom advocacy in

Japan, where members of the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses were kidnapped and incarcerated by anti-cult activists until they recanted their new faith or managed to escape. Once a court sentenced them, they got afraid and stopped their criminal activity. Only such threats could stop those anti-cult and anti-human rights activists in Korea.

### **About the author**

*Rosita ŠORYTĖ was born on September 2, 1965 in Lithuania. In 1988, she graduated from the University of Vilnius in French Language and Literature. In 1994, she got her diploma in international relations from the Institut International d'Administration Publique in Paris.*

*In 1992, Rosita Šorytė joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. She has been posted to the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to UNESCO (Paris, 1994-1996), to the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 1996-1998), and was Minister Counselor at the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to the United Nations in 2014-2017, where she had already worked in 2003-2006. She is currently on a sabbatical. In 2011, she worked as the representative of the Lithuanian Chairmanship of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) at the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (Warsaw). In 2012-2013, she chaired the European Union Working Group on Humanitarian Aid on behalf of the Lithuanian pro tempore presidency of the European Union. As a diplomat, she specialized in disarmament, humanitarian aid and peacekeeping issues, with a special interest in the Middle East and religious persecution and discrimination in the area. She also served in elections observation missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Belarus, Burundi, and Senegal.*

*Her personal interests, outside of international relations and humanitarian aid, include spirituality, world religions, and art. She takes a special interest in refugees escaping their countries due to religious persecution and is co-founder and President of ORLIR, the International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees. She is the author, inter alia, of "Religious Persecution, Refugees, and Right of Asylum," The Journal of CESNUR, 2(1), 2018, 78–99.*

*Languages (fluent): Lithuanian, English, French, Russian.*

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