

The Church of Almighty God

Persecution in China - Refugee Problems Abroad

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One of the most fundamental human rights protected by the UN Universal Declaration is religious freedom, the right for someone to have a religious identity, to be a member of any peaceful religious or belief community, to worship openly and to share beliefs with others.

Members of religious minorities and new religious movements are often victims of state repression in undemocratic countries professing atheism or having an official religion. Their only crime is to profess beliefs of which certain governments do not approve. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has built up a database of over 2000 documented cases of people of various faiths who are currently in prison for having peacefully exercised their right to religious freedom. In search of a safe haven for themselves and their families, believers of various faiths have sometimes no other solution than to leave their country.

Quite often, the national authorities in charge of dealing with asylum procedures lack the most basic knowledge about some minority religious movements. This is the case with the Church of Almighty God in China, a new religious movement founded in 1991.

From the early 1990s to 2017, more than 300,000 members of the Church of Almighty God have been arrested and deprived of their freedom in one way or another. Many have been tortured and a number of them have died in custody under suspicious circumstances.

Beijing's Fake News about the Church of Almighty God

While their members are victims of state violence in China, Beijing's propaganda is demonizing their movement at home and abroad. The Chinese authorities have accused The Church of Almighty God of using violence for proselytization purposes and preaching the gospel through kidnapping, brainwashing and sexual temptation. Some of their members were accused of killing some people in a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan in 2014. Others were accused of gouging out the eyes of a six-year old boy in the province of Shanxi in 2013. In both cases, the accusations recently appeared to be false. The crimes really happened, but were not committed by members of The Church of Almighty God. However, these pieces of fake news were reproduced by the most reputed media outlets worldwide and reached their objective: to irremediably tarnish the image of the Church of Almighty God and to prevent their members from getting any support from the United States, the European Union and human rights organizations in the face of persecution.

Fortunately, in 2017 and 2018, the academic journal *The Journal of Cesnur* published a series of research notes by sociologists of religions refuting Beijing's fake news and fake accusations against the Church of Almighty God. Just to name a few:

“Cruel Killing, Brutal Killing, Kill the Beast”: Investigating the 2014 McDonald’s ‘Cult Murder’ in Zhaoyuan” by Dr Massimo Introvigne¹

“Cult Crimes and Fake News: Eye-Gouging in Shanxi” by Dr Holly Folk². 2017, The Journal of CESNUR 1(2):96–109. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2017.1.2.5.

These and other subsequent works of scientific research were the starting point of an international coalition of human rights NGOs created to highlight the persecution of this religious group in China and the difficulties for their members to get asylum in South Korea and in Europe.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has been working to investigate and track stories of persecution of the Church of Almighty God members over the past year. I have selected two of them that are indicative of the inhuman and degrading treatment to which they have been submitted because of their affiliation to their Church.

Some Cases of Persecution

Church of Almighty God couple arrested, drugged and tortured during their detention

In October 2016, two members of the Church of Almighty God, Yang Jun and Li Mei, from the Pukou District in Jiangsu Province were arrested at home around 10am by the Chinese police and taken to the police station. There, they were told that “believing in the Church of Almighty God is a violation of the State law and a disturbance of social security”.

Upon their arrival at the police station, they were separated and put into cells with a glass wall between them.

Around 6pm that very day, officers placed hoods on their heads, escorted them onto a bus and transferred them to a nearby basement belonging to the Shixing Hostel, where they were separated and secretly interrogated by the National Security Group.

Yang was kept in a small room. Officers ordered him to remain standing against the wall. They deprived him of sleep and provided him three meals per day.

¹ The Journal of CESNUR 1(1):61–73. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2017.1.1.6.

http://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/tjoc_1_1_6_introvigne_ter.pdf

² The Journal of CESNUR 1(2):96–109. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2017.1.2.5.

On the third day, he noticed a strange taste in his breakfast and felt groggy – soon after his vision went blurry.

While partially unconscious, Yang was interrogated by four policemen, asking for information about the church. When he refused to answer, they started to beat him – slapping and punching his face at first before turning to kicking his body on the ground.

Over the following days Yang Jun continued to eat the food provided, but often had hallucinations, blurred visions, and experienced mental abnormalities, such as uncontrollable vocalizations. The torture continued over the days, beatings, being subject to freezing temperatures, and being forced to strip and stand in front of an air conditioner while guards watched and laughed.

According to Yang, a medical examination after his release showed scapula ligament injuries, a broken rib, many bruises and general swelling.

In a nearby room, Li Mei, his wife, suffered similar torture. During the first two days, she was forced to remain standing – not allowing her to sleep. They repeatedly asked her questions about the Church but she did not reply. The following day, she noticed a difference in the taste of her food and felt groggy. She was unable to control her speech or actions – often acting in strange ways, uncontrollably laughing and asking questions to the guards, as if she was under the influence of drugs. Li Mei also experienced hallucinations.

Due to their life-threatening condition, the couple was sent to hospital and later on released but they remained under the surveillance of authorities and residents in their community.

Many other members of the Church of Almighty God have suffered inhuman punishment, including arrest, beating, torture, including drug torment, etc. at the hands of the Chinese authorities solely because of their faith.

In February of 2005, one member of the Church from a city in Henan was arrested while on her way home. On the 12th day of her detention, the police force-fed her drugs, even though they knew she was pregnant. The drugs and inhumane treatment during her imprisonment resulted in a miscarriage. In the following weeks and months, police continuously gave her injections of an unknown substance. It is reported that she became schizophrenic for three months.

Deprogramming attempt under torture

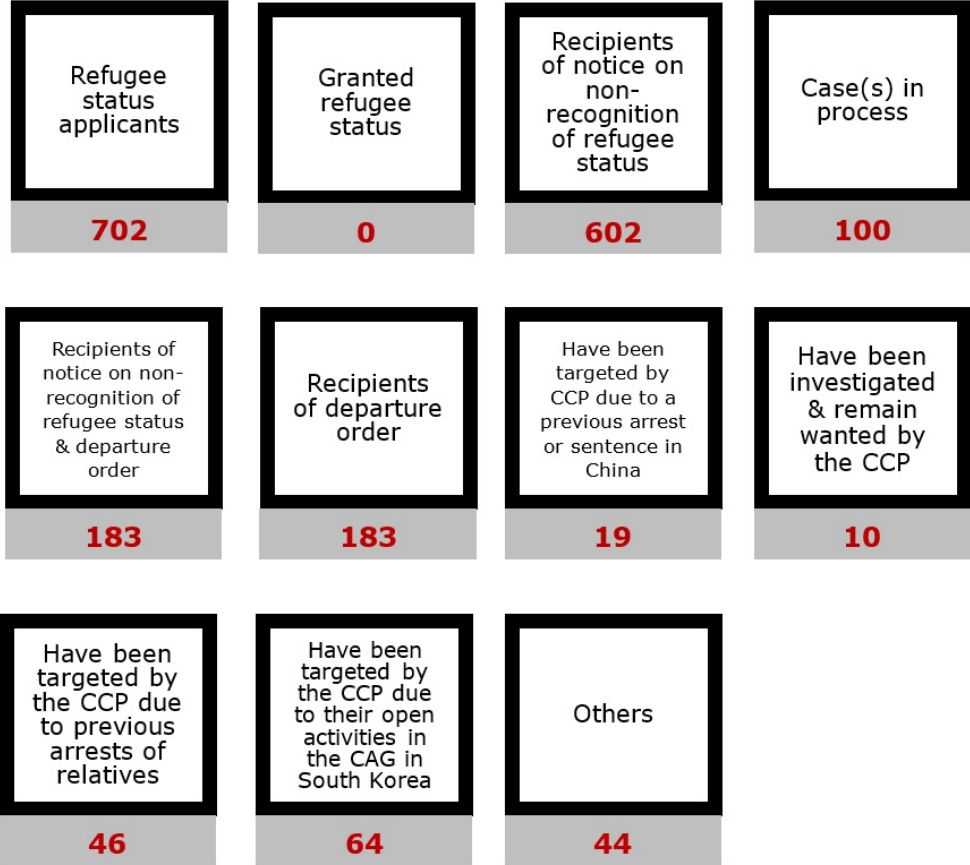
Another frequent element that we have observed during incarceration of Church of Almighty God members is attempts under torture to have them recant their religion.

The case of Bai Rongguang

Bai Rongguang was arrested in December 2012 in Xinxiang, Henan Province on charges of ‘using an evil cult organization to undermine law enforcement’. While detained, Bai was beaten and subject to brainwashing programs that encouraged atheism. Through the torture and brainwashing, the authorities tried to get him to sign ‘three statements’: a confession, a repentance and a declaration of breaking off ties with the Church. Bai refused, resulting in repeated beatings and starvation. He suffered serious mental and physical injuries from the torture he experienced while in custody. He was finally released in December 2016.

Five days after his release, his family sent him to hospital to get psychiatric help. To date, 47-year old Bai has not been able to take care of himself and to live independently.

The arrests, imprisonments and torture of members of the Church of Almighty God are not isolated cases. They are systematic and widespread. It is therefore not surprising that more and more of their members are leaving China to find a safe haven in another country. Some of their favorite destinations are South Korea and Europe. Unfortunately, the reality does not



meet their expectations.

Denial of asylum in South Korea

The statistics from South Korea alone show that out of 702 members of the Church applying for refugee status nobody was granted asylum. As of 15 March 2018, 602 had been rejected, 183 had received a departure order and 100 cases were pending.

Of the 183 individuals under threat of deportation back to China,

- 19 were previously arrested or sentenced in China, and upon their return, have been targeted by Chinese authorities; 10 of them have been investigated and remain wanted by the CCP;
- 46 have been targeted by the CCP due to previous arrests by relatives;
- 64 have been targeted due to their open activities related to their church while they were in South Korea.

These statistics, paired with the testimonies of treatment upon return to China clearly display that Church of Almighty God members face strenuous, and sometimes fatal, situations in China, whether they are physically detained by authorities or not.

Denial of asylum in Europe

European Countries	Total Applications	Asylum Granted	Asylum Rejected	Departure Order	Deported	Left On Own Will
France	442	6	335	158		
Switzerland	33	1	26	23	3	5
Netherlands	38	13	25	19		
Belgium	12	0	11	11		
Sweden	9	6	2	2		1
Italy	684	27	200			
Germany	282	35	238	1	1	
Spain	216	pending	pending			
Greece	48	3	8			
Czech Rep.	42	3	39			
Finland	39	pending	pending			
Portugal	9	0	4			
Austria	8	2	4			
UK	1	0	1			

Thousands of members of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) have left their country in search of a safe haven. Europe has been one of their destinations.

A preliminary research by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* covering 13 EU member states and Switzerland shows that **Italy, France, Germany and Spain** are the four European countries that are perceived by these religious asylum-seekers as Promised Lands. However, their hopes have been short-lived. As of 15 March 2018, the situation was as follows:

France had rejected 355 requests for asylum out of 442 and issued 158 orders of departure but had not deported any of them yet. Only 6 applications were accepted. Nobody has been deported yet.

In **Italy**, 684 applications were introduced, the highest number in Europe. Twenty-seven were accepted, 200 were rejected but nobody was deported.

In **Germany**, more than two-thirds of the applications were rejected: 238 out of 282. One person received a departure order. Thirty-five refugees were granted asylum.

In **Spain** and **Finland**, all the applications (216 and 39) were pending.

In **Greece**, 3 refugees were granted asylum out of 48 and eight received a negative answer. All the other cases are pending. Nobody was deported or got an order of departure.

In **Portugal**, out of 9 applications 4 were turned down but nobody received an order of deportation. The other cases are pending.

In the **Czech Republic**, only 3 applicants out 42 were granted asylum and 39 were rejected.

Switzerland had only granted asylum to one applicant out of 33, had turned down 26 requests and issued 23 orders of departure. Three were deported and five decided to leave the country. It is known that one of them was arrested as soon as he arrived at the airport in China.

In the **Netherlands**, 13 people out of 38 were granted asylum while 25 applications were turned down and 19 orders of departure were issued. Nobody has been deported yet.

In **Belgium**, 12 members of the Church of Almighty God applied for asylum. Eleven of them were denied asylum and received an order of departure.

In **Sweden**, 6 members of the Church of Almighty God out of 9 were granted asylum. Two received a negative answer and an order of departure.

The **UK** has rejected the only application it had received but no order of departure was issued.

<p>Extraditing members of the Church of Almighty God from South Korea or EU member states back to China would mean to hand them over to their persecutors.</p>

Quite often, members of the Church of Almighty God, a religious community that is not known outside China, are requested to give evidence that they were personally persecuted in China before fleeing abroad. This is impossible.

In 2004, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published guidelines on religion-based refugee claims (<http://bit.ly/2BtCRgn>). These guidelines clarify that new and non-traditional religions are entitled to the same protection as mainline religions, that individuals should not have to prove that they have been individually persecuted, a general pattern of persecution against their religious group being sufficient, and that "persecution" should be broadly interpreted, including prohibition to freely practice and propagate one's religion.

The Church of the Almighty God fulfills these conditions. This is why *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (Brussels) calls upon South Korea, the EU member states and Switzerland to grant political asylum to their members.