

South Korea: A young women killed in a case of forced de-conversion

– By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

– HRWF (08.07.2019) – During a fact-finding mission in South Korea in June last, the director of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) met a number of people who had been abducted and sequestered by their families because they had chosen to convert to another religion than their parents'. The purpose of the families was to forcibly deconvert them by submitting them to a special program, called 'exit counseling' or 'deprogramming', which was to be carried out by Protestant pastors during their sequestration.

In one case, the abductee died from a violent death during the session.

First abduction

On 23 July 2016, Ji-in Gu, then 24 1 , was on her way home in her parents' car along with her older sister when she was abducted by her family and taken to the Catholic monastery of St Clare's in Jangseong county (South Jeolla Province) where she was kept in confinement during 44 days. Her sister, a teacher in an elementary school, was actively backing their parents' decision and tied Ji-in's arms to hers during the trip to prevent any escape attempt.

Concerned about the conversion of their daughter, her parents had previously consulted a Presbyterian evangelist, Woong Ki LIM about how to de-convert her. The advice had obviously been to submit her to an 'exit counselling' session to be carried out in 'isolation' (sequestration) conditions. Abduction and confinement are illegal activities repressed by Article 276

(False Arrest and Illegal Confinement, Those in Lineal Ascendant) of the criminal code 2 in South Korea which says:

A person who illegally arrests or confines another person shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than five years, or a fine not exceeding seven million won. (Amended by Act No 5057, Dec. 29, 1995)

When the crime as referred to in paragraph (1) is committed on the lineal ascendant of the offender or one's spouse, one shall be punished by limited imprisonment for not more than ten years, or a fine not exceeding fifteen million won. (Amended by Act No 5057, Dec. 29, 1995)

During her confinement, two Presbyterian evangelists, Mr Woong Ki LIM, 3 , and Mr Jung Cheol PARK pressured her to put her signature under a statement, already signed by her parents, asserting that she was willingly accepting to follow their 'exit counselling' program in order to renounce her beliefs in the teachings of the Shincheonji Church (See Annex). She did sign the agreement, because she thought that she would not be able to get out of confinement if she did not do it as she was then held under tight security. It was therefore not her free choice.

During 44 days of confinement, she was submitted to a forcible de-conversion program. When she left the monastery, the Mother Superior whose function is to train nuns said to her "Good job".

The Presbyterian evangelists then thought that they had been successful with their program, but, in fact, she had only acted as if she was 'de-converted.' As soon as she was free and back home, she disappeared to escape the surveillance of her family and the post-reconversion program which included the attendance of religious services and classes about the Presbyterian faith in a Presbyterian church.

In 2017, her parents realized that she still believed in the

teachings of the Shincheonji Church 4 and planned another abduction operation.

Second abduction

New Year times are always a sensitive period for converts who fear an abduction attempt because they cannot escape family reunions and these are misused by families for kidnapping, confinement and coercive de-conversion. Ji-In GU was in such a mood at the end of 2017 and she shared her feelings with her closest friends.

On 29 December 2017, Ji-in parents pretexted a family trip to abduct her again. During her confinement and exit counselling, she lost her life in unclear circumstances. A media outlet 5 said

“A 27-year-old woman, Ji-in Gu, was killed while she was being held captive at a secluded recreational lodge in Hwasun (Jeonnam, South Jeolla Province). On January 18, the parents of the woman were held responsible for the murder. According to the police department of Hwasun, they bound and gagged their daughter, leading to suffocation. The autopsy revealed a “high possibility of cardiopulmonary arrest due to hypoxic hypoxia. The death was ricocheted from a ‘family matter’ to a national issue, with more than 120,000 people gathering in Seoul and the other major cities of South Korea on January 28 to protest against coercive conversion, of which the woman was a victim.” 6

The incident did not remain unnoticed by the US Department of State which noted in its annual country Report on International Religious Freedom published on 19 June 2019 7 :

“In January, following reports that parents killed their daughter while attempting to force her to convert from what the parents viewed as a cult to their own Christian denomination, 120,000 citizens gathered in Seoul and elsewhere to protest against coercive conversion, reportedly conducted

by some Christian pastors. The protestors criticized the government and churches for remaining silent on the issue and demanded action.”

[2018 Report on International Religious Freedom](#)

The father of the victim was indicted but is on the run, according to Ji-in’s coreligionists. 8

Impunity: the responsibility of the South Korean authorities

After repeated cases of kidnapping and forced change of religion attempts, several victims of these practices have publicly called for the prosecution of the instigators and perpetrators in these cases; such actions are strictly forbidden by law. However, there appears to be no will on the side of various South Korean authorities to tackle this issue.

In the case of Ji-in Gu, a civil complaint was submitted to the Office of the President of South Korea but it was the police station of Gwangju Bukbu that was assigned to the case. The authorities replied that they tried to contact the family, but they were not at home and their phones were all turned off. No further action was initiated.

On 18 January 2018, Hye Jung LIM, a former victim of abduction for the purpose of deconversion, posted a letter about the violent death of Ji-in Gu on the website of the Blue House, the executive and official residence of the President. In her post (that was soon deleted from the website) she recalled that on 4 June 2017, Ji-in Gu had called upon the government to prosecute Presbyterian pastors inciting illegal violent actions for the purpose of forced change of religion.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, in charge of religious affairs, received a copy of the civil complaint and

answered the applicant in February 2018: “the state cannot interfere with an individual’s choice of religion, religious activities, or that of any particular religious organization, as the Constitution of the Republic of Korea guarantees freedom of religion and the separation between state and religious organizations in Article 20.”

ANNEX: What is the Church of Shincheonji?

Shincheonji Church of Jesus Temple of the Tabernacle of Testimony (Shincheonji in short) is one of the largest Korean Christian new religious movements. The Church was founded in 1984 in South Korea by Chairman Man Hee Lee and currently has more than 200,000 members in 29 countries.

Shincheonji teaches that it is the promised church in the Bible, pledged to appear in the times of the fulfillment of Revelation prophecies. It also teaches that, in this special time when the prophecies are fulfilled, the messenger of Jesus, i.e. Chairman Man Hee Lee, starts a new religious world to spread the gospel of the fulfillment of Revelation and to heal the nations. Because of its original theology and rapid growth, the Church encountered the hostility of traditional Christian denominations.

Footnotes

1 Jin-in GU was born in 1992

2 Source: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3f49e3ed4.html>

3]**Woong Ki LIM**

- Secretary General of the Gwangju Christian Church Council Anti-Cult Committee Gwangju East Presbytery (Integrated Presbyterian Denomination) Anti-cult Committee, Expert Committee Member
- Advisory Committee of Anti-cult Committee of Jeonbuk Academy of Evangelization

- Korea Christian Cult Counseling Center, Director of Gwangju Area
- Gwangju Ju Won Church, Evangelist (Presbyterian (Integrated) Denomination)
- Jeonnam Province Daily Paper's Director of Missions Bureau

4 Source: A video statement of the victim shot outside the place of confinement. It has not been made public but HRWF has access to it.

5 The Week Magazine: "In bad faith: Korean woman dies during forced conversion", 19 February 2018.

<https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2018/02/19/in-bad-faith-korean-woman-dies-during-forced-conversion.html>

6 Most demonstrators were Shincheonji members. There were also some people who joined in the protests on the day on the streets, and some were friends of Shincheonji members.

After the death of Ji-in GU, more than 100 000 signatures were collected in support of an online petition asking for the punishment of those promoting forcible programs of de - conversion from Shincheonji Church. It was delivered to the Blue House, the residential office of the President of South Korea, but it was deleted from the presidency's website, and up to this point the Blue House has not provided an official response for this move.

7 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-free>

8 As far as HRWF knows, Ji-in's mother was a social worker but quitted her job to prepare the first forcible program of de - conversion from the Shincheonji Church in 2016. After the first attempt, she went back to work as a contract worker.

