

SOUTH KOREA: Hundreds of Protestant Churches refuse to halt their religious services

On 23 March, the South Korean government stepped up measures to enforce its guidelines on social distancing among the public. See the "64 new cases of coronavirus on Monday, some from abroad" by Shim Kyu-seok in Korea JoongAng Daily

Korea JoongAng Daily (24.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2WIu7RM> – Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun in a morning health meeting warned that "stern legal action" would follow for churches in the country that have violated government orders against mass gatherings.

The remark came in response to decisions by hundreds of Protestant churches across Korea to hold services on Sunday in spite of government orders against large public gatherings.

"[Such meetings] are actions that threaten not only the individuals partaking in them but also the safety of our entire community," Chung said. "Now is a time of emergency akin to a state of war, so executive orders should not be lightly regarded as a bluff."

On 21 March, Chung issued an administrative order calling for the suspension of religious, entertainment and indoor sports activities for 15 days from Sunday through April 5 – which the prime minister said was a "critical period" to contain the coronavirus. In case the activities must be held, organizers are expected to abide by quarantine authorities' measures or be penalized.

In spite of the order, hundreds of Protestant churches across Korea held services on Sunday without following health guidelines. The Sarang Jaeil Church in northern Seoul, best

known for its strong conservative leanings under its now-jailed pastor Jun Kwang-hoon, was singled out by Chung, who said the church should be subject to legal punishment for violating city ordinances banning mass rallies.

The Sarang Jaeil Church held a Sunday worship service to criticize the Moon Jae-in administration along with other right-wing groups in open defiance of the central and local government's antiviral measures. Members of the church reportedly hurled insults and shouted at public servants dispatched to observe whether health guidelines were being followed.

Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon at a press briefing on Monday called the church's actions "intolerable" and said he issued an order banning the church from holding any gatherings or services for two weeks until April 5.

"The case of the Sarang Jaeil Church constitutes an action that seriously threatens the safety of the community and threatens the [antiviral] hopes of the government and the people," Park said. "The extreme measures we have taken with regard to the Sarang Jaeil Church have nothing to do with freedom of religion, and I'm certain religious leaders will understand."

The KCDC on Monday further warned of false information circulating with regard to the virus, noting in particular a cluster of cases at a church in Gyeonggi where worshippers' mouths were sprayed with a saltwater solution and a case in which a person became sick after industrial alcohol was used for disinfection purposes.

"Incorrect information that has not been verified medically can be even more dangerous than the virus, so it is important to check whether the source of that information is trustworthy," Jung said.

A White Paper about the Coronavirus and Shincheonji Church: Sorting fact from fiction

HRWF (25.03.2020) – The whole world is currently facing a coronavirus pandemic that originated in China and quickly expanded to South Korea where a church was demonized for allegedly spreading the virus throughout the country, the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers* recently declared in a press release.

A 30-page [White Paper](#) has just been published in five languages by a prominent scholar in religious studies, human rights activists, a reporter and a lawyer who have researched this phenomenon in South Korea. Distinguishing fact from fiction was their sole objective. After a thorough investigation, they have de-constructed about 20 biased and false stories, among many others, concerning the Shincheonji Church and have opposed facts to these fake news.