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SOUTH KOREA: The Coronavirus and the Shincheonji Church: A White Paper

EU Reporter (24.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2WPcBv7> – *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, writes Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.*

In the international media cacophony that has been raging for a couple of months on this issue, there is a lot of fiction and fake news about it. 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, to which they have opposed facts. Here are some of these debunked fake news circulated in South Korea:

Fiction: The so-called Patient 31 identified as a Shincheonji member from Daegu has been accused of refusing to be tested twice because of her religious beliefs, of attacking a nurse and of hereby infecting many other coreligionists.

Fact: On 7 February, she was admitted to Saeronan Korean Medicine Hospital for a minor car accident and developed a cold that, she says, was attributed to an open window in the hospital. She insists that nobody mentioned coronavirus as a possibility to her, nor suggested a test. Only the following week, after her symptoms worsened, she was diagnosed with pneumonia, and then tested for COVID-19. That, when quarantined, she started screaming and assaulted the nurse in charge in the hospital, was reported by some news but denied by both her and the nurse.

Fiction: Shincheonji has been accused of teaching its members to rely on the sole protection of God and to reject any medical treatment.

Fact: Shincheonji does not teach its members that they are immune from sickness and should reject medical treatment when it is needed. On the contrary, its message to its members has

been to follow the instructions of health officials and political authorities in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. It is also not true that Shincheonji's religious services are uniquely unhygienic because participants sit on the floor rather than on chairs or benches; in fact, this is common in many religions, such as Buddhism or Islam.

Fiction: Shincheonji was accused of not being concerned about the epidemic and of delaying the closure of its religious services.

Fact: On 25 January 2020, and again on 28 January, Shincheonji's leadership issued orders that no Shincheonji members who had recently arrived from China could attend church services. Moreover, the same day that the patient was tested positive, Shincheonji suspended all activities in its churches and mission centers, first in Daegu and within a few hours throughout South Korea.

Fiction: Shincheonji was accused of dragging its feet when the authorities asked for the list of all their church members. It was also reproached that it delayed the compilation and submission of this list, and that it was intentionally incomplete.

Fact: There is no such evidence that Shincheonji deliberately tried to hamper the authorities' efforts. Shincheonji has more than 120,000 members and so it took time to collect such information. Shincheonji complied as quickly as it could. The Catholic Church or Protestant Churches might have been unable to provide such information or might have refused on privacy

grounds. Unfortunately, after Shincheonji submitted this list, the identities of a number of its members were leaked to the public. This had catastrophic consequences for many of them, such as public stigmatisation and job loss.

The question is: Why is there an anti-Shincheonji campaign in South Korea and who is behind it?

The fictitious stories and biased news have primarily been created and circulated by fundamentalist Protestant Churches that use them to call for the banning of Shincheonji. For years, they have been vainly fighting against Shincheonji under their crusade against theological heresies, but in reality, Shincheonji is targeted because it is a fast growing movement that threatens their membership. Those fundamentalist churches are conservative and anti-liberal, and represent a powerful majority in South Korea. They organise rallies and occasionally resort to violence against groups they label as “cults,” LGBTQI people, and Muslim refugees seeking asylum in Korea. They consider Islam to be a demonic religion that is inherently inclined to terrorism.

On 6 February 2020, the U.S Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal government entity, issued a declaration stating: “USCIRF is concerned by reports that Shincheonji church members have been blamed for the spread of #coronavirus. We urge the South Korean government to condemn scapegoating and to respect religious freedom as it responds to the outbreak.”

The authors of the White Paper second this conclusion and

appeal to the South Korean authorities. COVID-19 cannot be an excuse to violate the human rights and religious liberty of hundreds of thousands of believers.

**Willy Fautré is director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.
Read the white paper here.**

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