

# **SOUTH KOREA: Imprisoned for their faith**

Jehova`s Witnesses (30.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2PHJrqw> – On November 30, 2018, authorities in South Korea released nearly all of Jehovah's Witnesses still imprisoned as conscientious objectors. With this historic event, the government has taken a monumental step toward ending its policy of prosecuting and imprisoning Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objection.

Since the end of the Korean War, South Korea has criminalized conscientious objectors and sentenced them to prison. However, the government has begun to alter its handling of these cases based on two landmark court decisions rendered earlier this year.

On June 28, 2018, the Constitutional Court ruled that a portion of the Military Service Act (MSA) is unconstitutional because it fails to provide for alternative service for conscientious objectors. Then, just two months later, the Supreme Court heard the case of a young Witness convicted by lower courts for refusing military service. On November 1, 2018, the Supreme Court ruled 9 to 4 in his favor, concluding that conscientious objection is not a crime.

Based on these rulings, lower courts in South Korea now have the legal basis to reconsider over 900 pending cases concerning Jehovah's Witnesses who have been prosecuted for refusing military service. With this legal groundwork in place, young Witness men hope that these courts will render "not guilty" verdicts in their cases.

## ***A Growing Resolve to Reform the MSA***

Prior to the June ruling, the Constitutional Court had ruled twice before, in 2004 and in 2011, that the MSA does not violate the constitution, even though the MSA does not recognize the right to conscientious objection. Yet, regardless of those rulings, some lower court judges still believed they were violating the constitution when they sentenced conscientious objectors to prison. Some courageously declared these young men innocent, recognizing they refused to join the military because of their sincere religious beliefs. In time, more judges adopted this view.

Since 2015, judges have declared 157 Witness conscientious objectors “not guilty” of committing a crime for refusing military service, and 15 of these decisions were rendered by appellate courts. As more judges saw the need to reform the MSA, they suspended hearings in many cases, preferring to wait on the decisions by the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court rather than render an unjust verdict.

## ***Landmark Ruling From the Constitutional Court***

Beginning in 2012, lower courts referred six cases to the Constitutional Court, asking it to rule again on whether the MSA is constitutional. On July 9, 2015, the Constitutional Court held a hearing to examine the matter for the third time.

After deliberating for almost three years, on June 28, 2018, the Constitutional Court acknowledged the right to conscientious objection. The Court ruled that failure to provide alternative service for conscientious objectors is unconstitutional and that the government must change the MSA. Although the present law will remain in force for now, the government must amend it by December 31, 2019, and provide

alternative service for conscientious objectors.

The Ministry of National Defense has stated that it will respect the Court's ruling. However, to abide by international standards, acceptable alternative service must not be punitive, it must be truly civilian in nature, and it must not be under military control or supervision. The government has yet to unveil specific plans for implementing alternative service, but Jehovah's Witnesses hope that the new program will be acceptable for all conscientious objectors.

The Court also ruled on whether it was constitutional to penalize conscientious objectors under the MSA. It determined that criminal courts have the right to imprison those who evade military service. However, it also determined that, depending on the circumstances of each case, a conscientious objector could be found "not guilty" of evading military service based on the provision in the law of "justifiable grounds."

### ***Milestone Decision From the Supreme Court***

On November 1, 2018, the Supreme Court recognized the right to conscientious objection for the first time in the country's history. In its ruling, the Court quashed the earlier guilty verdict rendered by the Changwon District Court in June 2016 against a Witness who objected to military service. The Supreme Court stated that the original court had not fully examined whether the defendant had acted on a genuinely held religious conviction, and it returned the case back to the Changwon court for further review.

According to the new ruling, courts may accept conscientious

objection based on genuinely held religious beliefs as “justifiable grounds” for refusing military service. In its majority opinion, the Court stated: “Forcing a military duty with criminal punishment or other punitive measures is an excessive restraint of freedom of conscience.”

The Supreme Court not only recognized conscientious objection as a lawful right but also vindicated the neutral stance of Witnesses who had been imprisoned in the past. Additionally, the Court stated that “the existence of alternative service is not a prerequisite for the recognition of conscientious objection as a ‘justifiable ground.’” Rather, according to the Court, if someone objects to military service because of deep, firm, genuinely held beliefs, this should be recognized as “justifiable grounds.

### ***Far-Reaching Effects of the Supreme Court Decision***

Since the Supreme Court decision, three trial courts and one appellate court have already handed down not-guilty verdicts for Witnesses who are conscientious objectors. Two of the Witnesses refused reservist training, and the other refused military service. The Supreme Court third division has also rendered 33 not-guilty decisions and referred those cases back to the appellate courts. In addition, the government is in the final stages of drafting its new alternative civilian service program.

As previously stated, on November 30, 2018, Korean authorities released on parole 57 Witness conscientious objectors. They had served at least one third of their 18-month sentence. The remaining eight Witnesses still in prison should be released once they have served at least six months of their sentence.

Jehovah's Witnesses welcome this shift in the government's policy. Over three generations, 19,350 Witnesses have been prosecuted and sentenced to a combined total of 36,824 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. Witnesses around the world rejoice at the prospect that South Korean conscientious objectors and their families may no longer have to endure unjust punishment for their sincere beliefs.

Paul Gillies, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, stated: "With these two decisions, South Korea has finally chosen to respect the rights of conscientious objectors, upholding its own constitution and international standards. Jehovah's Witnesses hope that all of their fellow believers imprisoned in South Korea for conscientious objection will soon be released. They are optimistic that the judges in pending cases will accept the decision these young men make in adhering to their Bible-trained conscience as 'justifiable grounds' to find them 'not guilty.' Jehovah's Witnesses also hope that the government will expunge the records of the 19,350 Witnesses who have been labeled as criminals for refusing military service based on their strongly held religious beliefs."

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# PAKISTAN: Pakistan arrests 1100 supporters of detained cleric

By Asim Tanveer

AP News (24.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2r8Ept2> – Police in an ongoing crackdown arrested some 1100 supporters of a detained radical Islamic cleric, who disrupted daily life with nationwide rallies following the acquittal of a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, officials said Saturday.

Senior police officer Tahir Mahmood said that supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik party were picked up in sweeps across the country, mainly in Punjab province, following the arrest of its leader, Khadim Hussain Rizvi. Mahmood said police teams raided Labbaik party seminaries, the homes of party leaders and supporters and hiding places to net them.

He said police also arrested scores of Rizvi's supporters as they took to streets to protest his overnight arrest. He said most of the arrested men were sent to prison for one month. He added that those charged with violence and arson in their protests over Asia Bibi's acquittal would be dealt with according to relevant laws.

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said the current crackdown on Labbaik party supporters has nothing to do with Asia Bibi's case. He said the arrests are being made to contain those exploiting the situation in the name of religion to gain political strength.

Rizvi's supporters held violent rallies against the Supreme Court's Oct. 31 acquittal of Bibi. Rizvi has called for more protests on Sunday in the capital, Islamabad. Pre-empting the possible protest, police in the capital have set up security posts near a vital intersection that connects the capital with the garrison city of Rawalpindi. Rizvi and his supporters earlier this year blocked that intersection for 20 days protesting the change of a religious reference in a parliamentary document. That protest led to the resignation of the law minister of previous government.

Pakistan's hard-line Islamists have threatened to kill anyone who insults Islam or speaks out against the country's blasphemy laws.

Associated Press writer Zarar Khan in Islamabad contributed to this report.

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## **RUSSIA: Danish Jehovah's Witness Arrested and Jailed in Russia After Police Raid a Christian Meeting**

JW.ORG (26.05.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2rdnwic> – In the wake of the April 20, 2017, decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation against Jehovah's Witnesses, a Danish citizen was arrested along with Russian citizens at a peaceful worship service disrupted by a police raid on the evening of May 25, 2017.





Dennis Christensen

At least 15 heavily armed police and Federal Security Service (FSB) officers raided a peaceful religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Oryol (also known as Orel), pictured above. The police collected copies of the identification documents of all in attendance and seized their electronic devices. The FSB also took into custody Dennis Christensen, one of Jehovah's Witnesses who is a Danish citizen. Shortly thereafter, police officers searched four homes of Jehovah's Witnesses located throughout the city.

After being detained overnight in FSB custody, today, the Soviet District Court of Oryol granted the application of the FSB and ordered Mr. Christensen to be jailed in pretrial detention pending completion of the FSB criminal investigation. Mr. Christensen is the first foreigner to be included in these official actions against Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia since the Russia Supreme Court decision. If convicted, Mr. Christensen faces the possibility of a lengthy term of imprisonment.

This raid is the latest of over 40 incidents of aggression against Jehovah's Witnesses perpetrated by authorities and others after the Russian Supreme Court labelled them as extremists and liquidated the Witnesses' Administrative Center in Russia along with 395 Local Religious Organizations they used throughout the country.



Vandals burned a house used for religious services.

Just hours after the Supreme Court issued its decision on April 20, a group of men in St. Petersburg vandalized the largest place of worship used by Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, even threatening the worshippers. Vandals have also targeted other places of worship and even homes of Witnesses in Kaliningrad, Moscow, Penza, Rostov, St. Petersburg, Sverdlovsk, Voronezh, and Krasnoyarsk. In one incident, on May 24, 2017, in the town of Zheshart in the Komi Republic, a house where meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses used to be held was badly damaged in an arson attack. In addition to police raids and vandalism, individual Witnesses have been attacked, threatened at school and work, or lost their jobs.

David A. Semonian, a spokesman at the Witnesses' world headquarters, states: "Jehovah's Witnesses around the world are now even more concerned about our fellow worshippers in Russia. These disturbing events are clearly aftereffects of the Russian Supreme Court's unjust decision against us. We have formally appealed this decision on May 19, 2017. This will give Russia another opportunity to end these unwarranted and unjustifiable actions against Jehovah's Witnesses. We are also filing a complaint against the unjust imprisonment of our fellow worshipper, Dennis Christensen."

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## **SUDAN: Police in Sudan arrest Christians at school, prevent others from leaving**

*Take-over of evangelical institution leads to obstruction accusations.*

Morning Star News (30.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2ovfMq4> – Police accused staff members of a Christian school in Sudan of obstructing the work of a Muslim-owned business trying to take it over, sources said.

Police in Omdurman, across from Khartoum on the Nile River, on Monday (March 27) arrested 12 staff members of a Christian

school and the next day prevented others from leaving the campus, they said.

In an apparent attempt to help the Muslim investor take over the Evangelical School of Sudan, police first arrested two leaders of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) – the Rev. Idris Karntina and an elder identified only as Younan – at about 10 a.m. An hour later two police vans arrived at the school complex, and officers arrested 10 other Christians, including women, all SPEC members, church leaders said.

They were taken to Omdurman's central division police station and released at about 8 p.m., accused of obstructing the work of Education Vision, which is trying to take over the school. The institution is still functioning as a Christian school, but representatives of Education Vision are regularly disrupting classes, school personnel said.

The following morning, police along with National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) officers prevented Christian teachers, including the headmaster, to leave the school, which is owned by SPEC. Teachers at the school together with other SPEC members held a prayer meeting inside, until they were allowed to leave that evening.

The Rev. Yahia Abdelrahim Nalu, SPEC moderator, was inside the school during the staff members' confinement.

"We expect the arrests to continue," Nalu said.

On March 16 about 20 policemen aboard a truck forcefully entered the school compound, arrested three Christian teachers including the headmaster, Daud Musa, and took them to Omdurman's central division police station, sources said. Also arrested were Christian teachers Yahya Elias and elder Younan, all of the SPEC.

They were released on bail after eight hours, charged with obstructing the work of those attempting to take over the

school.

The arrests came nearly a month after authorities [arrested](#) and held overnight four educators from the same school, including Musa, before releasing them on bail. They were accused of destroying a sign belonging to Education Vision. The Christians strongly denied the accusation.

The Evangelical School of Sudan is one of several SPEC schools throughout Sudan.

The leadership of the SPEC remains in the hands of government-appointed committee members even after a court ruled in November 2016 that the appointments were illegal, sources said. That case is separate from an Aug. 31, 2015 ruling by the Administrative Court of Appeal saying the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments interfered with SPEC's Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church by imposing committees on the church in order to enable Muslim investors to take it over.

Harassment, arrests and persecution of Christians have intensified since the secession of South Sudan in July 2011, when President Omar al-Bashir vowed to adopt a stricter version of *sharia* (Islamic law) and recognize only Islamic culture and the Arabic language. The Sudanese Minister of Guidance and Endowments announced in April 2013 that no new licenses would be granted for building new churches in Sudan, citing a decrease in the South Sudanese population.

Due to its treatment of Christians and other human rights violations, Sudan has been designated a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. State Department since 1999, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended the country remain on the list in its 2016 report.

Sudan ranked fifth on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2017 World Watch List of countries where Christians face most persecution.

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## **CHINA/NORTH KOREA: Christian Pastors arrested for smuggling defectors out of North Korea, will likely be charged**

By Leah Marieann Klett

The Gospel Herald (16.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2mrLSUp> – Two South Korean Christian pastors have been arrested in China for allegedly helping to smuggle North Korean defectors out of the country.

Reuters quotes Yonhap news agency as reporting that one of the

pastors was arrested with his wife as the pair tried to board a flight from China to South Korea, while the other was arrested at a Chinese hotel.

The wives of the two had been released but the pastors remained under arrest, the news agency said.

Pastor Peter Jung, who heads Justice for North Korea in Seoul, told Yonhap the two South Korean nationals were "protecting defectors" but were tracked down by Chinese police who promptly arrested the religious clerics and their families.

"The arrested pastors openly stated to Chinese authorities they were helping North Korean defectors out of fear they would be subject to inhumane treatment if repatriated to the North," Jung said.

He added that Chinese police are seeking to charge the South Koreans for operating a human smuggling operation.

The arrests come amid an ongoing crackdown against Christian evangelizing in China and a mass expulsion of South Korean missionaries. According to Asianews, authorities recently arrested four missionaries and deported at least 32 more. The missionaries had been working in the northeast Yanji region of the country – which borders North Korea – for decades, providing assistance to fugitives fleeing North Korea.

"Chinese authorities raided the homes of the missionaries, citing a problem with their visas, and told them to leave," a human rights activist told AFP.

The outlet notes that while missionary work from the foreigners is illegal in China, evangelism from South Korean missionaries has been overlooked on the grounds that these missionaries prove humanitarian service.

According to Reuters, China has a strictly enforced policy of sending back illegal entrants from North Korea, whom it

considers economic migrants. For over a decade, North Korea has ranked no. 1 on Open Door USA's [World Watch List](#) of countries where believers face the most persecution.

“Worship of the ruling Kim family is mandated for all citizens, and those who don't comply (including Christians) are arrested, imprisoned, tortured or killed,” reads the report. “Entire Christian families are imprisoned in hard labor camps, where unknown numbers die each year from torture, beatings, overexertion and starvation. Those who attempt to flee to South Korea through China risk execution or life imprisonment, and those who stay behind often fare no better.”

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