

CHINA: Shandong authorities target Christian students at universities

Municipal governments are following in the steps of authorities in other provinces to discriminate against students who hold religious beliefs.

By Jiang Tao

Bitter Winter (15.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2DvBUsq> – Bitter Winter recently accessed an internal document, issued by municipal authorities in one of the cities of Hebei Province in the north of China. Entitled, the Notice on the Printing of Measures on the Evaluation of the Ethnic and Religious Work, it details a list of activities for all levels of governments and Communist Party committees under the city's jurisdiction to regulate the religious beliefs of students and teachers.

The document prohibits teachers and students from abroad preaching or promoting religions while local religious students are not allowed to engage new believers among classmates and entice them to participate in religious activities. The dissemination of religious thought through newspapers, books, audio-visual products, and other means should be strictly forbidden. The local authorities are ordered to eliminate venues of religious missionaries, religion-related meeting places, and religious goods stores within the teaching facilities and take actions to prevent their establishment.

Recent reports from across the eastern province of Shandong raise concerns that municipalities across the province have been implementing similar measures with damaging consequences to students.

Zhang Qianqian (pseudonym), a resident of Shandong's Zibo city, was told that she wouldn't be granted her diploma if she didn't renounce her faith. Ms. Zhang, who was raised in a Christian household, was in the middle of an internship at the time and found the situation trying to navigate.

In another case, Wei Tong (pseudonym), also a Christian, is currently studying at a medical university in the province. She was recently discovered to be a believer by her teacher and has since been questioned five times because of it.

Of her experience, she said, "They advised me to give up my faith, and prohibited me from preaching the gospel and attending gatherings. I'm under a lot of pressure right now." Ms. Wei is worried she might be summoned for an ideological conversation in coming days.

University fellowships are under attack as well. Authorities recently shut down a meeting place for student-believers at a nearby vocational school in Zibo city's Zhoucun district. The venue belonged to the Sola Fide Christian theological doctrine held to distinguish Protestant churches from Catholic and Orthodox churches. The students were getting ready to conduct the first meeting of the semester on September 7, when police officers ambushed them.

In the end, a local Christian was arrested, and the landlord of the venue was forced to terminate the lease agreement. The students are now without a place to congregate.

Similarly, at the Haidu College of the Qingdao Agricultural University in Shandong, students have been sought out for one-to-one conversations during which the teachers ask about their living conditions and religious beliefs. As a result, the college's Christian fellowship has been suppressed as students have been warned of consequences if they continued to attend the meetings.

Analogous guidelines suppressing religious beliefs in universities have been issued in Heilongjiang as well.

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SOUTH KOREA: South Korean court allows conscientious objection to military service

The Straits Times (01.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20rI66H> – South Korea's supreme court ruled on Thursday (Nov 1) that moral and religious beliefs are valid reasons to refuse the country's military service, in a case that has implications for hundreds of conscientious objectors.

Almost 65 years after the end of the Korean War, nearly every able-bodied South Korean male between the ages of 18 and 35 must still complete around two years of military service. Anyone refusing the call-up has usually ended up in prison for 18 months, and more than 19,000 conscientious objectors have been jailed since 1950, most of them Jehovah's Witnesses.

But the Supreme Court overturned the conviction of a conscientious objector on Thursday, months after a landmark constitutional court ruling that authorities had to provide an alternative to joining the military.

At the centre of Thursday's case is Jehovah's Witness Oh Seung-hun, who was called up in 2013 but refused, was found guilty, and lost an initial appeal to the high court.

"It is the majority opinion of the supreme court that conscientious objection is... a valid reason (to refuse conscription)," said chief Supreme Court justice Kim Myeong-

su.

Punishing conscientious objectors “for refusing conscription on grounds of religious faith, in other words, freedom of conscience, is deemed an excessive constraint to an individual’s freedom of conscience”, he added.

The decision, by a majority of nine votes to four, overturned a previous Supreme Court ruling 14 years ago.

Oh, 34, said he had refused to join the military as doing so went against biblical teaching.

“The bible says that everyone who uses a sword will be killed by a sword,” Oh told AFP. “I expected to suffer for objecting to conscription but I thought the pain I would feel by not listening to my inner voice would be far worse,” he added.

Jehovah’s Witnesses welcomed the ruling, calling it a “huge step forward in ending this policy of imprisoning our fellow believers”.

“Today the Supreme Court has brought South Korea more in line with international norms,” said spokesman Paul Gillies.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, more than 900 similar cases are pending in the South Korean justice system, with

another 96 people currently serving prison terms for not fulfilling their duties.

Conscripts killed

The South remains technically at war with the North, after the 1950-53 Korean War ended in a ceasefire rather than a peace treaty. But the ruling comes amid a dramatic dialling-down of tensions on the peninsula, with Pyongyang taking part in a series of summits with both the South and the US, long its sworn enemy.

Seoul's armed forces rely heavily on conscription, and military service often involves postings to front-line positions on the border with the North.

In May 2010, a North Korean submarine torpedoed the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan, killing 46 sailors including 16 who were on military service. Pyongyang denies responsibility.

In November the same year, the North shelled a South Korean border island, killing two marines – both of them young conscripts.

The social implications of the South's military service are also enormous – men must interrupt or delay either their education or their careers to comply, with Tottenham striker Son Heung-min a high-profile recent example.

He only secured an exemption – avoiding a potentially ruinous career break – by winning gold at this year's Asian Games in Indonesia.

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