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South Korea frees 58 conscientious objectors in wake of landmark ruling

By Choe Sang-Hun

The New York Times (29.11.2018) - <https://nyti.ms/2QCfCMm> - Fifty-eight young men who had been imprisoned for refusing to serve in South Korea's military were released from prisons across the country on Friday, after a landmark court ruling that supported the rights of conscientious objectors.

The ruling by South Korea's Supreme Court on Nov. 1 acquitted a conscientious objector for the first time in the country's history. The court recognized "conscience or religious beliefs" as a justifiable reason to refuse to serve in the military.

For decades, South Korea has required all able-bodied men in South Korea to serve a minimum of 21 months in the armed forces under a conscription system seen as crucial to the country's defense against North Korea. The punishment of those who cited their religious beliefs in refusing to serve has been both uniform and harsh.

Guided by the Nov. 1 ruling, lower courts are expected to dismiss cases against 930 men, most of them Jehovah's Witnesses, who are currently on trial for refusing to do mandatory service in the armed forces if they are determined to be conscientious objectors.

But the Supreme Court ruling did not affect 71 men who said they were conscientious objectors but were already serving 18-month sentences after their appeals had been exhausted.

On Friday, the Justice Ministry paroled 58 of those 71 men, including 57 Jehovah's Witnesses, who have served at least one-third of their sentence, allowing them to perform community service for the remainder of what would have been their prison terms.

"Jehovah's Witnesses around the world applaud this latest development," said Paul Gillies, international spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses. "As families welcome their sons back home, we share their joy. We commend the government for acting on the recent Supreme Court decision by swiftly releasing these young men."

Each year, South Korea has sent hundreds of young men, most of them Jehovah's Witnesses, to prison by invoking its Military Service Act, which calls for up to three years in prison for those who refuse to serve without "justifiable" reasons.

Amnesty International and the Jehovah's Witnesses say more than 19,300 South Korean conscientious objectors have gone to prison since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The country's Constitutional Court first objected to the decades-old practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors. In June, it ruled that the failure to offer alternative forms of civilian service to conscientious objectors was unconstitutional, and gave the government until the end of next year to introduce the option of performing alternative civilian services, like working in prisons.

The rulings come despite fears among some South Koreans that legalizing conscientious objection will undermine the country's national defense. North and South Korea are still technically at war and share the most heavily fortified border in the world.

South Korean court allows conscientious objection to military service

The Straits Times (01.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2OrI66H> - 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.

Anti-refugees “demonstrations” in South Korea: the real story



On September 2–4, 2018, Austrian journalist Peter Zoehrer was an eyewitness to false "spontaneous demonstrations" staged by the CCP and Korean anti-cultists against asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God in Seoul. He tells the whole story to Bitter Winter.

By Rosita Šorytė

Bitter Winter (09.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2yIHERg> - Bitter Winter reported extensively about the false "spontaneous demonstrations" organized in South Korea between August 30 and September 4 by the Chinese Communist Party and Korean anti-cultists against the asylum seekers of The Church of Almighty God, a Chinese Christian new religious movement heavily persecuted in China.

We also reported that an Austrian journalist, Peter Zoehrer, was an eyewitness to the events. Zoehrer is also the secretary of FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom Europe) and has uploaded on FOREF's YouTube channel videos of the events. We have interviewed Zoehrer in Warsaw, where he was attending the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).

You interviewed several members of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) about persecution and torture, what was your experience?

Yes, I can tell honestly, that the last four days of my stay in Korea were some of the most intense, exhausting but at the same time enriching days in my entire lifetime. During this period, I interviewed 17 members of The Church of the Almighty God. Not only this: five of them were victims of physical torture. All of them have been persecuted in China. They fled to South Korea to escape permanent surveillance by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and in desperate search for religious freedom.

I was shocked when I saw members of an anti-cult group demonstrating outside their church in Seoul and asking their members to be deported back to China where everybody knows they will be arrested, jailed, interrogated and tortured.

During these few days I had the extraordinary chance to meet the members of a religious community that has experienced severe persecution by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the early 1990s. It is said that on the CCP index of the twenty most “dangerous cults” The Church of the Almighty God is ranking among the top seven.

Through the interviews, I also had the unique opportunity to hear very personal, often tearful stories of the members who suffered unspeakable persecution because of their faith. The CCP established a nearly perfect system of thought-control by using countless spies as well as their state of the art observation technology. Additionally, they observe believers through neighbours, teachers, and even relatives and family members. Already at elementary school, the CCP instills fear of punishment into children, should they start to believe in God.

Each person I interviewed has a different, unique story, which could probably fill an entire book. Originally, I intended to interview only a handful of people. However, soon more and more would come forward, once they heard from their peers how liberating it is to get things off their chest. They told their story straight, without getting lost in details. The heinousness of the CCP’s big lies that CAG is breaking up families by fleeing to South Korea and other countries made some of the interviewees really angry. With powerful indignation in their voice, they explained their own narrative: if the CCP would grant them religious freedom and basic human rights, they would never have fled from their country. So, who is causing the breakup of families? It is the atheist Communist regime.

Some of them still have family and relatives in China, who could be punished as a consequence of these testimonies. When I asked them if they really want to take this risk, they expressed that it would be more important to let the world know about the atrocities and crimes of the CCP and the unspeakable suffering of believers in China.

For a coincidence—but a believer would call it providence—you were in Seoul when Chinese agents and local anti-cultists organized demonstrations against CAG. What happened, exactly?

Originally I went to Korea to attend an international conference at the Lotte Hotel. My second purpose was to attend the TNKR Speech contest. TNKR, “Teaching North Korean Refugees,” is an NGO that helps North Korean refugees to master the English language so that they can tell their story to the world. My friend Michael is one of the teachers and he invited me to attend their annual speech contest. This was a deeply moving experience for me.

My departure date was September 3. Just two days before my intended departure I got a message from my friend Willy Fautré (the director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, HRWF) that I should meet the members of the CAG. He told me there would be demonstrations against them, organized by the CCP (he had been alerted, in turn, by an article on Bitter Winter). Our human rights coalition in Europe would urgently need photos, videos, and interviews. So, I prolonged my stay in Seoul for another three days. A delegation of the Chinese refugees came to meet me at the hotel and briefed me about their complex situation.

In my capacity as a reporter, I attended three demonstrations against the CAG. The first one was held in front of the CAG premises in Seoul. On the following day, they demonstrated in front of the Blue House, which is the residence of the President of the Republic of Korea; and the third demonstration was held in front of the CAG worship center, which lies to south of Seoul, in the countryside.

These demonstrations were organized by agents of the CCP in collaboration with South Korean anti-cult activists. The narrative they are trying to convey to the South Korean media and politicians is totally twisted and the opposite from reality. The CCP propaganda is claiming that the CAG is a dangerous cult that is breaking up families. Therefore, they bring some relatives of the CAG refugees from China to join into these demonstrations. It is estimated that only half of the demonstrators were relatives and the other half were paid South Korean "professional protestors," and anti-cult activists from five different groups.

I was made aware of the hidden agenda of these atrocious actions through articles published by Bitter Winter, which gave me valuable background information; i.e. about the secret CCP strategy memos, which revealed an outline of how the anti-CAG protests should be organized in South Korea, etc. Especially Mrs. O Myung Ok (오명옥, a Korean anti-cultist who served as the local organizing agent of CCP) followed the outline to the letter. She operated with remarkable frankness. We have video footage that shows how she instructed the protesters on where to go, what to do, and even what to shout.

On Sunday afternoon, three members of the CAG picked me up from my hotel and took me to their church. They told me that the protests had already started in front of their premises. When we arrived at our destination, I almost could not believe my eyes. There was shouting, screaming, yelling and waving of posters in front of the entrance gate by around twenty people. They barred the entrance so that our car could not enter the Church's parking area. I stepped out into the mad crowd, wearing my press-card on my chest. This worked like magic. Being a foreign journalist, they didn't dare to stop me from entering. However, two young women were still in the car, which was surrounded by the raging mob. Some demonstrators would even lay down in front of the car. Others, including Mrs. O, banged with their fists on the car, shouting that those trapped inside should open the windows. They tried to identify the ladies who were helplessly waiting in the vehicle in fear of what might happen next. Finally, when the police arrived, they could drive unhindered through the gate into the parking lot. Evidence of this can be seen on our videos on YouTube.

On Monday, the protestors gathered in the open area near the Blue House. Their numbers were much less than the day before. The reason for that may have been the pouring rain. I went there with two cameramen, both members of the CAG. One of them wore a white mask over his face, because if he was identified, his parents and relatives back home in China would definitely be in danger to receive reprisals by the CCP. In fact, Mrs. O turned up and very aggressively pushed the young man, challenging him to identify himself. She also turned to me, taking pictures of my press-card and demanding that I hand her my business card, which I of course refused to do. I called her by her name and told her that I knew who she was, and she was not amused. Some media representatives were there as well. Soon the demonstration broke up because of the rain. It was a total flop for the organizers. On the other hand, that again was rather satisfying for the refugees of the CAG.

The next day, on Tuesday, we drove to the CAG worship center lying to the south of Seoul, the location of the final "demonstration." It was an impressive compound, which included much more than just a hall for worship. There were numerous flats for members, a big kitchen with a spacious canteen, an arts center, a media center, and the lot. The buildings were located at the foot of a hill, near a river with an impressive panorama as a backdrop.

After a delicious lunch, we prepared for the arrival of the demonstrators. In a small facility near the main house, we were able to see on a large screen TV all that was going on in the street outside the security fence.

Although the lawyers had told us that the demonstration was officially registered from 2:00 pm until 4:00 pm, already at 1:45 pm they arrived and started to chant and scream through their loudspeakers turned on maximum volume. That was their first mistake. Their second mistake was to exceed the legal limitation of demonstration, trespassing on the premises of The Church of Almighty God to stage the demonstration. And they even raised banners there to cover the banner with the appeal of the nine NGOs that the Church had exposed. Their third mistake was to park their pickup truck illegally on the private premises of The Church of Almighty God. The two young Korean lawyers hired by the CAG were brilliant. They went out the gate and told the organizers to pack up, since they were violating Korean law. The anti-cult pastor, standing on the pickup, yelled back, refusing to follow the lawyer's advice. That was their fourth mistake. Without hesitation, the attorneys called the police. The protesters had to take down and roll up their posters, remove the cars, and finally they even stopped screaming.

You were interviewed by the Korean national television KBS and other media. So far, the media coverage of the events has been very much coloured by anti-cult stereotypes. What is your impression of the Korean media?

Interestingly, there were more people from the media than there were demonstrators. I asked the lawyers to negotiate with the KBS (the Korean National TV) a meeting with me. They agreed, and as I went out to meet them, a crowd of journalists encircled me. The reporters fired all kinds of questions at me. I told them that in their previous news coverage they had treated CAG badly by repeating only the narrative of the CCP ("dangerous cult," breaking up families, etc.). Therefore, I would not talk to them anymore. Only KBS would receive my exclusive interview. That was the end of the demonstration. Together with the national broadcasting team and my translators, we entered the premises and started the interview, which lasted no less than 90 minutes. They asked very good questions and I was happy that I could explain to them that I am representing nine European NGOs, whose members are gravely concerned about the fate of the persecuted Chinese Christians who fled their country in search for religious freedom. Also, I could explain to the journalists about the urgency of granting political asylum to the members of this Church. Should the South Korean government deport them back to China, they would end up in jail or "transformation through education camps" with certainty.

Before this quite positive experience, the members of the CAG told me how distrustful they were towards the media in South Korea. The reason is that several times their story has been totally twisted. They felt totally slandered and betrayed by the journalists who seemed to be taking the side of the CCP and the Korean anti-cultists. This really shocked me. Is the Korean media really becoming a victim of Chinese propaganda? Why are they kowtowing to fundamentalist anti-cult groups? Although I can understand the distrust of the CAG refugees, I still encouraged them to seek contact with the media and give them another chance.

What can NGOs in the West do to support refugees in Korea who flee from religious persecution?

This is a very important question indeed! Most people underestimate the long arm of China. The tremendous influence the CCP is exercising through their economic power and their propaganda... It is a sad fact that the Korean government issued already 187 deportation orders against Chinese refugees who are members of CAG. Time is really against those refugees and so far, in the Korean media, they have no voice to speak in their defence. Therefore, the international human rights community as well as the international media is challenged to put the spotlight on their pitiable situation.

First of all, we should spread the story of these refugees to the European mainstream and social media. Next, we should make the human rights community in Europe and the

United States aware of this serious problem. Another step would be to inform the European Parliament and Dr. Jan Figel, who is the EU special envoy on FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief). Our colleagues in the USA could inform the US State Department. Last not least, we should make interventions at the UN in Geneva. Although Korea is in many ways economically and culturally dependent on China, they do respect Europe and the United States.

Our organizations, HRWF and FOREF Europe, had positive experiences with regard to religious freedom advocacy in Japan, where members of the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses were kidnapped and incarcerated by anti-cult activists until they recanted their new faith or managed to escape. Once a court sentenced them, they got afraid and stopped their criminal activity. Only such threats could stop those anti-cult and anti-human rights activists in Korea.

About the author

Rosita ŠORYTĖ was born on September 2, 1965 in Lithuania. In 1988, she graduated from the University of Vilnius in French Language and Literature. In 1994, she got her diploma in international relations from the Institut International d'Administration Publique in Paris.

In 1992, Rosita Šorytė joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. She has been posted to the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to UNESCO (Paris, 1994-1996), to the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 1996-1998), and was Minister Counselor at the Permanent Mission of Lithuania to the United Nations in 2014-2017, where she had already worked in 2003-2006. She is currently on a sabbatical. In 2011, she worked as the representative of the Lithuanian Chairmanship of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) at the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (Warsaw). In 2012-2013, she chaired the European Union Working Group on Humanitarian Aid on behalf of the Lithuanian pro tempore presidency of the European Union. As a diplomat, she specialized in disarmament, humanitarian aid and peacekeeping issues, with a special interest in the Middle East and religious persecution and discrimination in the area. She also served in elections observation missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Belarus, Burundi, and Senegal.

Her personal interests, outside of international relations and humanitarian aid, include spirituality, world religions, and art. She takes a special interest in refugees escaping their countries due to religious persecution and is co-founder and President of ORLIR, the International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees. She is the author, inter alia, of "Religious Persecution, Refugees, and Right of Asylum," The Journal of CESNUR, 2(1), 2018, 78-99.

Languages (fluent): Lithuanian, English, French, Russian.

South Korean false demonstrations against the Church of Almighty God refugees end in disgrace

Police intervention stops further false demonstrations by CCP executives and anti-cultists harassing harmless refugees in Korea.

Bitter Winter (05.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2NPBQ9b> - Bitter Winter has reported in the last few days about false "spontaneous demonstrations" organized in South Korea against The Church of Almighty God (CAG) by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) executives who came from China for this purpose, with relatives of CAG asylum seekers they had "persuaded" to join them and local anti-cultists led by pro-Chinese activist Ms. O Myung-ok. For a fortunate coincidence, the Austrian journalist Peter Zoehrer, secretary of FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom Europe), was in Seoul for collecting material about CAG members who suffered torture in China, and was able to document and photograph the events for Bitter Winter.

On September 4, 2018 at 10:00 AM, thanks to the mediation of the police, Ms. O and her colleagues had to allow the CAG members to meet their relatives. As they reported to Peter Zoehrer after the meeting, the CAG members explained to their relatives that it was their own free decision to flee to South Korea, where they can practice their religion openly, because of the Chinese Communist regime's inhumane persecution of the CAG in China, and that they are totally free to come and go as they please. When in turn CAG members asked their relatives questions, for instance, who told them they were held against their will by the CAG, why the relatives came to Korea now, and who brought them there and paid their tickets, and so on, they just dodged the questions.

At the same time, Ms. O kept making trouble outside the premises of the CAG under the pretext of "seeking for relatives." On September 4, 2018, at 1:15 PM, led by Ms. O, about twenty demonstrators drove to the CAG worship building located in Chungcheongbuk-do. They hung up banners along the roadsides in front of the Church building and got ready for another demonstration against the CAG. Simultaneously, KBS and CBS, the two leading Korean media, were also on site to follow up and report the demonstration. Unlike the one in Onsu on September 2, this demonstration was not attended by any Chinese relative of the CAG asylum seekers.

At 1:48 PM, a middle-aged demonstrator (male, in his 50s) jumped onto the rear of a truck and yelled, while some others echoed his shouting with sporadic words (in Korean). During the time, Ms. O walked up to the man and kept whispering to him. Then the man took out a prepared paper and shouted out the texts.

Shortly after the demonstration had begun, others came in a vehicle and joined the demonstrators. The women among them were in headscarves, while the men were of tanned skin. They didn't look like Korean. The police officers asked why they were there, and they answered they were "called to come" but didn't know what to do next. The police told them a demonstration was in progress there and that they'd better leave. They quickly left.

At 1:53 PM, a lawyer representing the CAG went out of the building to remind the demonstrators that they had crossed the legal limitations of their demonstration and trespassed on the premises of the CAG. He requested the demonstrators to move away from their truck that was parked in front of the CAG building together with their banners. The leading demonstrator became hysterical and began to yell. He refused to move the truck under the pretext of not having the key and angrily confronted the lawyer. Having no choice, the CAG members had to call the police to solve the problem.

A few minutes later, the police arrived to deal with those demonstrators and asked them to leave.

At 2:21 PM, Ms. O and her people had to move away from their truck and banners. The demonstrators marched to the west. At that time, only a handful of demonstrators

remained in front of the CAG building and they were scattered along the roadside opposite the CAG premises. The entire demonstration lasted half an hour only and ended in failure.

At 2:50 PM, Peter Zoehrer appeared at the entrance of the Worship Building. KBS, CBS and other TV stations asked to interview him. Ms. O saw the reporters invited by her surround Mr. Zoehrer for the interview, and soon packed up and left. The presence of a foreign journalist was not part of her, or CCP's, plans.

At 3 PM, the reporter and the producer of KBS Cheongju conducted an in-depth interview with Mr. Zoehrer at the security office of Worship Building. The reporter raised questions such as, whether the CAG is persecuted in China, whether CAG members fled to South Korea because of the persecution, and what Mr. Zoehrer knows about the human rights situation of CAG refugees. Mr. Zoehrer explained that nobody can seriously dispute that the CAG is persecuted in China and that its members fled to South Korea to escape persecution. Their families were disrupted, but this was the fault of the CCP rather than of the CAG. When he was asked about how he learned about the persecution of the CAG, Mr. Zoehrer replied that he learned it through his studying the CAG for more than a year. He also mentioned that, during his personal interviews with several CAG members, he found their persecution stories very credible. He also explained that CAG members are preparing affidavits about the abuse and torture they suffered in China. Mr. Zoehrer also mentioned the leaked internal document from CCP published by Bitter Winter on how to conduct demonstration against CAG in South Korea, and how his script was faithfully executed by Ms. O. He added that, as an eyewitness to the events, it was pretty obvious to him that most demonstrators were hired thugs with no knowledge whatsoever of the CAG.

Zoehrer concluded: "The Founding Fathers of the US were European Puritans who went all the way to America because they couldn't have religious freedom in Europe. This is why, especially in America, they never forget the importance of religious freedom. This is no different, CAG members come to South Korea under very difficult circumstances, for the sake of finding freedom, religious freedom, finding their human rights." The entire interview lasted for an hour and a half.

As Supreme Court hearing nears, a conscientious objector's optimism grows

JW.org (24.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2wp7l2p> - In January 2017, Lee Gyo-won, who was 21 years old at the time, stood before a South Korean judge with high hopes and well-chosen words. Mr. Lee aimed to convince the judge that his earnest refusal to perform military service was not a criminal act but a conscientious decision based on a deeply held belief in nonviolence.

Mr. Lee, a member of the Christian community of Jehovah's Witnesses, had little reason for optimism. As he went to trial, 392 Witness conscientious objectors sat in prison with sentences totaling 588 years. Since 1950, over 19,340 of Mr. Lee's fellow believers have been sentenced to a combined total of some 36,800 years in prison because Korean law did not consider their stand as justifiable grounds to refuse military duty.

However, since 2004, judges who were troubled by the practice of routinely jailing objectors declared 90 of them not guilty. For one, Senior Judge Choi Jong-du of the

Busan Appellate Court found that the personal decision to abstain from military service "is based on a strong and genuine 'conscience' formed by their religious conviction."

In June 2018, South Korea's Constitutional Court finally ruled that the Military Service Act must be rewritten to provide conscientious objectors with alternative service options. * But this landmark decision came too late for Mr. Lee. "After exhausting all legal provisions to appeal my case," Mr. Lee explains, "I now find myself in prison at the Daegu Detention Center." He is serving an 18-month sentence.

Mr. Lee joins a legacy of Korean Witness objectors that actually dates back to the days of Japanese rule. When two young Witnesses in Japan went to prison in 1939 for refusing to join the army, colonial authorities rounded up other Witnesses in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea (then known as Chosun). The 38 Witnesses jailed in Korea refused to pay homage to the Japanese emperor and support the war effort. Five of the imprisoned Witnesses died under brutal conditions, most gaining release only with the defeat of Japan in 1945.

The Witnesses' conscientious objection to military service spans more than a century. Based on Bible passages and the model of early Christianity, the Witnesses believe that Christians should abstain from war because they have no right to take human life. Moreover, the Witnesses remain politically neutral since they see themselves as subjects of God's Kingdom, or government.

It was during World War I that the Witnesses (then known as International Bible Students) faced the first serious challenge to their nonviolent ethic. In Britain, about 400 Witnesses refused to heed the mandatory call-up. In World War II, Witnesses in the United States made up the largest group of conscientious objectors in prison, about 4,440 in all.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the Witnesses' depth of conviction is their well-documented history of suffering under the totalitarian Nazi regime. The Nazis executed an estimated 400 Witnesses, the majority for conscientious objection to military service. More than 1,000 other Witnesses died of torture and brutal conditions in camps and prisons for adhering to their faith. They were, according to historian Robert Gerwarth, "the only group in the Third Reich to be persecuted on the basis of their religious beliefs alone."

Korean Witnesses, though, have the distinction of enduring the longest-running prohibition of their stand of conscience. Lee Gyo-won, who lost his father in an accident when Mr. Lee was eight years old, was taught by his mother about the Bible and the importance of following his conscience. "When I understood the purpose for which we were created," says Mr. Lee, "I could not help but love my God, Jehovah. From that moment on, my priority in life had been firmly determined."

Realizing that he would likely end up in prison, Mr. Lee chose a career in interior construction. He planned to be self-employed after serving his sentence, knowing that the stigma of his criminal record would make it hard to find a job.

On his day in court, Mr. Lee recalls, "I eagerly desired to prove that I was not guilty, since it was a sincere decision due to my faith and conscience." He reflected on the early Christians disciples Stephen and Paul, who had eloquently defended their faith while on trial. "I think I spoke twice as well as I had when I practiced," Mr. Lee declared.

On August 30, 2018, South Korea's Supreme Court will hold a public hearing as it considers the Constitutional Court's direction to make provision for conscientious objectors. The highest court's ruling will greatly impact 900 cases currently on hold in various courts. Additionally, 117 Witness objectors, including Mr. Lee, remain in prison, awaiting the outcome of the request for a special pardon by the president of South

Korea. Though Mr. Lee may still be in the Daegu Detention Center on August 30, he will follow the proceedings with great interest.

Despite his court conviction and the dismissal of his appeal, Mr. Lee remains optimistic about the prospects for his fellow believers: "I hope that I will be among the last ones to experience prison life, a prison life that was given to me due to my love of others and, most importantly, my love of God and his principles."

The Constitutional Court declares the law on military service must provide for alternative service

HRWF (29.06.2018) = On 28 June, the Constitutional Court declared a section of Korea's Military Service Act (MSA) unconstitutional, as it does not provide alternative service for conscientious objectors. The landmark ruling is the key to reversing a 65-year-old policy of imprisoning conscientious objectors under the MSA.

Since 1953, over 19,300 Jehovah's Witnesses have been sentenced to a combined total of more than 36,700 years in prison. The Constitutional Court's decision now opens the door for the Supreme Court of Korea to apply this ruling to specific cases involving conscientious objectors. In addition, Korean lawmakers are now obligated to institute alternative service for conscientious objectors by December 31, 2019.

"For many it has been a lifetime wait. Over the past 65 years, young Witnesses have courageously held to their peaceful stand of conscience. We are grateful that the Constitutional Court has now acknowledged the fundamental human right to conscientiously object to participating in war."—David A. Semonian, international spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses at their world headquarters in New York.

"Today's Constitutional Court's decision is a historic breakthrough for the rights of conscientious objectors in South Korea. We now look to the Supreme Court to apply this decision on specific cases involving conscientious objectors later this year. Furthermore, when the Government, as ordered by the Constitutional Court, adopts a law on alternative civilian service, the rights of conscientious objectors in Korea will truly be protected."—André Carbonneau, international human rights lawyer, world headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses. He is available for interviews: acarbon@jw.org or +1 (514) 914-7120

Amnesty International Press Release:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2018/06/south-korea-authorities-stop-criminalizing-conscientious-objectors-after-court-ruling/>

Statistics

- A 2013 Gallup Poll found 68% of South Koreans favor a provision for alternative service, up from 29% in 2008
- In anticipation of a Constitutional Court ruling, the number of convictions has dropped; as of June, 2018, the number of Witness men in prison was 214, a ten-year low
- Over 95% of conscientious objectors imprisoned worldwide are Jehovah's Witnesses
- A 2007 report by Human Rights Without Frontiers documented 18,996 "acts of cruelty" reported by survey respondents
- A 2009 Presidential report blamed the military for the deaths of 5 imprisoned Witness objectors, 1975 to 1985

- Between 2011 and 2012, the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) finds violations of the right to freedom of conscience in 488 cases involving Witness conscientious objectors

Timeline

- 1953 Government imprisons first Witness conscientious objector (CO)
- 1957 Maximum penalty for conscientious objectors raised from one year to three years
- 1973 Maximum penalty raised to 10 years; allows repeated arrest and imprisonment of COs
- 2001 Buddhist peace activist Oh Tae-yang becomes first non-Witness objector
- 2001 Prison stays are reduced from a mandatory 3-year sentence to a year and a half
- 2005 Korea's National Human Rights Commission recommends alternative service
- 2006 UN Human Rights Commission (CCPR) finds Korea in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, recommends eliminating disparities between military and alternative service
- 2011 CCPR recommends provide alternative civilian service, not punitive
- 2012 CCPR recommends expunging criminal records, providing adequate compensation
- 2015 UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) for the fifth time finds South Korea guilty, adding "arbitrary detention" to the list of violations of COs' freedom of thought, conscience, and religion
- 2015 District Court judge contravenes case law and declares three Witness COs not guilty
- 2016 Appeals Court overturns conviction and jail terms of two JW's
- 2017 According to report filed with the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights on March 23, 2017, a total of 806 complaints were filed with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention by Witness men who had served prison terms for refusing to join the military

South Korea courts increasingly seek solutions for conscientious objectors



(Photo credit: jw.org)

JW.org (01.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2I86IPN> - Instead of routinely imprisoning Jehovah's Witnesses who conscientiously object to military service, judges in South Korea are increasingly searching for ways to accommodate their position. Some judges are considering the underlying motive of these men—a conscientious determination, based on Scriptural principles, not to harm others. * Thus, relying on the fundamental right to freedom of conscience, some courts have ruled that these young men are not guilty of evading military service. Since May 2015, trial court judges have rendered 66 "not guilty" decisions in behalf of Witness conscientious objectors—a remarkable increase from the record of only 4 other such decisions in previous decades.

A Persuasive Decision

Most strikingly, on February 1, 2018, a Busan appellate court, while ignoring the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court on this issue, upheld one of these "not guilty" trial decisions. The decision was especially notable for two reasons—the Busan District is conservative, and the presiding judge in this decision, Jong-du Choi, had previously declared a conscientious objector guilty.

The three-judge panel focused on South Korea's constitutional obligation to honor international laws that the nation has ratified—in this case, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Covenant), which recognizes the right to conscientious objection. The court reasoned that "the practice of punishing conscientious objectors by imprisonment contradicts article 18 of the Covenant, so therefore, . . . it is appropriate to interpret that conscientious objection to military service constitutes a 'justifiable ground'" for refusing enlistment. The decision was widely reported and many observers believe that it will positively influence the legal community.

Looking for a Way Forward

In the past, judges sent an average of from 500-600 young men to prison each year on this issue, but now many judges are deferring trial. The number of undecided cases, at this time more than 700, continues to increase as judges anticipate the Constitutional Court's impending decision. As of December 31, 2017, only 267 Witness men were in prison—the lowest number in ten years.

The Constitutional Court will determine whether judges should apply to conscientious objectors the provision in the Military Service Act that punishes evasion of military service or whether the constitutional right to freedom of conscience protects them, in harmony with international standards. Many in South Korea are looking to the Court to find a solution that will dignify young men who can conscientiously accept alternative civilian service in programs that benefit society.

If the Court resolves this issue in favor of conscientious objectors, it would bring South Korea in line with UN Human Rights Committee rulings covering hundreds of individual cases. The Committee has called on South Korea to stop imprisoning conscientious objectors and to respect their fundamental right to freedom of conscience.

Witnesses in South Korea petition the President: Resolve the issue of conscientious objection



A South Korean family of Jehovah's Witnesses participating in the petition campaign (photo credit: jw.org)

JW.org (01.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FtCWxn> - Recent events in South Korea suggest that the government may be considering a major shift with regard to respect for fundamental human rights. On December 7, 2017, South Korea's President Jae-in Moon met with officials from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and asked them to recommend ways for the nation to improve its human rights practices in order to meet the level of international standards. President Moon specifically asked the NHRC to propose solutions that would assist the government to put an end to its policy of imprisoning men who conscientiously object to military service.

After the highly publicized meeting, Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea organized a campaign to collect signatures on petitions addressed to the president. The government's policy of punishing conscientious objectors with imprisonment has deeply affected generations of Witnesses. Since President Moon has directed his administration to respond to petitions from the country's citizens, the petitions request the president's help to find a solution to the problem that conscientious objectors have faced for some 70 years.



The national office of Jehovah's Witnesses organized the petitions (photo credit: jw.org)

Within four weeks of the start of the campaign, the petitions were completed. Those signing the petitions included over 14,000 of the men who have been criminally punished as conscientious objectors and more than 26,000 of family members who have suffered because of the men's criminal convictions and imprisonment.



Petitions submitted to the Office of the President, January 15, 2018 (photo credit: jw.org)

On January 15, 2018, 6 representatives of the 41,275 Witnesses who signed the petitions presented them to the Office of the President. The petitions expressed gratitude for the president's interest in the issue, highlighted the negative effects of the 70 years of punishing conscientious objectors with imprisonment, and emphasized the benefits to the nation of resolving the issue. On January 16, 2018, the Office of the President forwarded the petitions to the Ministry of National Defense for its consideration.

As the petitions were being prepared, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses also met with NHRC officials. They explained the Scriptural reasons why Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to serve in the military. If offered alternative civilian service, the young Witness men who enroll in the program would not sit idle in prison but would be a useful resource for the government and would serve for the benefit of the country. The officials told the Witnesses that addressing the issue of conscientious objection to military service is a top human rights priority for the NHRC in 2018.

The number of conscientious objectors imprisoned in South Korea is far more than the number who are imprisoned in all other countries combined. As officials reconsider the government's long-standing policy on the issue, Jehovah's Witnesses hope that this new initiative will eventually bring to an end the many years—now more than 36,700—that young Witness men have collectively spent in prison for refusing to perform military service.

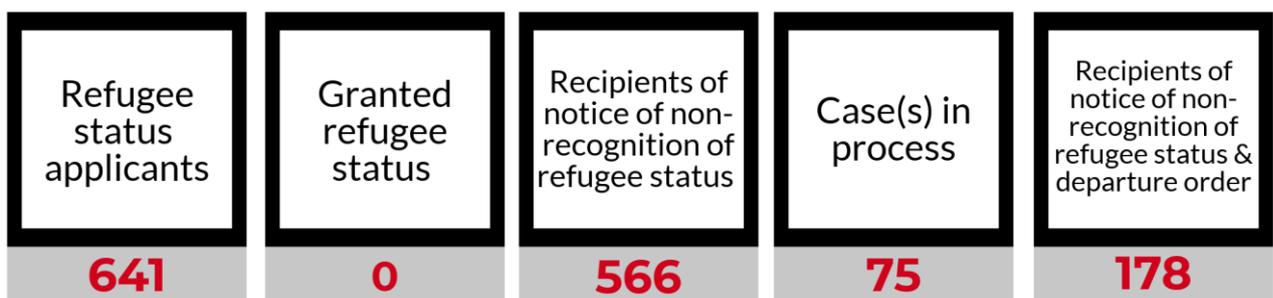
Over 600 refugees of the Church of Almighty God persecuted in China threatened to be sent back by South Korea

178 have already received a departure order; arrest, imprisonment and torture are awaiting them

HRWF (18.01.2018) - Seoul has seemingly decided to deport over six hundred Chinese members of the Church of Almighty God seeking a safe haven in South Korea, despite the fact that there is a high risk for them to be arrested, detained, and tortured in China.

Up until now, none of the applicants have been granted asylum, whereas 178 have received a departure order.

Data from South Korea, as of 14 January 2018:



How have these individuals suffered upon their return to China?

All listed names are aliases.

Ms. DanChun was arrested by the Chinese police in Fuling, Chongqing, China on 1 March 2013 and was tortured during interrogation in the Fuling Detention Center.

Ms. YouXin was reported and arrested by Chinese police when preaching the gospel and kept in custody at a police station in Hang Zhou, China on December 13, 2012. After being bailed out by the president of her college, she had been kept under surveillance and unable to live a normal life, so she was forced to drop out of school, leave home and live in exile. The Chinese police officers went to her house twice for her whereabouts in June and September 2013 respectively and have been monitoring her mother.

Mr. Liu Yang was arrested and interrogated by the Chinese police in Feixi County, Anhui Province, China when preaching the gospel on 12 December 2012, and was detained for 15 days on the charge of "disturbing the social order."

Ms. Li Chunlian was arrested by the Chinese police officers from Huichun City Police Station on her way home on 1 June 2005, she was then interrogated under CCP's Kangaroo Court, tortured and sentenced to one year of re-education through labor, which leads to her lifetime physical disability.

Mr. XiangXin was arrested by the Chinese police in Guangyuan City, Sichuan Province, China when preaching the gospel in July 2004, he was tortured for a month and kept in custody for 15 days on the charge of "disturbing the social order" later on.

Mr. Xu Zhigang was tortured after being arrested by police officers from the National Security Brigade of Yanji City, Jilin Province, China when preaching the gospel on 29 July 2002, and was then sentenced to three years of re-education through labor on charge of "attending illegal meetings and disturbing the social order" without a public judicial process.

If CAG members are deported back to China, their arrest is imminent, which is coupled with the strong possibility of subsequent torture, and sometimes even death.

Three members of the Church of Almighty God were immediately arrested upon their return to China from South Korea.

Mr. Li ZhenYuan was arrested by police officers once he went through the security check at Yanji Airport in China on May 18, 2015.

Mr. Han Feng returned to China seeking medical treatment for his serious heart disease complications in March 2017. He had been monitored for two months before being arrested by the police in Hubei Province when he showed his ID document during a standard procedure. He was detained and 'brainwashed' for a span of two months before being released. Since his release, he remains under police surveillance.

Ms. Yan Ru was immediately arrested by the Chinese police upon her return to China from the Church of Almighty God in South Korea on June 2017.

***Human Rights Without Frontiers* has gathered numerous testimonies of arrest and torture from members of the Church of Almighty God in China. Additional testimonies prove that asylum seekers who are ultimately denied asylum status and deported back to China face a high risk of arrest, detention, and torture.**

***Human Rights Without Frontiers* urges the member states of the European Union & South Korea to grant political asylum to members of the Church of Almighty God who have fled from China in search of a safe haven.**
