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## **Over 600% increase in hate speech and crimes against Jehovah's Witnesses**

World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses (25.04.2024) - Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan are experiencing a 638% increase in hate speech and hate crimes compared to the previous six years. This spike is a direct consequence of the Japanese government publicly assaulting the character of Jehovah's Witnesses, asserting that parents teaching their religious beliefs to their children is tantamount to abuse. There is great concern that on Friday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, the situation will further escalate as the Japanese government is slated to release the results of its so-called investigation into the Witnesses' family lives.

According to experts, the Japanese government has outlined arbitrary child protection standards that violate the freedoms of religious minorities much in the same way Russia has misused its anti-extremism laws. Additionally, experts see the situation as potentially problematic for other faiths, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. (*See details below*)

### ***What started it all?***

On December 27, 2022, Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) released the "Q&A on Responses to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs" (Q&A Guidelines). This set off a wave of disinformation against Jehovah's Witnesses in the media, as well as a barrage of hate speech and hate crimes. In some cases, the perpetrators referred to the Q&A Guidelines to justify their hate speech or acts of aggression.

By means of an access to information request, we confirmed that the Q&A Guidelines were created by the MHLW in just 18 days (December 5-23, 2022), in closed-door meetings with anti-cult organizations internationally known for targeting minority religions, and without any independent expert review or public consultation. It is widely understood by both the public and scholars that Jehovah's Witnesses are a main target of the Q&A Guidelines. This, despite the fact that in the more than 96 years that Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Japan, there has not been one case, anywhere in Japan, in which our beliefs and practices have been found to be unlawful or harmful.

### ***Hate speech and hate crimes***

In 2023, Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan were the victims of hundreds of acts of online hate speech and innumerable acts of discrimination and intolerance at their places of work, at school, and in their neighborhoods. The following are a few recent examples:

- February 9 and 14, 2024. Letters threatening the mass murder of Jehovah's Witnesses were left at their places of worship in Hyogo Ward and Kita Ward, Kobe

- February 11, 2024. An elderly female Witness was violently attacked in Yachiyo City, Chiba. The assailant kicked her down a flight of stairs and then grabbed her by the hair and continued to fiercely kick her in the stomach
- December 21, 2023. Two female Witnesses were violently assaulted while peacefully sharing in their religious evangelism on a public street in Kita Ward, Tokyo

### ***Experts explain the problem with the guidelines***

Leading national and international experts agree that the Q&A Guidelines are a “brazen” violation of the Constitution and international law. Full-text opinions from the below experts and others can be accessed using this [link](#). See section 2.)

#### **Hideki Shibutani, Professor Emeritus of Constitutional Law at the Rikkyo University, Tokyo**

“This is an insult to religious pluralism and to the hundreds of thousands of families belonging to minority religions in Japan, and it violates the government’s obligation of religious neutrality, impartiality, and tolerance that constitute the principle of separation of religion from politics as set forth in Article 20 of the Constitution. It would also result in prohibiting children belonging to religious minorities such as Judaism, Sikhism and Islam from wearing clothing or religious adornments that indicate their affiliation with these religions (and prohibiting certain Christian children from wearing crosses or other items associated with Christianity).”

“[T]he Government of Japan must immediately stop using the ‘Q&A’ document and have it reviewed by experts independent from the Government. Doing so is essential to ensure that the guarantees in Articles 14, 19, 20 and 26 of the Constitution are fulfilled, to fulfil the obligations imposed on the Government of Japan under the ICCPR and the CRC, and to determine whether the ‘Q&A’ document should be revised, possibly completely revised, or withdrawn.”

#### **Jean Zermatten, Professor of Children’s Rights and International Law, University of Geneva (Switzerland), and former member (2005–2013) and president (2011–2013) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**

“The fact of limiting the [Q&A Guidelines] document to children who profess a religious belief and have parents who have provided them with a religious education could constitute discrimination against this group of children, but also against their parents.”

"[The] unqualified approach [of the Q&A Guideline] seems to me dangerous, as it could lead to an extension of the offences contained in the Child Abuse and Prevention Act, by introducing new notions such as religious education being harmful, or that certain common religious practices which may constitute an offence or offences."

"[T]he State's action seems disproportionate, as it does not respond, as far as I know, to any eminent danger to children of religious belief, and there is nothing to demonstrate, on the contrary, that this group of children is particularly at risk."

**Frank S. Ravitch, Professor of Law, Walter H. Stowers Chair in Law & Religion, and Director of Kyoto Japan Program, Michigan State University College of Law (USA)**

"The irony of this... is that it would make the parenting of children by almost every Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, and Sikh parent abuse under Japanese law, while allowing parents who force their children to go to cram schools from a very young age."pan on this issue and as a scholar and person with a deep connection to, and profound respect for, Japan, it is my hope that the MHLW will rise above the stereotypes and legal violations in the Q&A guidelines and amend the answers ... By doing so, MHLW can carry out its essential mission to protect children while not causing Japan to join the likes of Russia as a violator of human rights and religious freedom."

**Massimo Introvigne, Professor Emeritus of Sociology of Religions, Pontifical Salesian University, Torino (Italy), and Holly Folk, Professor in Religious Studies, Western Washington (USA)** [addressing the Q&A Guidelines and two "reports" by anti-cult groups against Jehovah's Witnesses]

"While the guidelines claim to protect the freedom of children to refuse their parents' religion, in fact they put at risk both their freedom to embrace and practice it and the parents' right to educate them in their religion specifically protected by Article 18 [paragraph] 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The guidelines contain numerous provisions that declare as 'child abuse' normal parental decision-making that many would consider to be beneficial or certainly not harmful. Applied literally, the guidelines would outlaw practices of many Christian churches, as well as practices of Islam and Judaism."

The reports are premised on "an unprecedented interpretation of religious freedom, one which eradicates the right of parents to pass their faith tradition on to their children ... There is not a democratic country in the world that has this understanding of religious freedom."

**Associate Professor Seigi Shibata, Hanan University (Osaka), an expert in religious freedom issues, and attorney Minori Morimoto (Tokyo), an expert in family law**

"In Russia, ... 'counter-extremism' measures have been used to suppress groups or individuals with views differing from those of the government ... Similarly, the current 'Q&A' concept of 'child abuse' may similarly violate the basic human rights of groups or individuals ... under the pretext of 'addressing abuse'."

Additionally, in response to the criticism Jehovah's Witnesses have received in Japan over the past year, an independent research team conducted the largest-ever quantitative study on Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan, surveying over 7,600 participants. The preliminary

findings were released in January 2024. An academic advisory committee of international scholars reviewed the research design, examined the data for validity, and approved the summary report. You can access the summary using this [link](#).

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