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The state's crackdown on the Unification Church denounced in Geneva

Patricia Duval, an international human rights lawyer, presented her report on September 25th during a Special Briefing held on the sidelines of the 57th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva



Mrs. Patricia Duval, International Human Rights Lawyer presenting her report in Geneva (Photo: FOREF)

[FOREF](#) (10.10.2024) - Good morning, everyone. The situation in Japan is alarming, and I will provide a brief overview of the key issues. My report, ****The Witch Hunt to Eradicate the Unification Church in Japan****, may sound dramatic, but it reflects the severity of the current circumstances, with the repressive apparatus deployed by the Japanese authorities, especially in the wake of Prime Minister Abe's assassination in 2022.

Ten years ago, we presented a [Report to the UN on the “deprogramming” of Unification Church members](#), that is to say cases of abduction, confinement, and enforced de-conversion aimed at making individuals recant their faith.

In 2013, on behalf of the **Victims Association**, we documented numerous cases, which led the [UN Human Rights Committee](#) to recommend that Japan put an end to these practices. However, “deprogramming” has since continued in more covert forms, now coupled with widespread efforts to eliminate the **Unification Church** from Japan’s religious landscape.

Former members, coerced into leaving the Church, have been induced to file lawsuits seeking damages to prove their apostasy, resulting in a surge of cases orchestrated by an **anti-Unification Church Lawyers association**. This association, motivated by financial incentives and ideological opposition—many of its members aligning with Communist and atheistic beliefs—has been instrumental in inciting de-converted members to sue the Church.

In 2022, following the **assassination of Prime Minister Abe**, this network of lawyers falsely attributed blame to the Unification Church. The assassin, the son of a Church member, blamed the Church for his personal misfortunes and used Abe’s occasional supportive gestures toward Unification Church peacebuilding activities as a pretext for his crime. Rather than focusing on the assassin, the media—driven by this lawyers’ network—launched a massive campaign against the Church, labeling it antisocial and malevolent. Under intense public pressure, the Government has since requested the dissolution of the Unification Church—a drastic and unprecedented step.

The Government’s dissolution request is based on 32 tort cases, primarily involving de-converted members, alleging undue influence in soliciting donations. The Courts, influenced by these anti-Church lawyers, have ruled against the Church, accusing it of violating “social norms” through so-called mental manipulation. However, under international human rights law, particularly **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, religious beliefs—including those held by minority groups facing hostility—are protected, and States are obligated to remain neutral and maintain diversity whatever social norms might be in religious matters.

Japan has repeatedly ignored the UN Human Rights Committee’s recommendations to cease using “**public welfare**” as a pretext for limiting freedom of religion, and now seeks to dissolve the Unification Church based on this flawed justification. The dissolution request is currently before the **Tokyo District Court**, with hearings scheduled for December this year.

In addition to the dissolution request, two new laws enacted in 2022 and 2023 specifically target the Church. These laws impose arbitrary restrictions by repressing the “**unjust solicitation**” of donations, i.e. by infringing the free will of donors through mental manipulation, a provision only applied to the Unification Church. It also empowers family members—rather than the Church members themselves—to challenge donations. This undermines the right of individuals to make autonomous religious decisions. The laws also provide financial support for lawsuits against the Church, further eroding the principle of State neutrality in religious affairs.

Moreover, the **Government has introduced measures to “re-educate” second-generation Unification Church members**. These include briefings by counsellors trained by Unification Church apostates and the distribution of SOS letters to children, encouraging them to report any issues related to their parents’ faith. This blatant violation of parental rights—specifically, the right to educate one’s children in one’s own faith—amounts to a new form of “deprogramming”.

Given these serious violations of human rights, we call on the UN and the international community to take immediate action. I have provided a detailed report and am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Patricia Duval is an Attorney and member of the Paris Bar in France. She has a degree in public law from La Sorbonne University and specializes in international human rights law. She has defended the rights of minorities of religion or belief in European and international fora such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Union and the United Nations Human Rights Committee. She has also published a number of papers and articles which contain critical legal analysis of draft legislation and final laws on religion and religious minorities, and the role of the State in religious matters, such as "Anti-sect Movements and State Neutrality" (Journal for the Study of Beliefs and Worldviews, Dresden Technical University, 2012).

HRWF Footnote: More reading

[The Bordeaux Videos: Spotlight on the Unification Church and Japan's Religious Liberty Crisis](#) (4 October 2024)

Series of reports by Bitter Winter

[Japan and the Unification Church: The Duval Report. 1. Organized Tort Cases](#) (26 September 2024)

[Japan and the Unification Church: The Duval Report. 2. Abe's Assassination and Media Blitz](#) (27 September 2024)

[Japan and the Unification Church: The Duval Report. 3. Violation of Japan's International Commitments](#) (28.09.2024)

[Japan and the Unification Church: The Duval Report. 4. Enactment of New Laws](#) (30 September 2024)

[Japan and the Unification Church: The Duval Report. 5. State-Sponsored Deprogramming](#) (1 October 2024)



United Nations denounce discrimination and hate crimes against Jehovah's Witnesses and others

For the first time, an official UN document signed by four Special Rapporteurs acknowledges the existence of a major religious liberty crisis in the country.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (04.07.2024) - A letter to the government of Japan by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea; Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Farida Shaheed; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan; and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, dated April 30, 2024, has now [been made public](#). As the letter explains, it is the Special Rapporteurs' normal practice to publish such statements 60 days after they are communicated to the respondent Government for its comment.

The statement refers to the controversial "Q&A on Responses to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs, etc." released by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare on December 27, 2022 (a [full translation](#) was published in "The Journal of CESNUR"). The Q&A are part of a set of laws, guidelines, and administrative regulations issued after the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The politician was killed by a man who intended to punish him for his cooperation with the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, which the assassin blamed for the fact that in 2002 his mother had gone bankrupt, allegedly because of her excessive donations to the religious movement. A campaign against "cults" followed, of which the Q&A are one of the by-products.

As the UN statement notes, "the Q&A Guidelines were developed against the background of increased scrutiny and stigmatization of some religious or belief minorities following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 8 July 2022," and were prepared in cooperation with private anti-cult organizations. "The Guidelines were drafted in consultation with the Japanese Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (JSCPR), whose Chairperson called for the recognition of a new type of child abuse by religious groups in October 2022, and had previously made public statements denigrating the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious or belief minorities."

The statement goes on to comment that, "While the Jehovah's Witnesses are not mentioned in the Q&A Guidelines as such, their practice and activities appear to be targeted by the new policy. Neither the Jehovah's Witnesses nor any other religious or belief minority were consulted during the preparation of the Q&A Guidelines, despite the sensitivity of the context and the fact that the Q&A Guidelines concern all religion or belief communities. While the Jehovah's Witnesses had repeatedly sought a meeting with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, none was granted until the Q&A."

The four Rapporteurs rightly observe that the Q&A are based on a problematic notion of child abuse that "may occur with the background of religious beliefs," and note that "several parts of the guidelines appear to set a lower threshold for the establishment of abuse in religious as opposed to non-religious contexts." In other words, the Q&A regard as abusive pressures by parents to persuade children to participate in religious services but not to attend, for example, sport training or music or dance classes. They deem abusive parents who object to their children's participation in certain forms of entertainment based on religious motivations, but not other parents whose objections may be political or cultural. They state that children should not be asked to wear signs identifying their

religion, but there are no similar provisions for signs expressing support for political, artistic, or sport organizations.

"Several of the guidelines," the statement adds, "make vague references to deviations from 'social conventions,' 'social appropriateness,' or 'socially accepted norms,' as the basis for establishing potential forms of abuse, thereby limiting the diversity of manifestations of religion or belief which are inherent to its free exercise." The Rapporteurs remind Japan that states cannot prevent their citizens to adopt and transmit to their children a lifestyle and customs different from those of the majority, outside of the rare cases when state intervention is justified by "necessity and proportionality."

As "[Bitter Winter](#)" reported, the Q&A had the immediate effect of generating a climate of discrimination and hate against the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities. "The release of the Q&A Guidelines was accompanied by significant media coverage, some of which accused religious or belief minorities including the Jehovah's Witnesses of being guilty of child abuse. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported a 638% increase in hate crimes in 2023 as compared to the previous six years... Reported incidents included a violent physical assault of an elderly Jehovah's Witness in Yachiyo City, Chiba, on 11 February 2024. The same month, letters threatening the mass murder of Jehovah's Witnesses were left at their places of worship in Hyogo Ward and Kita Ward, Kobe City. These concerning developments were accompanied by an increase in online and offline hate speech and incitement to discrimination and violence, some of which directly referenced the Q&A Guidelines." The Q&A were also at the origins of investigations into the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the distribution of pamphlets in schools "against a background of heightened stigma and negative attitudes towards religious or belief minorities in Japan." All this, the Rapporteurs said, "may constitute a violation of the principles of neutrality and non-discrimination, as well as potentially contributing to further stigmatization and suspicion of religious or belief minorities." They are also "concerned that in the context of heightened suspicion of religious or belief minorities, the Q&A Guidelines in their current form may facilitate stigma, social pressure, or bullying of children belonging to religion or belief communities," as well as "an increase in hate crimes and instances of hate speech and incitement of hatred, discrimination and violence" against the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups.

The Rapporteurs asked Japan to respect its international human rights and freedom of religion or belief obligations and immediately take measures to prevent discrimination and hate crimes. The statement notes that the information the United Nations have received about Japan "is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations."

The Japanese government did submit [a very weak response](#) to the statement on June 27. It claims that the Guidelines also apply to non-religious abuse of children, which is false, as the very title and the introduction explicitly state the contrary. It defends its methodology based on a "survey" and "consultations" with relevant "parties," but those interviewed and consulted were either anti-cultists or apostate ex-members selected by the anti-cultists. The "survey" was also designed and administered by anti-cultists and based on obviously leading questions. The Japanese government also states that it was never its intention to incite violence against the Jehovah's Witnesses and other minorities. This may well be true, but any scholar of discrimination might have told it in advance that publicly demonizing and slandering minorities unavoidably generates violence.

The United Nations statement a very important document and a breakthrough in the post-Abe-assassination situation of religious minorities stigmatized as "cults" in Japan. For the first time, a high international body acknowledges that Japan is going through a major religious liberty crisis, and one "warranting immediate attention."

About the killing of PM Shinzo Abe : a press conference in France

Press release of a delegation of the Universal Peace Federation

Version en français [ICI](#)

FFWPU (15.06.2024) – A delegation from the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) Japan has traveled to France to highlight the ongoing crisis of religious freedom in Japan. FFWPU-President Tomihiro Tanaka sent a compelling video message to support the initiative. The press conference, organized by the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), an NGO in general consultative status with the UN ECOSOC, was held at the UPF France office in Paris. The event brought to light the severe social, political, and legal challenges facing the organization.

Address of President Tomihiro Tanaka

In his address, President Tomihiro Tanaka expressed his deep respect for Europe's historical journey toward achieving religious freedom, which is protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. He regrettably reported on the escalating violations of religious freedom in Japan, where the FFWPU has faced significant persecution. The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formerly known as the Unification Church, was founded in Korea in 1954 by the renowned religious leader Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon. The movement has experienced substantial growth, particularly since its establishment in Japan in 1958.

Historical Context and Challenges

President Tanaka detailed the difficult history of FFWPU in Japan, including the illegal abduction and coercion of members by various groups opposed to their beliefs. He emphasized that despite these challenges, the organization has remained committed to its mission of promoting global peace and mutual understanding. The FFWPU has a long-standing history of advocating for freedom, with a membership that has grown to over 600,000 in Japan.

Impact of Shinzo Abe's Assassination

The assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, which the media linked to the FFWPU due to the assailant's alleged grudge against the organization, has significantly worsened the persecution. President Tanaka explained that, following the assassination, media attacks against FFWPU members intensified, leading to widespread discrimination. Members have faced difficulties in renting properties, finding employment, and maintaining their livelihoods.

Government Actions and Legal Proceedings

In October 2022, Prime Minister Kishida's administration escalated the government's campaign against the FFWPU by altering legal interpretations to facilitate the organization's dissolution. A formal request for the dissolution order was made to the court in October 2023, with hearings commencing in February 2024. President Tanaka warned that such an order would represent a major setback for religious freedom in Japan, potentially increasing state control over all religious activities.

Legal Perspective from Nakayama

Nakayama, a lawyer advising the FFWPU, provided a comprehensive legal analysis of the situation. He emphasized that the dissolution of a religious corporation in Japan requires evidence of extreme harm to public welfare, typically through criminal activity. Nakayama pointed out that in its 60-year history in Japan, the FFWPU has committed no crimes. He also highlighted the human rights violations inherent in deprogramming efforts, where members are forcibly kidnapped and coerced into renouncing their faith.

Human Rights Violations and Deprogramming

Nakayama shed light on the issue of deprogramming in Japan, where over 4,300 members have been victims of abduction and forced deconversion. These human rights abuses, often underreported, have led to significant psychological and physical harm. Nakayama argued that many civil lawsuits against the FFWPU are driven by deprogramming victims coerced into legal action, undermining the legitimacy of claims used to justify the dissolution.

Call for International Attention

Nakayama called for international attention and support to safeguard religious freedom in Japan. Despite intense political pressure, he stressed the importance of upholding justice and preventing the unjust dissolution of the FFWPU based on coerced and unfounded allegations.

Testimony from Moriko Hori

Moriko Hori, President of the Women's Federation for World Peace in Japan and a second-generation FFWPU believer, provided a heartfelt testimony. She detailed the global humanitarian efforts of the Women's Federation, an NGO with General Consultative Status with ECOSOC at the UN. Since its founding in 1992 by Rev. Sun Myung Moon and Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the Federation has empowered women and children in over 100 countries through international cooperation projects.

WFWP's Humanitarian Efforts and Persecution

Mrs. Hori began by detailing the organization's extensive work. Since its inception, WFWP has supported over 400,000 women and children through various projects, stabilizing families in developing countries. However, after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Women's Federation of Japan, who shared the same founders with the FFWPU, faced intense persecution. Hori recounted a specific incident in November 2022, where Communist Party Parliamentarian Keiji Kokuta attacked the Foreign Ministry for awarding Mrs. Akiko Hozan, a school chairwoman in Mozambique, the prestigious Foreign Minister's Award. The Foreign Ministry, succumbing to political pressure, revoked the award. This decision, driven by fear of further attacks, damaged the federation's reputation and led to the loss of 2,000 paying members, jeopardizing the lives of 20,000 beneficiaries of their projects.

Loss of Critical Projects

One of the federation's flagship projects, the JAMOO vocational school, aimed at empowering women to achieve economic independence, has seen significant success. Recognized by the UN in 2008 as one of "the Best Practices," this project, along with others, faced severe setbacks due to government interference. Hori narrated how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under political pressure, conducted investigations and demanded the

removal of all traces of the WFWP from their projects, even causing the resignation and illness of key personnel.

"We've been fighting to change the situation and restore our dignity, but we realized that we cannot do this alone. We need to build allies with other religious entities who are also suffering from persecution. We have been the 'Silent Majority'. We need to become the 'Noisy Minority' together," said Mrs. Hori.

Broader Impact and Legal Struggles

The persecution extended beyond organizational setbacks to personal attacks on members. Maria Colleter, a second-generation believer in the Unification Church, shared her harrowing experiences at university. Despite their community service efforts through the CARP student association, Maria and her peers faced defamatory campaigns and institutional discrimination. This culminated in legal battles, where Maria's rights to religious freedom were defended in court, setting a precedent against such discrimination.

Urgent Call for International Support

The testimonies emphasized the dire need for international intervention and solidarity among religious entities. Hori and Maria both stressed that the fight for religious freedom and human dignity cannot be won in isolation. They urged other religious organizations and the international community to stand against the rising tide of religious intolerance and discrimination in Japan.

Conclusion

The testimonies presented in Paris paint a grim picture of the current state of religious freedom in Japan. The Japanese delegation's message is clear: the international community must act to protect the fundamental rights of religious organizations and their members. The struggle of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, alongside the Women's Federation for World Peace, exemplifies a broader battle between secularism and spiritualism, materialism and morality. Upholding these values is essential for a just and free society.

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Hate crimes epidemic against Jehovah's Witnesses. Who is responsible?

Documents prove that private anti-cult organizations had a key role in the creation of government documents that caused a surge of hate speech and violence.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (05.06.2024) - In June 2023, while peacefully engaging in preaching, a female Jehovah's Witness in her 70s was assaulted by a 57-year-old man. He violently kicked her in the stomach and pushed her down concrete stairs, causing her to suffer, among other bodily injuries, a fracture in the right arm, requiring a long recovery. In February 2024, two female Jehovah's Witnesses were visiting a housing complex when a man in his thirties verbally assaulted them. When they tried to leave, he said, "Don't run away. Wait!" He kicked one of the women in the stomach, causing her to fall down the stairs. He then descended the stairs, grabbed her by the hair, and continued to kick her.

These incidents did not happen in Russia or one of the other non-democratic states where Jehovah's Witnesses are routinely persecuted. They took place in a democratic country we used to consider as respectful of human rights and religious liberty, Japan.

They were not isolated. On December 21, 2023, two female Jehovah's Witnesses were violently assaulted while evangelizing in Kita Ward, Tokyo. On 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 City. In addition, the Japanese Jehovah's Witnesses reported 62 cases of hate speech in 2023 between the end of February and the end of November.

What exactly is going on in Japan? Opposition to the Jehovah's Witnesses and to other minority religions manifested itself since the past century, and in Japan there are "anti-cult" organizations with regular contacts with their counterparts in Europe. However, the current wave of discrimination and violence started with the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Nara on July 8, 2022. Abe, although not a member, had supported initiatives of organizations connected with the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. His assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, claimed he wanted to punish him for this support. He reported he hated the Unification Church since his mother went bankrupt in 2002, allegedly because of her excessive donations to the movement, of which she remains a member.

Rather than blaming the assassin, or the anti-cult campaigns that might have contributed to his decision to commit the crime twenty years after his mother's bankruptcy, Japanese media launched a crusade against the Unification Church. It quickly extended to other groups stigmatized as "cults," including the Jehovah's Witnesses—who obviously had nothing to do with the Abe assassination. The well-organized Japanese anti-cult movement saw in the incident a golden opportunity to achieve its aim of having laws and regulations against the "cults" passed in Japan. Its positions dominated the media and exerted a strong pressure on the government.

As a result, not only the government filed a court case seeking the dissolution of the Unification Church/Family Federation, but new laws and regulations were passed on donations and on the so-called "religious child abuse." Directives aimed at contrasting the latter phenomenon, in the form of Questions and Answers (Q&A) Guidelines, were released by the Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) on December 23, 2022. [As "Bitter Winter" reported](#), they targeted a wide range of educational practices by conservative religion in general, from teaching children that those who commit serious sins and do not repent may go to hell to preventing them from watching cartoons and reading comics their parents regard as immoral, and counseling minor daughters against abortion. Some provisions targeted specifically the Jehovah's Witnesses without naming them. They mentioned, for example, not celebrating birthdays and other festivities and refusing blood transfusions, which are practices typical of the Jehovah's Witnesses and not found among

the other groups singled out by the anti-cult campaigns. In addition, in November 2023, the Jehovah's Witnesses were slandered by two reports produced by anti-cult groups for allegedly violating the Q&A Guidelines.

The combined effect of the anti-cult reports and the Q&A Guidelines determined a 638% increase of incidents of hate speech and violence against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan in 2023 with respect to 2022. This is a national human rights and freedom of religion or belief crisis, considering that there are more than 214,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan, with more than 310,000 attending their religious services. All are affected, directly or indirectly, by the surge in hate speech and hate crimes.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have now released the submission to the Japanese government they filed in March 2024, which includes expert opinions by several scholars (one of whom is the undersigned). The submission also reveals a crucial and extremely disturbing circumstance. The Jehovah's Witnesses through a legal request obtained disclosure from the Children and Families Agency (CFA) about the creation of the Q&A Guidelines. The documents revealed that the initiative leading to the Guidelines came from private anti-cult organizations, which were also involved in creating their content.

On October 12, 2022, Kimiaki Nishida, the Chairman of the Japan Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (JSCPR), known as a vitriolic critic of the Jehovah's Witnesses, submitted an application to the Government, requesting that it recognize "a new type of child abuse" of "second generation children" by "cult-like groups." On October 27, 2022, representatives of another anti-cult group submitted to each political party a request similar to the one made by JSCPR. On October 28, 2022, Nishida and his supporters held a press conference announcing the filing of their application with the Government. That same day, they met with MHLW representatives, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On October 31, 2022, as he confirmed in a press conference held the following day, the Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Katsunobu Kato, instructed his ministry to prepare a Q&A document on "child abuse" by minority religions. On December 5, 2022, the MHLW held the first of several closed-door meetings with Nishida and other anti-cultists to prepare the Q&A Guidelines. On December 20, 2022, the last such closed-door meeting was held and on December 23, 2022, the final draft of the Q&A Guidelines was approved.

It thus appears that the MHLW and the Japanese government acted as the secular arm of the anti-cult organizations and were guided by the latter in drafting guidelines aimed at harassing religious minorities.

The information the anti-cultists supplied to the government was largely false. In January 2024, an independent research team conducted the largest-ever quantitative study on Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan. Five international scholars, serving as advisers, reviewed the study design and the research findings. Anti-cultists had told the government that the Jehovah's Witnesses systematically prevent their children from attending higher education institutions. The research proved that, on average, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan have higher education levels compared with the general population. "For the Jehovah's Witness sample population (age 18 to 110 years): (1) 95.1% continued schooling beyond compulsory education, compared with 68.9% for the general population, (2) 58.4% graduated from high school, compared with 35% for the general population, and (3) 36.7% completed postsecondary education, compared with 33% for the general population." All other indicators confirmed that the education and the care for the well-being of children in Japanese Jehovah's Witnesses family is above average. The claim that Jehovah's Witnesses

do not report to secular authorities cases of sexual abuse of children within their community is also false.

The same survey evidenced that almost 95% of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan had seen media coverage that they believed misrepresented their community. Over five hundred respondents (out of 7,193) reported having been insulted, 63 were denied employment, and 54 were threatened or attacked.

The anti-cult organizations that spread fake news through the media and incited the government to enact regulations in obvious contrast with freedom of religion or belief are the main responsible of the increase in hate crimes against a peaceful community. The Japanese government, however, is not innocent. For political reasons and driven by opinion polls and the media, it accepted the claims of the anti-cultists about the Jehovah's Witnesses and ignored the findings of an international scholarly literature that has proved them false.

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 26th, 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, Former Professor (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](#).
