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Protests grow over deportations of Falun Gong practitioners

The Wall Street Journal (20.09.2011) / HRWF (26.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - South Korea - Chinese Falun Gong practitioners who want to escape persecution at home are learning that South Korea is not a country where they can seek refuge.

South Korea since 2009 has deported 10 Falun Gong practitioners back to China after courts here refused to grant them refugee status and asylum. Some of them haven't been heard from since their return to China, according to other Chinese asylum-seekers in South Korea and human rights organizations.

South Korea has denied asylum to more than 40 other Chinese Falun Gong practitioners. It's unclear whether South Korea has granted refugee status to anyone associated with Falun Gong, a spiritual movement that began in China about 20 years but that alarmed Chinese authorities in the 1990s because of its size and independence from the government. The Chinese leadership officially banned it in 1999 and began to imprison practitioners.

On Sept. 6, Seoul police and South Korean immigration authorities arrested Jin Jingzhe, 26 years old, and his wife Ma Yue. The couple arrived in South Korea from China in 2008. Mr. Jin, who practices Falun Gong, sought asylum but was denied. He's now being held in a detention center in Suwon and could be deported any day. His wife was freed.

Representatives at the Immigration Department and Justice Ministry said they couldn't discuss Mr. Jin's case.

Supporters of Mr. Jin have marshaled letters from human rights groups, 23 members of the U.S. Congress and the vice president of the European Parliament to President Lee Myung-bak urging him to intercede in Mr. Jin's case. In one such letter, Terri Marsh of the Human Rights Law Foundation in Washington wrote, "It is a certainty that Mr. Jin will be subject to torture if he is returned to China."

Reached by phone at the Hwaseong Fortress Foreigners' Detention Center, Mr. Jin said he was fine but declined to discuss the situation. He referred questions to his legal

advisor, Oh Se-yeol, who also a spokesman for the Korea Falun Dafa Association, which is the local chapter of the organization.

Mr. Oh said he may ask Justice Minister Kwon Jae-jin to grant a humanitarian stay of the immigration court's rejection of asylum status.

"At this stage, filing an objection is the only option," Mr. Oh said. "If it is rejected again, Jin might be repatriated. The possibility would sharply rise."

He added, "We hope the public will recognize the urgent situation of Falun Gong practitioners and the Korean government will make a humanitarian decision for Falun Gong refugees."

Several human-rights groups staged a news conference late Monday about Falun Gong in South Korea. They said that, while the asylum hearings and deportations are in line with South Korean law, they may violate the nation's responsibilities as a signer of United Nations treaties on the status and rights of refugees and the convention against torture.

Two US Congressmen urge S. Korea to stop Falun Gong deportations

By Gary Feuerburg

Epoch Times (17.09.2011) / HRWF (29.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Washington DC, USA - On Sept. 6, Seoul immigration authorities, accompanied by local police, forced their way into the home of two Falun Gong practitioners of Chinese nationality, 26-year-old Mr. Jin and his wife Ms. Ma. They arrested the couple for lacking legal status after their applications for asylum had been denied.

Jin is being held in the Foreigners Protection Detention Center of Hwaseong Fortress for immigrants, where he faces imminent expulsion back to China. His wife is out of custody but also faces danger of repatriation to China.

A rally was held in front of the South Korean Embassy in Washington, D.C., at midday on Sept. 15 to urge President Lee Myung-Bak of the Republic of Korea (ROK) not to deport Falun Gong practitioners to China, and to find a way to permit Falun Gong refugees to remain in South Korea.

If repatriated to China, Falun Gong practitioners face the likelihood of imprisonment, torture and sometimes death. Practitioners of Falun Gong, a spiritual practice that involves doing meditative exercises and studying moral teachings based on the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance, have been persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party since July 1999.

Since 2009, South Korea has sent at least 10 Falun Gong refugees back to China, according to the Falun Dafa Information Center (FDIC). Currently, 56 Falun Gong adherents residing in Korea have also been denied asylum, and consequently risk being repatriated.

"If sent back, their lives will be at grave risk because the Beijing dictatorship has declared its intention to utterly destroy the Falun Gong movement," said California Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) in a letter sent to President Lee on Sept. 15. Rep. Rohrabacher is senior member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Rohrabacher's letter called on the Seoul government to halt any deportations of Falun Gong members to communist China.

Legal Obligations

"No one anywhere—regardless of their social, economic or political status—has the right to torture another human being, either with their own hands, or indirectly by sending human beings into those hands. Indeed, torture is immoral and unacceptable in nations that embrace civilized behavior and the rule of law," said California Congressman John Garamendi, in a statement read at the Washington rally.

Rep. Garamendi's moral argument is strengthened by South Korea's legal obligations. It is a signatory of the UN Convention Against Torture, whose Article 3 says in part, "No State Party shall expel, return ('refouler') or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture..

Garamendi pointed out in his statement that South Korea is committed not to deport "refugees, who, like the Falun Gong, are fleeing religious persecution," because it was a signatory of the United Nations Refugee Convention in 1951.

"I urge [ROK] Ambassador Han and President Lee to immediately reaffirm the commitment it made 60 years ago, and to take the first step toward restitution by granting amnesty to Shen Xianzhi and Jin," said Congressman Garamendi. Shen Xianzhi was reported by FDIC to be a Falun Gong practitioner who is also detained at an immigrant detention center facing potential deportation.

Pressure from Chinese Regime

The Korean Falun Dafa Association (KFDA) has in the past stated that the deportations from South Korea to China are due to their government bending to pressure from the Chinese regime.

A KFDA statement, released on Jan. 24 and issued following the sudden deportation of three Falun Gong practitioners to China, links the South Korean policy of deportation to visits by two Chinese officials.

In March 2005 Zhou Yongkang, head of China's security apparatus and a leading figure in the persecution of Falun Gong, met with the South Korean Minister of Justice. Shortly afterwards the Ministry rejected 32 Falun Gong refugee applications.

After that meeting, Chinese agents began showing up in court hearings, and Chinese media started publishing distorted stories about the applications, according to the KFDA statement

The latest round of deportations followed the visit of Li Changchun, propaganda chief and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, to South Korea in spring 2009.

He is reported to have made clear that the Korean government should "kick Falun Gong practitioners out of South Korea," according to the KFDA statement.

Soon after South Korea is said to have started quickly rejecting practitioners' appeals for asylum and several deportations followed.

In response to these actions by South Korea 23 U.S. Congressmen sent a letter dated Aug. 14, 2009, in which they urged South Korea "not to deport Falun Gong practitioners

to China." It referred to Falun Gong practitioners as "among the most brutally persecuted groups in the world today."

"Hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong prisoners of conscience are believed to be detained in China for their beliefs; in some detention facilities, they comprise the majority population," according to the FDIC website.

FDIC can confirm over 3,400 Falun Gong practitioners have died in China due to torture and abuse, but indicates the real death toll is likely in the tens of thousands.

US-South Korea Alliance

The rally was hosted by Falun Gong practitioner Frank Lee. He said that President Lee (not related) is scheduled to receive the 2011 World Statesman Award next week in New York for his "dedication to world peace and democracy." The reward is presented by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation that has worked on behalf of religious freedom, human rights, and tolerance throughout the world.

"We urge President Lee to be truly worthy of this award and stop deporting Falun Gong practitioners to face persecution in China," said Lee.

In his letter, Congressman Rohrabacher reminds the Republic of Korea (ROK) of the support the U.S. provided recently in response to North Korean hostilities in the Yellow Sea.

"The U.S.-ROK alliance is built on opposition to Communist oppression and aggression, whether from Pyongyang or Beijing. The Falun Gong should be seen as friends to our shared values," he says.

Noting that President Lee will be coming to Washington, DC in October for an official state visit, Rep. Rohrabacher expressed the hope that no deportations will take place. We wouldn't want to see illegal and immoral deportations "casting a shadow over the ROK leader's visit," he said.

Ruling allows Korea to continue imprisoning conscientious objectors

JW Official Website (02.09.2011) / HRWF (08.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - — Despite international recognition of the rights of conscientious objectors, a ruling by Korea's highest court will permit the continued imprisonment of Korean citizens exercising their rights as conscientious objectors to military service. On August 30, 2011, the Constitutional Court of Korea found no basis to declare unconstitutional the laws that penalize conscientious objectors who refuse military service.

Six different Korean courts challenged that these laws violated the human dignity of conscientious objectors or their freedom of conscience. The laws were also challenged by four of Jehovah's Witnesses who conscientiously refused to take up arms.

A ruling by the Constitutional Court in 2004, regarding Korea's Military Service Act, stated that the legislators were obliged to introduce an alternative provision that would accommodate conscientious objectors. Since then, some 5,000 conscientious objectors— young men with no previous criminal records—have been routinely convicted. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has repeatedly ruled that Korea—a member state of the United Nations for nearly 20 years—is violating the basic human rights of

conscientious objectors and is in violation of its commitments under the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. Additionally, the National Human Rights Commission in Korea has issued numerous recommendations calling for recognition of the right to conscientious objection.

Dae-il Hong, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Korea, commented: "The decision is disappointing, because the Court had the opportunity to acknowledge the right to freedom of conscience and terminate the trials and imprisonment of principled young men. We hope that the legislature will soon bring Korea in line with the rest of the world by providing an alternative civilian service program. Conscientious objectors are not criminals and should be given the opportunity to serve as productive members of their communities."

Since 1950, there have been more than 16,000 Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to a combined total of 31,256 years for refusing to perform military service. If alternative service is not provided, some 500 to 900 young men will continue to be added each year to the list of conscientious objectors criminalized in Korea.

South Korea churches' beacons an eyesore to some

Red neon crosses are a common sight atop churches in South Korea. Church leaders say they are an important symbol of faith, but critics see them as an annoying source of light pollution.

By John M. Glionna, Reporting from Seoul*

Los Angeles Times (20.08.2011) / HRWF (02.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - For a quarter of a century, Kim Un-tae has found comfort in the red neon cross that sits atop the steeple of the Protestant church he founded here.

For the 70-year-old holy man, the soft glow of the religious icon has always signified that his faith was open for anyone willing to enter the doors of his church. "It's like a coastal lighthouse for passing ships in the dark," Kim said.

Yet critics say church crosses like Kim's are just another form of light pollution.

Tens of thousands of churches dot South Korea, most with their own red neon crosses. In Seoul, where several churches crowd onto a single block, illuminating their crosses until midnight or later, the beacons combine to color the urban night like a carnival come to town.

"Looking from above, the night scene of Seoul looks like that of a graveyard," one Internet user complained in a posting.

The glare of neon lights atop restaurants, motels and retail stores has become such a blight that legislators this year passed a law to limit what they called "excessive illumination from artificial light."

Park Young-ah, a lawmaker with the ruling Grand National Party, worried about the long-term health effects of such glare. "Systematic control of light pollution and standards for the appropriate level of light do not exist," she wrote in her bill proposal.

Churches were originally included in the legislation, but massive protests and lobbying efforts staged by numerous church councils made politicians back down.

"We really didn't expect the religious groups to interpret the bill to be anti-Christian and react like this," said Park's spokesman, Noh Chang-hoon.

Kim Un-tae insists that any effort to dim the night crosses is a "foolish" attack on religious freedom. Because the mission of the church goes beyond the pursuit of capital gain, their leaders should not be subjected to a blanket government law, he reasoned.

"We don't like to use the word exception, but yes, we do believe that one should be made," said Kim, who years ago left his church to become director of the Christian Council of Korea, which represents 50,000 churches nationwide.

Still, critics say the churches are ignoring neighbors who struggle to sleep with the red neon lights shining through their bedroom windows. "Honestly, I don't believe the brighter the cross, the closer we get to God," one Seoul official told the local JoongAng Daily newspaper, requesting anonymity.

A 2005 government study showed that nearly half of South Koreans express no religious preference, 23% are Buddhist, 20% are Protestant, and 11% are Catholic.

South Korea's churches originally had tolling bells to attract worshipers, but most eventually changed to neon crosses, usually red, to signify the blood of Christ, officials say.

The propensity of the crosses moved photographic artist Cha Zoo-young this year to document the spread of the icons. He took thousands of pictures of South Korean urban landscapes, many filled with competing red crosses. His public showing of his work, criticized by churches, was meant to "talk about the fact that we should not blindly follow religion," he said.

One blogger who calls himself Cha documented his own battle with church officials who refuse to dim their cross. "It's so much like daytime at night that I'm chronically sleep-deprived," he wrote.

But complaints by residents of his apartment building have failed. City officials say all they can do is make suggestions to the church. The cross is now extinguished at 11:30 p.m., half an hour earlier, but it is switched on again at 4 a.m.

Others find solace in the crosses. "This is a poor community, but people here have hope," said one real estate agent. "Those crosses are a symbol of that hope."

Park Sun-ung, the minister of a 50-member rural congregation a few hours outside Seoul, may have stumbled upon a solution to the light controversy.

A few years ago, Park — who also works as a farmer — noticed the red neon cross atop his house-sized church continued to go out. He soon discovered that a nest of magpies had shorted the circuit.

After consulting with church leaders, he decided to leave the cross dark in favor of the birds' habitat. "We agreed that our church was a place to save lives, even those of other creatures," Park said.

Now his cross sits dark among the town's dozen other beacons. The pastor believes that other churches might follow suit, replacing their neon crosses with perhaps a less-intrusive sculpture.

"It distances our church from the others," Park said. "We stand out because we don't have a light."

*Jung-yoon Choi of The Times' Seoul bureau contributed to this report.

Conscientious objectors (May 2011)

JW Official website (05.2011) - Currently, there are 804 of Jehovah's Witnesses who are imprisoned in South Korea. They have been charged under South Korea's Military Service Act for their conscientious refusal of military service based on religious grounds. Since 1950, there have been 16,272 of Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced to a combined total of 31,168 years for refusing to perform military service. The names, grounds (under Military Service Act*), duration of sentence, and present locations of detention can be found at <http://www.jw-media.org/kor/20110501rpt.htm>

UN Human Rights Committee rules in favor of conscientious objectors

JW Official website (21.04.2011) / HRWF (04.05.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - On March 24, 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) ruled, for a third time, that South Korea violated its obligations under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) when it imprisoned conscientious objectors. Relying on a similar decision rendered in 2006, the Committee stated that these prison sentences imposed on conscientious objectors "amounted to an infringement of their freedom of conscience and a restriction on their ability to manifest their religion or belief."

This ruling involves 100 conscientious objectors who are Jehovah's Witnesses and who were sentenced to a prison term of one and a half years for refusing to perform military duty because they chose to follow their Bible-trained conscience. According to their attorney, André Carbonneau, "these conscientious objectors now have criminal records. They hope that, with the UNHRC's favorable decision, they will be able to clear that record and resume a normal life."

While the South Korean government continues to invoke its current situation with North Korea as justification for refusing to recognize the right of conscientious objectors, the Committee dismissed these arguments. Furthermore, the Committee confirmed that "the right to conscientious objection to military service inheres in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

Consequently, the Committee stated that South Korea was "under an obligation to provide" the 100 conscientious objectors who had filed complaints "with an effective remedy, including expunging their criminal records and providing them with adequate compensation. The State party is under an obligation to avoid similar violations of the Covenant in the future, which includes the adoption of legislative measures guaranteeing the right to conscientious objection."

Over the past 60 years, about 16,000 young Jehovah's Witnesses have been sentenced to a total of over 30,000 years in prison. Currently there are 843 Jehovah's Witnesses serving sentences as prisoners of conscience in South Korea. Thus, South Korean prisons hold about 90 percent of all conscientious objectors to military service imprisoned throughout the world.

The South Korean Supreme Court has dismissed appeals from conscientious objectors for relief, and there are currently seven cases pending before the South Korean Constitutional Court. The more than 840 young men languishing in Korea's prisons as conscientious objectors hope that this new decision from the Committee will motivate the authorities to resolve the issue.

South Korea to restrict Christian missionaries in Islamic nations

By Shin Hae-in

Korea Herald (15.02.2011) / HRWF (21.02.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - South Korea is to enact laws to discourage its people from engaging in illegal activities overseas, a move seen by Christian groups here as an attempt to curb missionary work.

The South Korean government has been trying to deal with the growing dangers of Christians working as missionaries in Islamic nations, especially after a young missionary was kidnapped and killed by insurgents in Iraq in 2004.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry announced that new laws will forbid passports for people who have been punished or banished from a foreign state for conducting illegal activities there. Under the revision, a wrongdoer will not be issued with a passport for one-three years depending on the gravity of the offense and the penalty, the ministry said.

The government decided to legislate on these issues — previously carried out under Foreign Ministry guidelines — for transparency and to notify more people of the regulations, the ministry explained.

Although the government has not specifically stated the term "missionary work" in the category of illegal activities — while including words such as murder, drug trafficking and illegal entry in the regulations — Christian groups claim there is only one real purpose behind the move.

"The government wants to control missionary activities overseas," an elder at a Presbyterian Church in Seoul said, asking not to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue.

"I can understand why some sort of a boundary is becoming necessary, but I cannot agree with using broad terms that will discourage overall missionary work," the elder added, citing the term "impairing national dignity" the government used to describe illegal actions in general.

The Korea World Missions Association sent a statement to the Foreign Ministry last week, expressing regret about the decision to tackle the issue "via legal restriction."

"Someone who is deported from a country for religious, humanitarian activities and someone who actually broke the law must be separately treated," the nationwide corporation said in the statement.

None of the regulations have been newly created and the government has no intention to unjustly curb missionary work, a ministry official said on the condition of customary anonymity.

"All of the regulations have been carried out since 1981 under our guidelines," the official said. "And there has not been anyone who was banned from achieving a passport due to missionary activities."

It will take less than three months for the laws to take effect once approved by the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet, the official added.

The Iraqi militants who killed the young South Korean missionary Kim Sun-il in 2004 claimed they did so because he was engaged in "annoying religious activities" in Iraq, spawning concerns over Christians who aggressively attempt to evangelize Muslims.

Some Christians continue to ignore government warnings and enter nations designated as "unsafe" by the Foreign Ministry for missionary work, leading to cases such as the kidnapping of dozens of Koreans in Afghanistan in 2007 and the imprisonment of two Korean men in Libya last year.

The issue has sparked social disputes in recent years as some side with the government saying taxpayers shouldn't have to shoulder ransoms and other costs spent to rescue the missionaries.

The South Korean government adopted a policy not to pay ransoms to kidnappers after the 2007 Afghanistan incident, during which two people were executed while 21 others were released after the government paid a large sum of money to the Taliban. The exact amount has not been made public.
