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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Treatment of the religious movement Shincheonji in South Korea

The religious movement Shincheonji is one of hundreds of so-called new religious movements in South Korea. Its treatment by the authorities before and especially since the outbreak of COVID-19 in South Korea is deeply worrisome. It seems that its labelling as a “cult” is an effort by established religious institutions and politicians to undermine the religious freedoms enshrined in the constitution of South Korea. Shincheonjie currently has about 200,000 followers in South Korea and around 300,000 worldwide.

Forced De-Conversion

According to the human rights organisation “Human Rights without frontiers”, more than 1,500 followers of Shincheonji have become victims of forced de-conversion since 2003, with almost 80 per cent of them young women in their 20s. The victims are often abducted by their own parents, held against their wish and forcibly de-converted by protestant pastors for money.

Disadvantages for Shincheonji members who are public about their faith

According to the “Center for Studies on New Religions”, members of Shincheonji who dared to publicly show their faith, had to fear losing their job or being harassed in their school or university. This would be the main reason for followers of Shincheonji to hide their faith from friends, family members or co-workers. The “Center for Studies on New Religions” also points to the fact that there are publicly spreaded falsehoods about Shincheonji and its teaching, such as the allegation that Shincheonji denies that its members can get sick. In fact, Shincheonji states that people, including its adherents can actually get sick.

Shincheonji and COVID-19

It appears that pre-existing resentment against Shincheonji before the outbreak of COVID-19 in South Korea exacerbated the reaction some politicians showed when they demonized Shincheonji, thus maybe wanting to increase their popularity. But even the vice minister of health, Kim Kang-lip said that Shincheonji cooperated with the authorities and provided information on its members requested by the government. He also said that too severe measures would scare Shincheonji members into hiding, thus hindering the containment of COVID-19.

Shincheonji on 25 January 2020 instructed members returning from China not to participate in church gatherings. The so-called “patient 31”, a Shinchoenji member accused of having resisted tests, stated that after having been sent to the Saeronan Korean Medicine hospital on 7 February 2020 due to a car accident she wasn’t recommend a test to determine whether she had COVID-19. She said that only in the following week she was diagnosed with pneumonia and subsequently tested on COVID-19. Thus, it was not possible for her to know that she had COVID-19 before being tested on it on 18 February 2020. That seems to be the reason why she was not put under quarantine and could participate in Shincheonji meetings, where she probably infected others. After her case became public, Shinchoenji reacted rather quickly and recommended that members should not participate in meetings. On 26 February 2020, Shincheonji ended any kinds of meetings.

With regards to the list that Shincheonji handed over to the authorities, the church had to scramble to submit a full list in a very short time. We refer to the above-mentioned statement of the vice minister of health, Kim Kang-lip who said that the revised lists submitted by Shinchoenji and the information meanwhile gathered by the government were rather minimal.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to call on the government of South Korea:

- Not to abuse the necessary measures against the spread of COVID-19 by unfairly singling out and scapegoating Shincheonji and its members.
- To make sure that Shincheonji and its members can enjoy the right to freedom of religion safeguarded by the constitution.
- End the unlawful and unethical practice of forced “de-conversions”.

