

Toru Goto awarded 4.38 million yen in suit against deprogrammers who held him captive for over 12 years

Shinyoung C. Simonds
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Toru Goto at the hospital after 12 years and 5 months of captivity

Unification Church members are no strangers to the fight for religious freedom. In its history, the church has won numerous legal battles and campaigned against violations of this basic human right. This week, religious rights activists of all faiths gained another victory when Toru Goto won his case in Japan.

On January 28, 2014, Goto was awarded 4.38 million yen (roughly \$47,000) in his civil case against family members and professional deprogrammers who held him captive for over 12 years.

“This is welcome news indeed, and brings the Unification Church in Japan one step closer to closing the sad chapter on forced conversions” said Dr. Michael Balcomb, President of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in the United States.

In September of 1995, Goto, a member of the Unification Church, was kidnapped by his own family members in an attempt to break his faith. His kidnappers kept him confined in an apartment in Tokyo until his final release in February 2008, 12 years and five months later. During that time, Goto endured faith-breaking efforts by his siblings, parents, and “deprogramming experts”, Takashi Miyamura and Yasutomo Matsunaga. Upon his final release, Goto was emaciated, suffering from a

state of starvation due to hunger strikes as well as insufficient nutrition provided by his captors.

Though Japan guarantees freedom of religion, Goto spent the next three years failing to convince the Japanese government to prosecute his captors. When the prosecutors finally did take up the case, it was dropped due to “insufficient evidence” and thus failed to yield any indictments.



Toru Goto address human rights and religious freedom issues at the Women's Federation for World Peace 18th National Anniversary Assembly themed: Human Rights: Awakening the Dignity of Women, October 15, 2010.

These same kinds of kidnappings were once rampant in the United States until the government came under pressure from civil rights and other religious groups to prosecute and criminalize this kind of forcible conversion.

When Reverend Sun Myung Moon was imprisoned in the United States on charges of tax evasion, for which he was later exonerated, civil and religious leaders came together in solidarity to campaign for his release and to uphold the constitution’s right to religious freedom. As civil rights activist, Dr. Joseph Lowry noted, “The assault on the religious liberties of Reverend Moon threatened the liberties of every religious leader.” Reverend Moon also won a case that had previously

banned him from Europe.

The Unification Church has fought hard over the years for the freedom of its own members; however, every victory won on the front of religious freedom can be counted as a victory for all religious movements.

The long-awaited victory for Goto is bittersweet. Approximately 4,300 Japanese church members have been victims of deprogramming over the last 40 years, beginning in 1966. Many suffered torture and rape or committed suicide. To this date, there have been no criminal prosecutions of any alleged deprogrammers in Japan. Even Goto's civil judgment seems insufficient given the pain and suffering he endured.



Toru Goto appealing to the public near where he was held captive, Japan

Still, Goto's court case is the most significant and most high profile civil judgment against deprogrammers and Goto himself sees it as a victory. He stated, "When we think about the numerous Unification Church members who were kidnapped, confined and suffered under the instructions of Miyamura, I believe that they would also be happy... My heartfelt wish is that the victory this time will be of help in eradicating kidnapping, confinement and forcible conversion."

President of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF), Dan Fefferman commented, "We are hopeful that this will be a

turning point for Japan. In the U.S. deprogramming didn't come to an end until the courts made it clear that the perpetrators of this crime would be punished."

Activists have yet to win the war, and uncertainty still remains as to how Japan will respond going forward, but for Goto, the battle has been won. It is a moral victory for the many other victims of deprogramming—those, like Goto, who have been able to return to their faith, raise families and live happy lives. This case marks a new milestone and a step forward in the continued fight for religious freedom for all religions across the globe.