

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: UN warns Japan on violation of rights of FFWPU

Knut Holdhus
October 3, 2025



Top left: From the header of the email announcing the [press release](#). The rest of the illustration is from the webpage containing the [press release](#).

UN rapporteurs warn Japan over rights of religious minorities and raise alarm on stigmatisation of Jehovah's Witnesses and Family Federation

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On 1st October, the UN Human Rights office issued a [press release](#) by four UN experts, so-called Special Rapporteurs [See editor's note below], appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

In the [press release](#), the UN experts expressed strong concern about the worsening situation for religious minorities like Jehovah's Witnesses and the [Family Federation](#) in Japan and the continued stigmatization they suffer.



The section on the [Family Federation](#) mentions,

"The experts also noted the [decision](#) by the Tokyo District Court on the dissolution of the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#), formally known as the [Unification Church](#).

"The civil tort rulings on which the [dissolution decision](#) was based on relies on the violation of 'social appropriateness' which were deemed to constitute a serious harm to 'public welfare'. As previously noted by the Human Rights Committee the concept of 'public welfare' is vague and open-ended and may permit restrictions exceeding those permissible under the [ICCPR](#)," the experts warned.

They emphasised that any restrictions on the exercise of Article 18 rights must comply strictly with the limitations set out in Article 18.3 of the [ICCPR](#), as interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee."

That section is significant because it goes to the heart of how international human rights law differs from certain domestic legal standards - and why the UN experts are cautioning Japan.

The Tokyo District Court's [dissolution decision](#) against the [Family Federation](#) relied on findings of "civil tort" (wrongdoing under civil law). The key legal justification was that the [religious organization's](#) activities violated "social appropriateness" and caused serious harm to "public welfare." In Japanese legal tradition, "public welfare" (kōkyō no fukushi) is actually often used as a flexible standard for limiting rights when balancing them against society's needs.

The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which Japan has ratified, protects religious freedom in Article 18. Restrictions on religious practice under Article 18 are very narrowly defined: only permissible if they are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Importantly, "public welfare" is not a valid ground under the [ICCPR](#). It is too vague and broad, and therefore risks being used to justify excessive or arbitrary restrictions.



If "public welfare" is used as a catch-all justification, it could permit the government or courts to restrict religious groups in ways that go beyond what international law allows. For example, activities that are unpopular or socially controversial might be labeled as "against public welfare", even if they fall within the legitimate exercise of religious freedom.

This creates a risk of undermining minority rights, since majority opinion often shapes what is considered "socially appropriate".

The **UN experts are warning that using vague legal standards** like "public welfare" sets a precedent. Other religious or belief minorities could later face similar restrictions, not because they caused demonstrable harm, but because their practices are viewed as "inappropriate" by mainstream society. This runs contrary to the [ICCPR](#)'s stricter protections, which are designed to safeguard

minority rights against exactly that kind of majoritarian pressure.

This section in the UN [press release](#) highlights a fundamental tension: Japan's reliance on "public welfare" as a legal concept may allow broader restrictions on religious groups than international human rights law permits. The UN experts are signaling that Japan must align its legal standards more closely with the [ICCPR](#) to ensure that dissolutions or restrictions on religious groups are based only on clear, necessary, and proportionate grounds.



From the "SOS Mini Letter." One example of abuse is "Because of my parents' religion I cannot participate in sport events."

The UN experts raised questions about the treatment of certain religious or belief minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, in educational and social contexts. They highlighted how initiatives, such as the Children's Human Rights SOS Mini-Letters distributed between May and July 2025, carried discriminatory stereotypes that risk reinforcing social prejudice. While these pamphlets were designed to raise awareness of child abuse and provide children with avenues to seek help, the experts warned that their framing of religious practices could unfairly conflate legitimate spiritual activities with abuse. This, they argued, creates the risk of marginalisation and bullying for children belonging to minority faiths.



The concerns also draw on the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare's "Q and A on Responses to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs, etc." (Q and A Guidelines), first published in December 2022. According to the experts, the persistence of these guidelines in shaping discourse illustrates a broader pattern of framing religious minorities as potential threats, which may lead to increased scrutiny and administrative pressures.

The [press release](#) gains additional weight because it is placed within the broader international framework

of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), to which Japan is a party. Article 18 of the [ICCPR](#) protects freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and it places strict limits on the kinds of restrictions governments can impose. The experts' emphasis on this article underlines that Japan's handling of religious minorities is not just a domestic matter but a question of fulfilling legally binding international obligations.



Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom [See editor's note below]. Ghanea has sent formal UN request to Japan, but has so far received no reply. Nazila Ghanea holds the position since February 2023

Through the UN Special Rapporteur [See editor's note below] on freedom of religion or belief at the Human Rights Council, Nazila Ghanea, the UN should be able to lead dialogue with Japan.

The UN experts behind the [press release](#):

Nazila Ghanea, [the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#);

Nicolas Levrat, [the Special Rapporteur on minority issues](#);

Farida Shaheed, [the Special Rapporteur on the right to education](#);

Gina Romero, [the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association](#).

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Text: Knut Holdhus, editor

[Editor's note: A Special Rapporteur (or Independent Expert) is an independent human rights expert appointed by the United Nations (UN) to provide reports or advice on human rights issues from either a thematic or country-specific perspective. These experts are selected by the UN Human Rights Council and operate independently of any government, playing a crucial role in monitoring the actions of sovereign nations and democratically elected governments.

Special Rapporteurs do not receive financial compensation from the United Nations for their work. However, they receive support from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and are often funded by charities and corporations. Annually, they convene in Geneva to discuss common issues, coordinate their efforts, and engage with various stakeholders, including states and civil society organizations.

These experts frequently conduct fact-finding missions to investigate human rights violation allegations in different countries. In addition to these missions, they regularly review complaints from alleged victims of human rights abuses. If a complaint is verified, they send an urgent letter or appeal to the concerned government. Even without a specific complaint, Special Rapporteurs can intervene on behalf of individuals or groups at their discretion.]

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GENEVA – A group of UN experts* today expressed concern about stigmatisation of religion or belief minorities in Japan, and its impacts on children and young people in particular.

“We are disappointed that materials disseminated to children in Japan reinforce discriminatory stereotypes about religion or belief minorities, and risk directly conflating legitimate religion and belief manifestations with child abuse,” the experts said.

Between May and July of 2025, ‘Children’s Human Rights SOS Mini-Letters’ were distributed to school children in Japan.

“While the pamphlets highlighted important information about child abuse and offered a highly valuable line of contact between young people and the State regarding their human rights, it is disappointing that the pamphlets appear to target some practices and activities, especially those of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” the experts said. “Rather than protecting children who belong to religion or belief minorities, these materials risk contributing to their bullying and marginalisation,” they said.

Consultations with civil society and minorities in relation to the “Q&A on Responses to Child Abuse Related to Religious Beliefs, etc.” (“Q&A Guidelines”), can help address these discriminatory concerns, they said.

The problematic material in the pamphlets reportedly draws on the Q&A Guidelines, published by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in December 2022, which were the subject of a [joint communication](#) to the Government of Japan in April 2024 from Special Procedures experts, to which the Government [responded](#).

“In line with our previous concerns, we have received credible reports that religion or belief minorities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, have since found themselves under increased scrutiny from authorities even when engaging in legitimate religious activities in line with article 18 of

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, such as praying with children, or opting out of certain activities on religious grounds,” the experts said.

“We are concerned that the continued use and re-use of the Q&A Guidelines’ discriminatory framing reflects a broader pattern of targeting religion or belief minorities for surveillance and administrative harassment,” they said.

“While we appreciate and encourage sincere efforts to engage with children and young people in order to combat violence and abuse in the home and at school, such good faith efforts must not result in discrimination against minorities.”

The experts also noted the decision by the Tokyo District Court on the dissolution of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, formally known as the Unification Church.

“The civil tort rulings on which the dissolution decision was based on relies on the violation of ‘social appropriateness’ which were deemed to constitute a serious harm to ‘public welfare’. As previously noted by the Human Rights Committee the concept of “public welfare” is vague and open-ended and may permit restrictions exceeding those permissible under the ICCPR,” the experts warned.

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***The experts:**

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