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JAPAN Forced change of religion: UN Human Rights Committee

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JAPAN

Forced change of religion in Japan: UN Human Rights Committee denounces Tokyo's policy of turning a deaf ear



HRWF (25.07.2014) – On 15-16 July, Japan's human rights record was reviewed in the framework of the 111th session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee. During Japan's sixth periodic review, the right to freedom of religion or belief and the right not to be coerced to change religion has been raised in detailed reports provided to the Committee by Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels) and by the Japanese Association of Victims of Abduction and Forced

Religious De-Conversion.

During the review, the German expert of the Committee, **Ms. Seibert-Fohr**, raised the issue of abductions and so-called "deprogramming" as she said. She explained that the Committee came to know about cases of abductions and forced religious de-conversions of members of the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, that adults were abducted and confined by their families for up to six months or more, and that there was a lack of investigation and police search, under the justification that they were "with their families". She explained that civil cases were brought but no injunction had been pronounced to her knowledge. She asked the Japanese government which steps it was going to take to remedy this situation.

The Japanese Government merely denied the existence of a problem by answering: *"The examples cited, we are not aware of. When reports are received, we deal with this appropriately. The Ministry of Justice dealing with human rights, based on regulations, indicates that investigations should be made on cases and that is exactly what we do."*

Still, the Committee, in its Concluding Observations of July 24 said that it was *"concerned at reports of abductions and forced confinement of converts to new religious movements by members of their families in an effort to de-convert them (arts. 2, 9, 18, 26)"* and it urged Tokyo to *"take effective measures to guarantee the right of every person not to be subject to coercion which would impair his or her freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief."*

For decades, Japanese authorities have turned a deaf ear to the complaints of numerous victims of abduction, confinement and attempts of change of religion under physical and psychological coercion. For decades, Japanese police have protected the perpetrators from prosecution letting such crimes continue and thus violating the victims' human rights.

In July 2013, Human Rights Without Frontiers' (HRWF) submitted a report, entitled Japan: Abductions and confinement for the purpose of religious de-conversion (Violations of Articles 7, 9, 12, 18, 23 and 26 of the ICCPR) to the Human Rights Committee in order to bring to the attention of Committee members its concerns about the total impunity of non-state actors who abducted and confined converts to new religious movements until they recanted their new religious faith. (See text of the submission at

http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCCPR%2fNGO%2fJPN%2f15101&Lang=en)

On 30 June 2013, the Japanese Association of Victims of Abduction and Forced Religious De-Conversion submitted a detailed report on the abuses ([See http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/JPN/INT_CCPR_NGO_JPN_14826_E.pdf](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/JPN/INT_CCPR_NGO_JPN_14826_E.pdf)).

On 14 November 2013, the problem was raised by the Human Rights Committee in its list of issues addressed to Japan

(See <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G13/486/27/PDF/G1348627.pdf?OpenElement>).

Issue 16 stated: *“Please comment on reports of cases of abduction, forced conversion and forced de-conversion, which were not investigated and prosecuted by the State party.”*

In its reply, the Japanese government flatly denied the existence of such an issue, merely stating *“We do not know of any cases as those described”* although on 28 January 2014, a Japanese man, **Toru Goto**, who had been kidnapped by family members, confined for 12 years (from September 1995 to February 2008) and subjected to violent attempts to force him to renounce his new religious affiliation, won a court ruling against his captors and the deprogrammer in a civil lawsuit.

The Tokyo District Court ordered the defendant members of the family to pay a total amount of 4.83 million yen (about \$47,000) while the deprogrammer, Takashi Miyamura, was ordered to pay 960,000 yen (about \$9,400) jointly, as part of the total damages. Some Japanese media briefly reported about this case.

Recent abduction cases confirm failure of police to take appropriate action

Since submitting its initial briefing to the Human Rights Committee in July 2013, Human Rights Without Frontiers has been informed of three further abductions of Unification Church members, two females and one male. One of them was believed still to be confined at the time of writing.

Before 27-year old Masato Ishibashi was allegedly abducted by his parents when visiting them for New Year's, he had been worried about a possible abduction for a long time and taken steps to prepare for such an event. He gave his lawyer a signed and stamped “Rescue Request” and carried a GPS device on him when visiting his parents at the end of December 2013. On 2 January 2014 an emergency signal was sent from his GPS device to a private security company.

In order to comply with Masato Ishibashi's explicit wish to be rescued should he be subjected to forced confinement, HRWF repeatedly urged the police to ascertain Masato Ishibashi's whereabouts and talk to him directly and confidentially in order to establish whether he was held against his will and wished to be rescued.

On 18 February 2014, a HRWF delegation consisting of the organization's director, Willy Fautré, and international human rights activist Aaron Rhodes, visited Chiba Prefecture Police Headquarters, along with Shunsuke Uotani, Vice-Secretary General of the Japanese branch of the Universal Peace Federation, a Unification Church affiliate, to raise Masato Ishibashi's case with the Public Relations Division. To follow-up from the meeting, Shunsuke Uotani, spoke by telephone to an officer at the Public Relations Division of Chiba Prefecture Police Headquarters and senior officers at Katori Police Station, on five different occasions.

The Unification Church documented all conversations with the police and made available transcripts to HRWF. The police officers' statements are revealing and provide information about reasons and justifications of police inaction that go beyond what HRWF was able to document in its July 2013 briefing to the UN Human Rights Committee and refer to the chapter **“Inadequate police response,”** in particular the section **“Police are aware of Masato Ishibashi's forced confinement, but unconcerned”** on pp. 9-10).

(See http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCCPR%2fNGO%2fJPN%2f15101&Lang=en)

It is thus clear that abductions, confinement and forced de-conversion of Unification Church members are continuing in Japan. The victims' fellow-believers continue to encounter indifference and a failure to take appropriate action on the part of the police. The abductees have only slim chances that the police will come to their rescue. Police officers themselves apparently often have discriminatory attitudes toward the Unification Church and show considerable understanding not only of the parents' wish that their son or daughter leave the Church, but also of practices such as abduction, confinement and forced de-conversion.

Additional updated reports to the UN Human Rights Committee

In June 2014, Human Rights Without Frontiers provided the members of the Human Rights Committee with updated information on important recent developments concerning the issue of abductions and confinement for the purpose of forceful religious de-conversion in Japan. This report was also a reaction to Japan's response to Question No. 16 (section on "Freedom of religion, opinion and expression (arts. 18 and 19)") of the Human Rights Committee's List of issues, which in HRWF's view demonstrated the authorities' failure to acknowledge that the human rights of abducted members of new religious movement are poorly protected in Japan.

(See http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/JPN/INT_CCPR_CSS_JPN_17429_E.docx)

The Japanese Association of Victims of Abduction and Forced Religious De-Conversion also reacted to Tokyo's denial of any problem by sending an updated and detailed answer to the Japanese government's reply to the UN Human Rights Committee

(See http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/JPN/INT_CCPR_CSS_JPN_17422_E.pdf).

HRWF believes that the Concluding Observations by the UN Human Rights Committee can play an important role in conveying to the authorities a strong message: abductions, confinement and attempted forced change of religion constitute human rights violations and the lack of appropriate action by police and impunity of the perpetrators cannot be tolerated. Effective measures have to be taken by the Japanese government to ensure the right of believers are fully respected.