

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: The Mental and Physical Torture of Faith-Breaking in Japan

Knut Holdhus
February 17, 2025



Toru Goto smiles as he arrives at the Shoto 2-chome intersection - 10th February 2025, Tokyo

Victim of horrendous ordeal - more than 12 years long faith-breaking - suffered hellish existence of mental and physical torture



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[Series] The "Deadly Struggle" to Protect Freedom of Religion - 17 Years Since Toru Goto's Release

Part 1: Tears over Two 500-Yen Coins Given Him by a Believer

The 10km Path He Walked After His Release

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)



Toru Goto's new book Deadly Struggle: Surviving 4,536 Days of Confinement

More than [4,300 persons](#) have been victims of abduction and confinement aimed at forcing them to leave the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). These victims were held captive for long periods in apartments and other locations, deprived of their freedom, and subjected to coercive faith-breaking. The method has been described as a "modern-day zashiki-ro (座敷牢 - prison cell)". [See editor's note below]

One of the most [harrowing cases](#) is that of Toru Goto (後藤徹) - now 61 - who was confined for an astonishing [12 years and 5 months](#).

On 10th February, marking the 17th anniversary of his release, Goto [published his autobiography](#), Deadly Struggle: Surviving 4,536 Days of Confinement (published by Sogeisha). Goto continues to speak out against the issue of abduction, confinement, and coercive faith-breaking, which has been called "the worst human rights violation in postwar Japan".

On the anniversary of his release, Goto [gave a lecture](#) in Suginami

Ward, Tokyo, to mark the [publication of his book](#).



Supporters walk the route toward Shibuya's Shoto, retracing the past journey of Toru Goto - 10th February 2025, Ogikubo, Suginami Ward, Tokyo

After the event, he and about 20 supporters walked a 10-kilometer route toward the [Family Federation's](#) headquarters in Shoto, Shibuya Ward - the same path he had taken after being freed.

During his confinement, Goto was malnourished, and his weight dropped from 65kg to 50kg. Seventeen years ago, he was thrown out of the apartment with nothing - penniless, no possessions. In his weakened state, he had no choice but to walk the long distance to the [church](#) headquarters. The purpose of this commemorative walk was for others to relive that journey.

The location of the 8th floor apartment in Ogikubo, Tokyo where Toru Goto was held

captive and dehumanized. Photo: [National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion](#),



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, The group first headed to Ogikubo, where the apartment he had been confined in was located. As they approached, Goto paused and pointed to the corner unit on the eighth floor, saying, "That is the room where I was locked up for over 10 years." He added, "Many believers suffered abduction and confinement in places like this." The apartment, located in a quiet residential area, had an eighth floor that was difficult to see from the ground, making escape nearly impossible. It was within this very room that the "[worst postwar human rights violation](#)", as Goto calls it, took place.

For 12 years and 5 months, Goto was locked in an apartment where the door and windows were sealed, leaving no way to escape. As the years passed, his physical strength deteriorated, making the possibility of escape even more impossible. His freedom of religion - the most precious thing to him - was taken away, and his very personality (人格) was denied [See editor's note below]. Yet, he never gave up his faith. Enduring the mental and physical torture of coercive faith-breaking, he finally regained his freedom on 10th February 2008, when his family, exhausted from their own struggle, abandoned their attempts and released him.

Just two to three minutes from the apartment was a police box (koban). At the time of his release, Goto hoped the police would intervene, believing that if they acted quickly, they could collect evidence. He approached the police, pleading desperately for help, but was completely ignored.

Realizing that no help would come, he decided to walk all the way to the [church](#) headquarters in Shoto, Shibuya, even though he knew it was an extremely long journey.

As the group retraced his steps, they moved eastward along Oume Kaido Avenue toward Shoto. The bustling main road was lined with stores, including gyudon (beef bowl) restaurants, ramen shops, and convenience stores.

Back then, Goto had no money and was starving, yet he couldn't even enter these shops to buy food. He couldn't rely on passersby either. The isolation he felt at the time must have been unbearable. Yet, he recalled, "I was desperate to get to the [church](#) headquarters, no matter what."

When he passed Yoyogi-Hachiman Station on the Odakyu Line, he reached a point more than halfway through the journey. However, a pedestrian bridge stood in his way. There was no pedestrian crossing - the only way forward was to climb the bridge. His weakened body was near its limit, making even walking a struggle. Somehow, he forced himself up and down the bridge, step by step.

Finally, he reached the Shoto 2-chome intersection - a place he calls "the climax of the journey".

Seventeen years ago, at this very spot, the pain in his knees had reached its limit. Exhausted, he crouched down. Desperate, he asked a random woman for help. Miraculously, she turned out to be a member of the [Family Federation](#).



"It was truly a miracle," he recalled with excitement.

That woman handed him two 500-yen coins (about \$6 - \$7 USD), which he used to hail a taxi. He finally arrived at the [church](#) headquarters - but even then, he was faced with one final obstacle.

The entrance was just five meters away, yet it felt impossibly distant. At last, he reached the guard at the entrance, who contacted [church](#) staff to take him in.

Severely malnourished and physically exhausted, Goto was given a plate of katsu curry, a red bean bun, and a meat bun by the [church](#) guard.

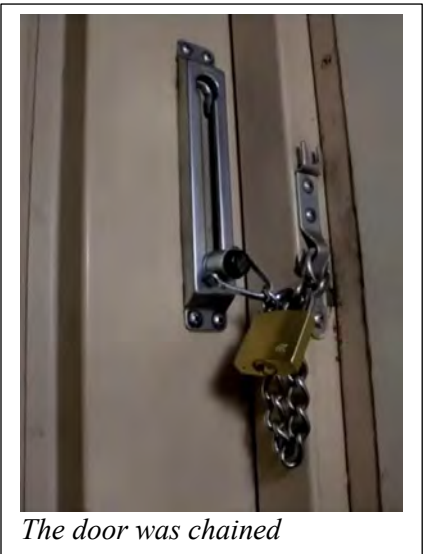
"I was so happy I could cry."

His eyes sparkled as he spoke, and his words conveyed everything.

Part 2 coming soon

[Editor's note: A zashiki-rō (座敷牢) is a traditional Japanese confinement room used historically for restraining individuals, typically within a private household. Zashiki (座敷) refers to a Japanese-style tatami-matted room. Rō (牢) means a jail or cell.

Historically, these rooms were used for confining family members who were mentally ill, violent, or otherwise considered disruptive or dangerous to the household or community. The practice was more common in the Edo (1603 - 1868) and Meiji (1868 - 1912) periods, before modern mental health care systems were established.



A Zashiki-rō was typically equipped with sturdy sliding doors reinforced with bars or locks, ensuring the person inside could not escape. It was located within a family home or a secluded part of the property, ensuring privacy. The confined individual was often left alone in this small, sparse room with minimal furnishings, and their basic needs were provided through a small opening or at designated times.

The term "zashiki-rō" today is often used metaphorically to describe situations of coercive confinement or control, as it evokes the idea of being trapped in a restrictive, oppressive environment. Such imagery is sometimes applied to cases of forced detainment or isolation, like in the more than 4,300 instances of members of the [Family Federation](#) being abducted and confined.]

[Editor's note: The phrase "denial of one's (legal) personality" refers to an infringement on a person's fundamental (legal) rights and status as an individual under the law. Legal personality is the recognition by the law that an individual has certain rights and responsibilities and can exercise these rights within a legal framework. When someone is abducted or confined against their will, their basic autonomy and capacity to make legal decisions - such as freedom of movement, freedom of association, and the ability to express religious beliefs - are severely restricted or completely denied.

In this context, Toru Goto is emphasizing that his experience of abduction and confinement stripped him of these legal capacities, as he was deprived of the freedom to act as an autonomous legal subject. By calling it a "denial of one's (legal) personality", he underscores the severity of these actions, framing them as violations not just of personal freedom, but of the foundational rights guaranteed to individuals within a democratic society.]

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Mental And Physical Torture Of Faith-Breaking

• February 17, 2025 • Knut Holdhus



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Front cover page of Japanese edition of **Toru Goto's new book “Deadly Struggle: Surviving 4,536 Days of Confinement”**



Supporters walk the route toward Shibuya's Shoto, retracing the past journey of Toru Goto – 10th February 2025, Ogikubo, Suginami Ward, Tokyo.
Photo: Yasuhiro Uno (宇野泰弘)

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The location of the 8th floor apartment in Ogikubo, Tokyo where Toru Goto was held captive and dehumanized.
Photo: *National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion,*

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The door was chained.
Photo: [National](#)

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Miraculously, a famished and exhausted Toru Goto met a female member who gave him money for a taxi ride.
Illustration: [National Association of Victims of Abduction, Confinement, and Forced Deconversion](#),

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