

International Rights Groups Raise Alarm Over Freedom of Religion and Expression in South Korea



Washington, D.C, District of Columbia Aug 9, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), together with CAP Liberté de Conscience (CAP LC), which has accredited ECOSOC status at the United Nations, FOREF, CESNUR and Bitter Winter, held a press conference today at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression in South Korea. The issues addressed included concerns about the treatment of elderly religious leaders in pretrial detention, including questions of proportionality, humanitarian considerations, and due process. The organizations called on South Korean authorities to review the detention of 95-year-old Shincheonji Chairman Lee Man-hee and to ensure that the legal and administrative response to religious minorities remains neutral, proportionate, and consistent with South Korea's international human-rights obligations, including with respect to 83-year-old Mrs. Hak-ja Han Moon of the Family Federation.

The issues discussed today form part of a broader pattern of Freedom of Religion or Belief concerns in South Korea. Concerns have also persisted regarding Segero Church in Busan, which has reportedly continued to face harassment and official scrutiny even after Pastor Son Hyun-bo was released from detention.

Reporting has also raised questions about conscientious objection, public hostility toward a mosque

project in Daegu, and religious accommodation in educational settings. Over the past decades, HRWF has documented the imprisonment of hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea as conscientious objectors, and although alternative civilian service was later introduced, critics maintain that it has been implemented in a punitive manner rather than as a genuine rights-respecting alternative, notably because it requires 36 months of service in correctional facilities, twice the length of regular military service. Recent court decisions have also upheld key features of that system against constitutional challenge.

Opening the conference, **Hans Noot**, Associate Director of HRWF, said the issues at stake "lie at the heart of democratic society," warning that when religious communities are stigmatized, peaceful gatherings are restricted, and dissent is treated as a problem to be contained, the consequences "extend far beyond any single group or case." He said the conference was not about defending any one theology or movement, but about "defending a principle: that fundamental rights apply equally to all."

Thierry Valle, President of CAP Liberté de Conscience, addressed the legality of Chairman Lee's detention under international law. Referring to South Korea's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1990 and the Convention against Torture in 1995, he questioned whether placing a 95-year-old in pretrial detention is consistent with those obligations. He stressed that the presumption of innocence must prevail over any presumption of guilt.

There are alternative more proportionate and more humane measures respecting the presumption of innocence and human dignity in democratic countries. And he cited precedents including Cardinal Joseph Zen's 2022 release on bail in Hong Kong and Vietnam's decision to place Buddhist Patriarch Thich Quang Do under house arrest rather than in prison.

Michael Langhans, Executive Director of FOREF Germany, presented a legal analysis questioning whether pretrial detention for Chairman Lee of the Shincheonji Church was necessary given evidence already sufficient for an indictment, and whether that evidence was gathered neutrally rather than through a narrative framing the defendant's community as a "sect" or "cult." He argued that the case raises a broader question for lawmakers: whether measures meant to protect fair elections can be applied without nullifying the constitutionally and internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion.

Márk Nemes, Deputy Director of CESNUR, shared his thoughts on the effects of ongoing persecution and its possible ramifications for minority faiths. He noted three recent scholarly investigations conducted in selected Shincheonji congregations in Europe, Argentina, and Australia, each finding worrisome increase in hostility toward the otherwise peaceful and cooperative religious movement. He stressed that Shincheonji is not simply a South Korean minority church but a global religious movement with congregations worldwide. The disproportionate persecution in South Korea affects the lives of those congregants abroad, whose freedoms for expressing and practicing faith, enshrined in ICCPR Articles 18 and 19, are inalienable rights and must be considered during this current process.

Massimo Introvigne, Managing Director of CESNUR and Editor-in-Chief of Bitter Winter, said South Korea "has crossed a worrying line" by arresting Chairman Lee, arguing that international standards such as the Mandela Rules would call for house arrest rather than imprisonment for a 95-year-old accused of a non-violent offence. He said the charges, tied to ordinary political participation by members of a religious minority, "appear legally and conceptually overstretched," and warned that the case fits a broader pattern of pressure against minority faiths in the country.

The organizations called on South Korean authorities, the media, and the international community to examine these developments with close attention to due process, proportionality, and the equal

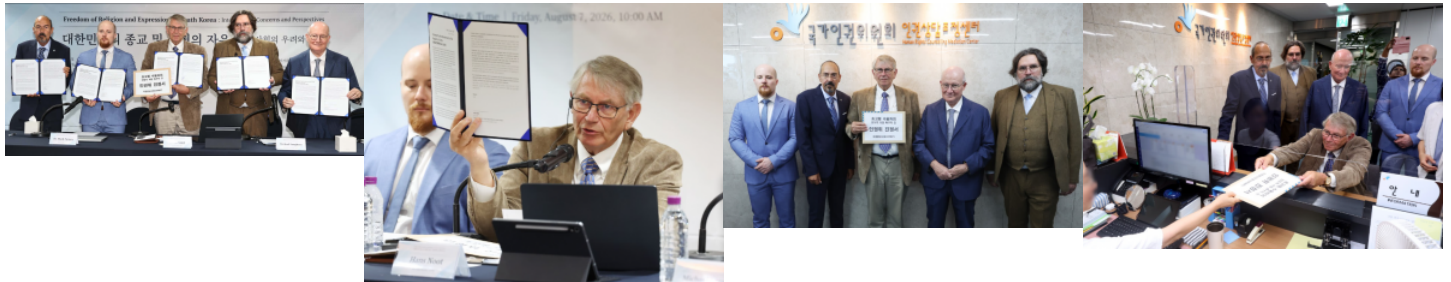
protection of fundamental rights, and made further documentation available to support continued reporting.

At the conclusion of the press conference, the scholars in attendance signed an official letter calling on the Government of the Republic of Korea to immediately release Chairman Lee from custody.

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Source : Shincheonji

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