

International Human Rights Organisations hold Seoul Press Conference on Freedom of Religion and Expression

Monday 10 August, 2026

Scholars and civil society groups, including one with United Nations consultative status, gathered to discuss due process and the fair treatment of religious minorities.

Seoul, 7 August 2026 - A group of international human rights organisations held a press conference at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club on Friday. The event explored freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression in South Korea.

The conference was convened by Human Rights Without Frontiers, together with CAP Liberté de Conscience, which holds accredited ECOSOC status at the United Nations. They were joined by FOREF, CESNUR and Bitter Winter. The gathering brought together scholars and civil society representatives to share research and legal analysis.

Speakers discussed the care owed to elderly people held in pretrial detention, and the principles of proportionality and due process. Their remarks referred to Lee Man-hee, the 95-year-old chairman of the Shincheonji Church, and to Mrs Hak-ja Han Moon, aged 83, of the Family Federation. The speakers encouraged an approach to religious minorities that is neutral, proportionate and consistent with South Korea's international human rights commitments.

Themes explored at the conference

The organisations placed the discussion within a wider conversation about freedom of religion or belief in South Korea. They noted continuing interest in Segero Church in Busan. They also referred to public reporting on conscientious objection, on a mosque project in Daegu, and on religious accommodation in schools.

Human Rights Without Frontiers described its long record of documenting the situation of conscientious objectors in the country. It observed that alternative civilian service now exists, and noted that some observers feel its current form, which lasts 36 months, invites further review.

Perspectives shared by speakers

Opening the event, Hans Noot, Associate Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, described the themes as central to democratic life. He said the gathering was not about defending any single movement, but about the principle that fundamental rights apply equally to everyone.

Thierry Valle, President of CAP Liberté de Conscience, spoke about international law. He recalled that South Korea ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1990 and the Convention against Torture in 1995. He reflected on the value of the presumption of innocence, and mentioned proportionate measures used elsewhere, including bail and house arrest.

Michael Langhans, Executive Director of FOREF Germany, offered a legal analysis. He considered whether pretrial detention is necessary where evidence already supports an indictment. He also invited lawmakers to consider how measures that protect fair elections can sit comfortably alongside the right to freedom of religion.

Márk Nemes, Deputy Director of CESNUR, reflected on the position of minority faiths. He noted recent studies of Shincheonji congregations in Europe, Argentina and Australia. He observed that Shincheonji is a global movement, and that developments in South Korea can touch its members in many countries. He referred to Articles 18 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Massimo Introvigne, Managing Director of CESNUR and Editor-in-Chief of Bitter Winter, referred to the United Nations Mandela Rules. He reflected that these standards tend to favour house arrest rather than imprisonment for a person of 95 accused of a non-violent matter. He suggested that the charges, which relate to political participation by members of a religious community, would benefit from careful reflection.

A shared invitation

The organisations encouraged the authorities, the media and the wider international community to follow

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developments with attention to due process, proportionality and the equal protection of rights. They made further documentation available to support continued reporting.

The organisations described their contribution as one offered in a spirit of goodwill, and of welcome towards communities of every belief.

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