

Protection of Human Rights Against Violations of Religious Freedom

Thursday 7 November, 2024

South Korean local government cancels international event with 30,000 participants from 78 countries, causing international damage.

On 29 October, an administrative decision by a South Korean government agency triggered international controversy, raising concerns over religious freedom and resulting in considerable financial loss.

The "Religious Leaders Forum and Graduation Ceremony," a joint initiative by two prominent religious organisations, was scheduled to take place in Paju, South Korea. The event was anticipated to attract over 30,000 participants from 57 countries, including 1,000 religious leaders representing Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

However, the Gyeonggi Tourism Organisation, a public entity under Gyeonggi Province, abruptly cancelled the venue rental without prior notice. This last-minute decision has led to significant financial damage for the international event. Organisers of the event stated that the cancellation constitutes an unconstitutional act of discrimination against a particular religion, violating religious freedom, human rights, and due process of law.

The hosting organisations, the Association for Buddhist National Unification of Korea and the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, reported that they had received official confirmation on 23 and 28 October that there was no plan to cancel. They also claimed that the unilateral cancellation was an unreasonable administrative action targeting a specific religious group. They further emphasised that other events scheduled for the same day were unaffected, suggesting that the cancellation was "an administrative decision influenced by opposition from a specific religious group," which "violates the principle of separation of church and state guaranteed by the Constitution."

The Gyeonggi Tourism Organisation cited security concerns related to recent North Korean actions and the planned activities of a North Korean defector group as reasons for the cancellation. However, it was noted that other events, such as civilian bike rides and foreign tourist visits to the DMZ, were allowed within the same designated area.

The incident has reignited international debate about religious freedom and tolerance in South Korea. The U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report has previously raised concerns such as the prosecution of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus and the government's refusal to approve the construction of a mosque.

The Association for Buddhist National Unification of Korea and the Shincheonji Church of Jesus are calling on the South Korean government to respect religious freedom, uphold human rights, and reverse this unjust decision. They urge international organisations to monitor the situation and take appropriate action to protect religious freedom.

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