

Unification Church to allocate up to 10 bn Yen (USD\$67 million) for compensation

Tomihiko Tanaka
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Japan branch head apologizes over forced donations but denies wrongdoing by church



Tomihiko Tanaka, head of the Unification Church's Japan branch, bows at a press conference on Nov. 7 in Tokyo. (Photo by Rie Ishii)

TOKYO (Kyodo) -- The Unification Church's Japan branch said Tuesday it plans to allocate up to 10 billion yen (\$67 million) to the Japanese government to cover possible compensation for former believers and their families over forced donations amid concerns that it would transfer its assets overseas.

At a press conference in Tokyo, Tomihiko Tanaka, the branch's head, expressed remorse over last month's request by the government for a court order to dissolve the religious organization over its aggressive donation solicitation tactics but stressed that he could not accept it.

"From the perspective of religious freedom and the rule of law, it is absolutely impossible to accept," Tanaka said.

He offered his "sincere apology" for the circumstances that led to the situation but clarified that the apology did not equate to an acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the church toward former believers as "it is difficult to accept that all compensation claims are valid."

The branch's plan to set aside a pool of funds for compensation comes as Japanese lawmakers discuss

ways to ensure that the assets of the South Korean religious movement's Japanese affiliate will stay in the country and be used to help victims.

Tanaka dismissed the need for an asset freeze, saying, "We are not considering transferring funds overseas until court proceedings for the dissolution order are finalized."

He added that while the organization had addressed 664 refund requests totaling around 4.4 billion yen since July last year and would continue to assess claims, it would not be possible to comply with every request.

A group of lawyers supporting victims in Japan said about 130 people have been confirmed as victims of the religious group's forced donations, with damages adding up to an estimated sum of over 4 billion yen. However, the lawyers believe there are far more unconfirmed cases, meaning the total could end up being about 100 billion yen.

Noting that progress has been made in addressing donation claims and implementing reforms, Tanaka said the "time is becoming ripe" to pass the baton to the next generation, indicating that the decision would be left to the group's board of directors.

Tuesday's press conference was Tanaka's third since the religious body came under renewed scrutiny due to the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July last year.

The shooter, whose mother made large donations as a follower of the Unification Church, has said he was upset with the religious group's perceived connections with Abe.

The government filed the request to the Tokyo District Court for a dissolution order on Oct. 13, saying its nearly yearlong investigation into the group found repeated malicious and illegal acts at an organizational level, including soliciting large donations from its followers.