

## Forced Conversion Still a Problem in Japan

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March 31, 2015



Each year, approximately ten members of the Unification Church in Japan are victims of kidnapping, forcible confinement, and faith breaking. Toshiaki Asano, 32, a convert to the Unification Church in Japan, was released at the beginning of March after being held by his family since the beginning of January. Though Toshiaki was released, no charges have been brought against his abductors, and now Japanese Unificationists fear that another man may be suffering the same fate.

Masato Ishibashi, 26, has been missing since January 2014 after visiting his parents' home in Chiba Prefecture. Judging from the circumstances surrounding his disappearance, local Unificationists are convinced that he is being held against his will in an attempt to persuade him to discard his faith.

Chiba police have been informed on several occasions, but have offered little support for over a year. Unfortunately, this kind of inaction from local officials is all too familiar for Unificationists in Japan and other countries, where faith breaking practices are seen as a "family issue." Even though kidnapping and confinement are illegal in Japan, a country that purports to uphold freedom of religion, police are notoriously slow to act and often turn a blind eye. It has taken decades for citizens to gain any kind of traction.

Kidnapping and confinement of Unificationists have taken place for nearly fifty years, with the number of those kidnapped estimated at about 4,300. Those who are kidnapped often experience horrific conditions, including a woman who was raped by a deprogrammer and a man who fell from a balcony while trying to escape, nearly dying from his injuries. Many of the victims suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological issues.

Only in the last few years have advocates seen any kind of action against these clear human rights violations. In January 2010, victims formed the Japanese Victims Association against Religious Kidnapping and Forced Conversion, and in November 2014, Mr. Toru Goto, a representative of the organization and a Unificationist who had been confined for 12 years, won a civil judgment against members of his family and others involved, who were ordered to pay 22 million yen (\$183,000). At the time, despite the absence of criminal charges and a meager financial judgment, advocates were hopeful that this case would be a turning point in the fight for gaining justice and deterring further crimes.

The fight goes on, however, with new cases of confinement, and even Mr. Goto's family filing an appeal to the Supreme Court. The Japanese Victims Association continues with various activities aimed at eliminating the problem; however, it often is limited by the local law enforcement and judicial system. The group has since reached out to Western countries to raise awareness of human rights, and has called for other nations to put pressure on Japan.

As a result, an international human rights NGO based in Brussels, Belgium, known as Human Rights without Frontiers International (HRWF), issued a report in late December 2011, outlining the reality of kidnapping and the confinement of Unificationists. This report was referenced in the International Religious Freedom Report issued annually by the U.S. State Department. Furthermore, the United Nations Human Rights Committee, based in Geneva, Switzerland, within the UN European Headquarters, issued a report in July 2014, expressing concern about the kidnapping and confinement of Unificationists in Japan, and recommending that the Japanese government take effective measures against the problem.

Though support is mounting, these latest cases show that the problem is still very much a troubling reality. The Japanese Victims Association encourages anyone who is interested in staying up to date on the latest news to sign up for its newsletter, which details all intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, and the specific situation in Japan. The association also says that spreading awareness is one of the main ways that people can support the fight for justice for the victims and stop these crimes from happening.