

FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Holy Mother Han's health is a Major Media Issue

Knut Holdhus
February 5, 2026



Worries about [Hak Ja Han](#)'s health condition. Illustration: Chat GPT



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su (2025)



South Korean media raises the alarm over worsening health of 82-year-old religious leader held in pre-trial detention in tiny cell since September.

In recent days, a growing public debate in South Korea has centered not on the guilt or innocence of a defendant, but on a more fundamental question: how should a modern legal system treat the health and human rights of an elderly person standing trial? The case involves [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) - also called [Mother Han](#) - president of the [Family Federation](#) and a globally recognized religious leader, whose reported deterioration in health while in detention has raised concerns that extend beyond one individual case and into the broader values of the justice system itself.

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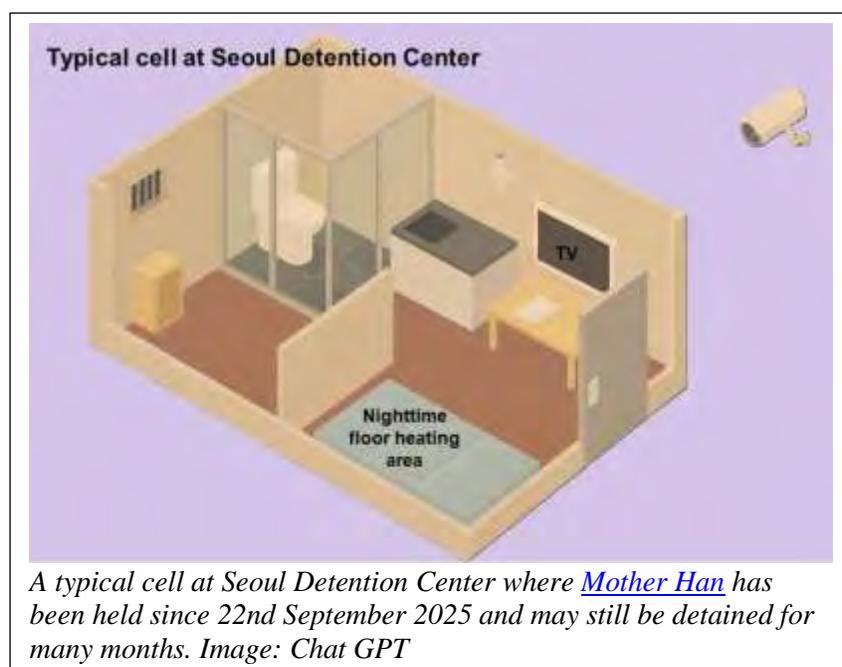
The issue is raised 4th February by religious affairs reporter Jeon Seong-su in his religion column in the daily newspaper Segye Ilbo. The headline was "[Controversy Over President Hak Ja Han's Worsening Health - Now an Explanation Is Needed](#)"

Jeong writes that according to reporting 4th February by Kukmin Ilbo, a Korean daily based on Christian values, [Mother Han](#) - now well into her 80s - has been detained at the Seoul Detention Center for more than four months while undergoing trial.

Recently disclosed information suggests that during her detention she has experienced multiple falls within a short period, is legally blind, and suffers from several underlying medical conditions. Her legal team has cited these circumstances in a renewed request for bail, though the court has not yet issued a final ruling.

These revelations did not emerge suddenly. For weeks, concerns about [Mother Han](#)'s physical condition had circulated quietly on social media and among legal observers. Reports of repeated falls during transfers to court hearings, difficulty standing or walking, and occasional absences from court due to

health issues gradually accumulated. While such accounts were initially regarded as unconfirmed or speculative, their persistence created unease among the public - especially as they involved an elderly detainee whose trial was already well underway.



What changed the nature of the discussion was the involvement of mainstream journalism. When established media outlets like Dong-a Ilbo, MBC, JTBC News reported specific dates, circumstances, and medical context based on investigative reporting, the issue moved decisively from rumor to public accountability. At that point, the question ceased to be whether the claims were inconvenient or politically sensitive. Instead, it became whether society had received sufficient explanation about how the judicial system is balancing legal procedure against health risks and human

dignity.

According to [Jeong's report](#), from a medical perspective, the reported symptoms are not trivial. Repeated falls in elderly individuals are widely recognized as a serious warning sign, often indicating declining physical resilience and increased vulnerability to complications. Injuries involving the pelvis or lower body can significantly impair mobility and independence, while preexisting cardiovascular conditions - such as atrial fibrillation - can turn physical stress into a potentially life-threatening situation. For defendants in such condition, the physical demands of detention and frequent court appearances may carry risks far beyond inconvenience.

This raises a difficult but unavoidable question: is continued detention the most reasonable option in such circumstances? The law permits detention when there is concern about flight risk or destruction of evidence, and courts are obligated to weigh these factors carefully. No serious observer disputes that the judiciary must apply these standards impartially. However, impartiality does not require ignoring context. When a defendant is elderly, medically fragile, and already deep into the trial process, the absence of clear public explanation can itself undermine confidence in the system.



Importantly, this discussion is not about granting special treatment to a powerful figure. International human-rights norms make clear that special consideration for vulnerable individuals is not privilege, but responsibility. The United Nations' "Nelson Mandela Rules", which outline minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners, recommend that detention of elderly or seriously ill individuals be used only as a last resort. Where incarceration poses serious risk to life or dignity, authorities are urged to actively consider alternative measures. These principles are widely accepted among democratic and developed nations, including South Korea.

At the heart of the matter lies a deeper misunderstanding about equality before the law. Equality does not mean treating every individual identically, regardless of circumstance. Rather, substantive equality requires reasonable accommodation for

differing conditions so that justice does not become mechanically cruel. Applying the same measures to a healthy adult and a medically fragile octogenarian may satisfy formal rules while violating the spirit of fairness those rules are meant to serve.

The [Segye Ilbo article](#) points out that the international dimension of this case adds further weight. [Hak Ja](#)

[Han](#) (한학자) is not only a domestic figure but a religious leader known well beyond Korea's borders. How her health and human rights are handled during trial will inevitably shape international perceptions of the Korean judiciary's treatment of elderly and vulnerable defendants. This is not a threat or pressure on the courts, but a reality of global scrutiny in an interconnected world.

Transparency, in this context, is not a concession - it is a safeguard. Clear explanations of how medical assessments are conducted, how detention decisions are justified, and what safeguards are in place to protect health and dignity help preserve judicial authority rather than weaken it. Silence, by contrast, allows speculation to flourish and trust to erode.



Justice, after all, is not something that exists only at the moment a verdict is handed down. It is also judged by how a legal system behaves during the process itself - how it treats those who are weak, dependent, or nearing the limits of physical endurance. If an elderly defendant were to suffer irreversible harm during trial due to inadequate consideration of health risks, the damage would not be confined to one individual or one case. It would mark a failure of the system's moral credibility, regardless of the final legal outcome.

It is possible that concerns about [Hak Ja Han](#)'s health are exaggerated, incomplete, or ultimately unfounded. If so, clear disclosure and explanation would quickly put those fears to rest. But if the concerns are real, then requesting explanation and

appropriate measures is neither excessive nor political - it is a legitimate civic demand. The strength of the rule of law is revealed not in how firmly it restrains the powerful, but in how carefully it protects the vulnerable.

At minimum, a society committed to human dignity must ensure that its legal processes do not place life itself at unnecessary risk. Upholding that standard is not an obstacle to justice. It is what gives justice its meaning.

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- February 4, 2026
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State interference in Japan and South Korea draws scrutiny at international religious freedom summit in Washington DC

Tokyo, 4th February 2026 – Published as an article in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#).

International Religious Freedom Summit Held in the U.S.

Persecution Domino Effect from Japan and South Korea

Concerns Raised by U.S. Faith Office Advisers over Detention of Elderly Hak Ja Han

by Yuya Kawase (川瀬 裕也)

The International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit 2026, aimed at promoting freedom of religion worldwide, was held in Washington, D.C., over a two-day period beginning on 2nd February. Government officials, religious leaders, and human rights activists from various countries participated, engaging in discussions on increasingly serious challenges to religious freedom around the world, including issues surrounding the Japanese government's request for a dissolution order against the religious corporation *Family Federation for World Peace and Unification* (formerly the Unification Church).

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At a dinner reception on the first day. Paula White. Senior

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Adviser to the *White House Faith Office*, emphasized that Pastor Son Hyun-bo (손현보), who had been detained in South Korea, was released as a result of efforts by the Trump administration. She appealed for cooperation among people who follow God and their conscience, declaring that "chains are broken, and freedom prevails."

At the same time, she referred to the continued detention of Hak Ja Han (한학사), president of the *Family Federation*, expressing "serious concerns" regarding her health, dignity, and human rights. She further named Japan and South Korea explicitly, calling on them to protect religious freedom "fully, fairly, and consistently."

Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich also delivered a video message, stressing that religious freedom is "an unalienable right given by the Creator." He pointed out that state intervention between God and citizens represents "the essence of the growing crisis in Japan and South Korea." He went on to criticize as "a grave abuse of power" the situation in which the 83-year-old Han, who suffers from visual impairment and difficulty walking, remains in detention, and urged the South Korean government to consider her release.



Masaichi Hori, here in Gapyeong, South Korea 24th Aug. 2025. Photo: FFWPU

Subsequently, Masaichi Hori (堀正一), president of the Japan-based religious corporation *Family Federation*, took the stage and cited reports that in December last year South Korean President Lee Jae-myung (이재명) instructed the Minister of Justice to investigate Japan's move toward a dissolution order and examine whether similar measures could be applied in South Korea. Hori warned that "a domino effect has begun in which religious persecution spreads to other democratic nations, Asian countries, and the world."

He further quoted Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne, who has argued that "China is the force driving this domino effect," and appealed that "only the United States and its allies can put a stop to religious persecution."

In addition to these speeches, panel discussions were held featuring speakers such as Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom* (USCIRF); Thomas McDevitt, chairman of *The Washington Times*; and international lawyer Tatsuki Nakayama (中山達樹), among others.

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Featured image above: Paula White, Senior Adviser to the White House Faith Office, delivers a speech 2nd February 2026 in Washington, D.C., USA. Photo: Yuya Kawase (川瀬 裕也)

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Pastor Son Hyun-bo of the large Segyero Church in Busan, released 30th January 2026 after 143 days of detention for warning his congregation about laws that would criminalize preaching biblical teaching on sexuality. He is however now effectively silenced as the court sentenced him to 6 months, suspended for 1 year, which means he cannot publicly criticize the current administration's policies. Here August 2025. Photo: Bitter Winter

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