FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Path to Justice for Victims of Faith-Breaking?

Knut Holdhus
October 11, 2026



From the panel of speakers at the conference in Het Nutshuis in The Hague, Netherlands on 21st September 2026, from left: Cristian Gonzalez, Hans Noot, Javier Ruiz, Haydee Dijkstal

The troubled path toward justice for more than 4,000 Japanese victims of coercive faith-breaking ignored by the authorities for over 50 years

A conference entitled "The Vital Role of the Statute of Rome for the Protection of Religious Freedom" was held in the conference center Het Nutshuis in The Hague, Netherlands on the International Day of Peace, 21st September 2026.

See also The Rome Statute: Safeguarding Religious Freedom?

See also Japan's Treatment of Faith Headed to The Hague?



Willem Koetsier, representing the Family Federation, speaking in The Hague on 21st September 2026. Screenshot from video by FFWPU, imroved resolution by Grok xAI, October 2026.



Toru Goto speaking in The Hague on 21st September 2026

Willem Koetsier, representing the host of the conference, mentioned that this day was established by the United Nations in 1981 to commemorate and strengthen the ideals of peace. He commented that, although much has been achieved since then, recently there has been some regression in the quest for world peace.

This was the second event this year organized by the Dutch Family Federation for World Peace and Unification focusing on serious religious freedom violations in Japan, particularly against the Family Federation, formerly known as the Unification Church. The dissolution of the Family Federation, the first of its kind in Japan, is seen as a concerning precedent that could impact religious freedom globally. The conference called attention to the importance of upholding human rights and the rule of law in protecting religious freedom. The event was moderated by Hans Noot, Vice Chair of the Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers.

The keynote speaker from Japan, Toru Goto, described the persecution of religious groups in Japan and South Korea, highlighting the cases of Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, co-founder of the Family Federation, and Chairman Lee Man-hee, founder of Shincheonji Church of Jesus [See editor's note 1 below]. Goto emphasized the importance of protecting religious freedom and avoiding the use of theological labels or political disagreements as substitutes for evidence.

See also Apartment Turned Prison: 12 Years to Break Faith

Mr. Goto recounted his experience of being confined and subjected to faith-breaking [See editor's note 2 below] efforts by his family and professional deprogrammers. He was completely isolated, denied basic

rights, and subjected to psychological and physical abuse for over a decade. He eventually resorted to a hunger strike in an attempt to persuade his captors to free him, but was unsuccessful, leading to prolonged suffering and near starvation.

After being confined for over 12 years, Mr. Goto was freed in 2008. He subsequently filed a civil lawsuit against his family members and the deprogrammers and won a judgement in 2015. This victory led to a near cessation of kidnapping and deprogramming [See editor's note 2 below] in Japan. Up until that time, over 4,300 Family Federation members in Japan had been forcibly detained and subjected to deprogramming [See editor's note 2 below] with 70% having been compelled to renounce their faith.

The case of Mr. Goto is part of a larger pattern of religious persecution. This persecution, involving abduction and coercion to renounce faith, has been ignored by the Japanese government, despite evidence and complaints. The Rome Statute, which Japan ratified in 2007, could provide redress for victims of these crimes, which may constitute crimes against humanity.



The International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague, Netherlands. Photo: Tony Webster

A panel consisting of Mr. Noot and three lawyers specializing in international criminal law, Javier Ruiz, Haydee Dijkstal and Cristian Gonzalez, then discussed the importance of integrating human rights into litigation strategies, particularly in cases involving crimes against humanity. The need for a comprehensive approach that considers the impact on victims, the role of strategic communication, and the potential for policy change was emphasized. The discussion also highlighted the importance of using various legal forums, including international and domestic courts, to address these issues.

The right to a remedy under international human rights law encompasses various forms, including judicial remedies, restitution, compensation and rehabilitation. Participation is crucial, allowing victims to have agency and a meaningful voice in the process, as recognised by institutions like the European Court of Human Rights and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.

The ICC and various national courts claiming universal jurisdiction are investigating the case of the Family Federation in Japan, focusing on the practice of confinement and deprogramming [See editor's note 2 below] and its impact on victims. These cases aim to challenge the narrative surrounding the religious organization and highlight the importance of freedom of religion. While the ICC respects state sovereignty, it also promotes accountability and justice for the victims.

International courts are being considered for these cases in Japan due to a lack of action by Japanese authorities. Their involvement is key to encourage Japan to take responsibility for the abuses.

However, the goal is for the cases to be handled within Japan if possible. The process involves a preliminary examination, a formal investigation, and potential arrest warrants, with victim involvement throughout.

The panel emphasized the importance of human rights, particularly freedom of belief, for all individuals, regardless of their religious affiliation. They highlighted the challenges faced by minority religions, often labeled as "cults", and the resulting discrimination and societal pressure.

The panel called for greater understanding, respect, and protection of religious freedom for all.

See also The Rome Statute: Safeguarding Religious Freedom?

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Text: Randy Orr, observer

[Editor's note 1: Shincheonji, officially known as Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation.

Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it. He teaches that South Korea is the location where the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are actively playing out in real-time, making it the epicenter of the final harvest. Shincheonji focuses on filling the literal 144,000 slots of the 12 Tribes mentioned in Revelation. Once this number of truly sealed, flawless believers is completed, they believe they will rule as kings and priests over the rest of humanity.]

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> Critics of forced de-conversion argue that it violates fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, religion, and association. Reports of psychological trauma and accusations of unlawful detention have sparked debates over its ethical and legal implications. In response, some religious groups, particularly NRMs, have lobbied for greater protections against such practices.
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> Japanese courts have been inconsistent in addressing cases of coercive faith-breaking. While some verdicts have condemned the practice as illegal detention, others have been more lenient, citing family concerns about "mental health" or alleged "exploitation" as mitigating factors.]

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From the conference in Het Nutshuis in The Hague, Netherlands on 21st September 2026. Photo: FFWPU

A speech by Hans Noot, Associate Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, delivered at a conference on the theme "The Vital Role of the Statute of Rome for the Protection of Religious Freedom", organized by the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification in the Netherlands in commemoration of the International Day of Peace on 21st September 2026 in Het Nutshuis, a conference and meeting facility in The Hague, Netherlands.

See also Japan's Treatment of Faith Headed to The Hague?

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Today is a very important day. As today's moderator and Associate Director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, I would like to place today's discussion in a broader setting.

We meet on the *International Day of Peace* to consider religious freedom and the Rome Statute.

Peace requires more than the absence of war. It requires respect of conscience, dignity – we talk about that a lot – due process and equal citizenship.

Our concern is that the restrictive policies against certain religions rarely remain confined to one country. A precedent created in one democracy can become a model for another, while language portraying minority religions as dangerous or illegitimate can cross borders even faster.

That's why Japan is not an isolated case.

After the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, you might remember that public and political attention focused on the Family Federation.

Allegations of coercion, fraud and other unlawful conduct must be investigated, and the victims must have access to justice. Religious organizations are not above the law. It makes sense, right?

But responsibility must be established through fair proceedings and attributed to those responsible. Restrictions must be lawful, necessary and the allegations against the individuals must not become collective punishment of an entire religious community.

In March, the *Tokyo High Court* upheld the dissolution of Family Federation as a religious corporation. In June, Japan's Supreme Court rejected its final appeal. The order is now final, and liquidation is underway.

This is unprecedented in Japan. It's the first dissolution of a religious corporation based on unlawful conduct under civil rather than criminal law.

The order does not formally prohibit individual believers from contributing their faith. Yet removing legal personality and liquidating institutional assets profoundly affects communal religious life.

Whatever one's opinion about the Federation, this precedent matters beyond one movement.

We now see the troubling echo in South Korea, where I was a couple of weeks ago. President Lee Jae-myung asked his

Asked his government to learn from Japan's dissolution case: Lee Jae-

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ago. President Lee Jae-myung asked his government to examine Japan's precedent.



*Asked his government to learn from Japan's dissolution case: **Lee Jae-myung**, President of South Korea since 4th June 2025. Here on 29th October 2025, at the Hilton Hotel in Gyeongju, South Korea. Official White House Photo by Molly Riley. Public domain image. Cropped*

At the presidential meeting with representatives of established religious traditions, leaders described the Family Federation and the *Shincheonji Church* – Shincheonji means New Heaven, New Earth – [See editor's note 1 below] as pseudo-religious and heretical organizations and called for harmful religious bodies to be dissolved with assets used to compensate the victims.

This is what I mean by "export", not necessarily coordination between governments in this case Japan and South Korea, but the conscious borrowing of a precedent, its vocabulary and its underlying logic. The human consequences are visible.

Dr. Hak Ja Han, known to the members of the Family Federation as Mother Han, is the 83-year-old leader of the Family Federation.

After months of detention, she was sentenced on 31st August to two years imprisonment on political funding, bribery and embezzlement charges.

She denies wrongdoing, and her detention is currently being suspended on grounds of health. She has particular heart conditions.

***Lee Man-hee** (이만희 – 95), founder and chairman of Shincheonji (New Heaven and Earth). Photo: MBC PD수첩 / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp*

Chairman Lee Man-hee, the 95-year-old leader of the Shincheonji Church, has been held in pretrial detention since June on charges linked to the alleged mass enrollment of its followers in a political party.

By the way, I visited him a month and a half ago before we did a press conference in Seoul on this matter. He has not been convicted in these proceedings, and yet he's in pretrial detentions.

He doesn't have a bed. He lies on the floor basically, a 95-year-old man.

The principle is simple. Churches are not above the law, but believers are not beneath it. A democracy may punish proven unlawful acts, but it should not use theological labels, public hostility or political disagreement as substitutes for evidence, nor extinguish legal personality when targeted remedies can protect victims and the public.

proven unlawful acts, but it should not use theological labels, public hostility or political disagreement as substitutes for evidence, nor extinguish legal personality when targeted remedies can protect victims and the public.

Today's reference to the Rome Statute also calls for precision. Not every violation of freedom of religion or belief is a crime against humanity. Article 7 requires, among other elements, a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population.

The question is, "Is this the case?" We are not announcing a legal verdict. We're asking when acts, policies and patterns become serious enough to demand international attention and accountability.



Mr. Toru Goto will shortly remind us that persecution may also arise when authorities fail to protect a believer from private coercion and forced deconversion [See editor's note 2 below].

Later, our legal speakers will examine the limits of possibilities of the Rome

Statute.

As we listen, I invite us to keep four questions in mind.

Are state measures based on proven individual conduct necessary and proportionate?

Is the state neutral towards all beliefs, including unpopular ones?



Japan turned a blind eye to Toru Goto and 4300 other victims of long-term forcible detention and coercive faith-breaking. Here, Toru Goto in 2023 in Tokyo. Photo: FOREF

And is a precedent first used against one minority, now being prepared to be used against another?

On this *International Day of Peace*, let us remember that peace begins with freedom of conscience. It is inherited to all of us, the freedom to believe, the freedom to not believe, to change one's belief and to live according to one's conscience while respecting the rights of others.

With that responsibility before us, I will invite Mr. Toru Goto to come forward and give his presentation.

Transcribed from video recording of the event by the Family Federation. Slightly edited.

See also Japan's Treatment of Faith Headed to The Hague?

See also Path to Justice for Victims of Faith-Breaking?

***Featured image** above: Hans Noot, Associate Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, delivering his message at the conference on the theme "The Vital Role of the Statute of Rome for the Protection of Religious Freedom", in The Hague, Netherlands on 21st September 2026. Screenshot from video by FFWPU. Improved resolution by ChatGPT, 10th October 2026.*

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***Also subject to faith-breaking attempts**: Members of **Soka Gakkai**. Here students belonging to the faith in 2001. Photo: Wikimedia*

Here students belonging to the faith in 2007. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC ASA 3.0 Unp. Cropped

However, also Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist-based lay organization with more than 8 million Japanese members, and affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, has occasionally been subject to faith-breaking attempts.

The practice gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents or concerned family members often hired faith-breakers who taught them how to abduct and forcibly detain believers. Almost all such cases involved confining the individual believer and cutting him or her off from the religious community. During the confinement, the believer was subjected to intense questioning or indoctrination designed to break his or her faith. The aim was to "rescue" the person from what the family often had been tricked by faith-breakers or lawyers to regard as harmful influence from the religious organization.

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