

February 15, 2012

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary,

We write as an informal group of scholars, religious leaders and human rights advocates cooperating to express our serious concern about the continuing reports of forced religious de-conversion in Japan, which the Japanese government does little to stop or punish. Misguided relatives, usually acting on the advice of “consultants,” have abducted and confined hundreds, possibly thousands, of victims in an attempt to force them to renounce their faith. This violates a fundamental principle of human freedom, enshrined in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 18, namely that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, alone or in community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

In Japan, skilled faith-breakers, often clergy of a religion opposed to that of the victim, have advised relatives to confine adult members of groups such as the Unification Church or the Jehovah’s Witnesses for prolonged periods, pressuring them to renounce their faith, and refusing to release them until they recant. The perpetrators describe these criminal confinements and forced de-conversion attempts as merely “family discussions” in which the faith-breaker acts as an “expert” or “consultant.” Sadly, the Japanese government and police seem to support the view that the issue is a “family matter” rather than an issue of fundamental human rights.

A report by the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers recently confirmed the above-mentioned situation, which has also been mentioned for more than a decade in the *International Religious Freedom Report* of the U.S. State Department. The HRWF report documents “the abduction and confinement of Japanese citizens for the purpose of religious de-conversion, and the failure of Japanese police and judicial authorities to investigate and prosecute those responsible for such cases of domestic violence.” It concludes that “the failure to provide the victims of such kidnappings with equal protection under the law, and the impunity of those responsible, constitute a serious violation of the Japanese people’s constitutionally guaranteed rights and the international human rights standards to which Japan is legally bound.”

We, the undersigned individuals and organizations, would like to add our voices to the growing list of people and institutions who insist that Japan must live up to international standards of human rights by protecting the rights of religious minorities. Japan’s own law and constitution clearly commit its government to uphold religious freedom and to protect its citizens from unlawful confinement. Yet it is reported that police agencies continue to refuse to receive missing-persons reports from non-relatives, even when it is clear that the suspected crimes of

abduction and unlawful imprisonment have been carried out by the victim's family. Prosecutors consistently decline to bring criminal charges against the known perpetrators. Courts commonly dismiss civil suits on the grounds of the issue being a "family matter."

We concur with the 1974 statement of the U.S. National Council of Churches, which stated: "The Governing Board of the NCC believes that religious liberty is one of the most precious rights of humankind, which is grossly violated by forcible abduction and protracted efforts to change a person's religious commitments by duress. Kidnapping for ransom is heinous indeed, but kidnapping to compel religious de-conversion is equally criminal." We further agree with the conclusion of Human Rights Without Frontiers that: "unsolicited or forceful exit counseling of converts to new or other religious movements for the purpose of religious de-conversion in Japan must be unambiguously condemned as incompatible with human rights principles and eradicated."

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

Individuals