

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF ROUNDTABLE BRUSSELS - EU

To all members of the EU Parliament
To all EU States Ambassadors to the EU

Brussels, the 23 July 2019

Copies to:

Mr. Jan Figel, EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion

Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Re: Asylum seekers from The Church of Almighty God (CAG)

Dear Members of the European Parliament,
Dear Ambassadors,

We write as an informal group of organisations and individuals who are scholars, religious and secular leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners.

One of our concerns is the situation of refugees who flee religious persecution. Unfortunately, legitimate concerns about immigration often translate into a general societal hostility to refugees, whose situation is obviously different from the predicament of economic migrants. Religion-based asylum seekers are women and men who would risk their liberty and their life if they would go back to their country of origin.

This letter focuses on a specific case, asylum seekers from China who belongs to The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Christian new religious movement that is severely persecuted there. The U.S. State Department's *Report on International Religious Freedom* for the year 2018, published on June 21, 2019, reported claims that in the year 2018 only, Chinese "authorities arrested 11,111 of its members", and "subjected 525 of its members to 'torture or forced indoctrination.'" The report also mentioned the cases of three CAG members who were tortured to death while in detention. According to updated CAG statistics, at least 105 members of the Church have been "persecuted to death" to date.

The USCIRF (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) similarly noted in its *2019 Annual Report* that "in 2018, the Chinese government harassed and arrested thousands of followers of ...[T]he Church of Almighty God. Many of those detained

during the year... suffered torture and other abuses, in some cases resulting in deaths or unexplained disappearances while in custody.”

The Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, summarizing NGOs claims at the 2019 Universal Periodic Revision of China, mentioned that “during 2014-2018, the Chinese Communist Party’s monitoring, arrest, and persecution had caused at least 500,000 Church of Almighty God (CAG) Christians to flee their home, and several hundred thousand families had been torn apart.”

We do not take any position on theology, but defend the human rights of believers of all faiths and no faith. We note, on the other hand, that a robust scholarly literature has clarified that The Church of Almighty God has been accused by Chinese propaganda of crimes it has never committed, and that the United Nations themselves interpret Art. 18 UDHR, on freedom of thought, conscience or religion, stating that, “Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions ... The [United Nations] therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established” (*General Comment no. 22 CCPR*).

As of June 2019, 2,322 members of The Church of Almighty God are seeking asylum in the countries of the European Union (plus 33 in Switzerland). Although some recent court decisions are encouraging, so far asylum has been granted only to 265 of them, or 11,4%, to be compared to a 100% ratio of favourable decisions in New Zealand and 73% in Canada, two other countries where members of The Church of Almighty God often seek asylum. 307 of these refugees have received departure orders in the European Union and are at risk to be repatriated to China every day. 227 of them are in France. A few have been actually deported. Scholars and NGOs have documented that those who are deported are normally arrested in China or “disappear.” The case of Ms. Zhao Xueliang, deported from Germany on August 31, 2018, is typical in this respect, and generated vocal protests from the Red Cross, the German Evangelical Church (EKD), and several NGOs.

Although these countries are not part of the European Union, the situation of The Church of Almighty God refugees is dramatic in South Korea and Japan, with 1,038 and 276 asylum seekers respectively. None has been accepted, and hundreds are at risk of being deported from countries whose rate of granted asylums in general is among the lowest in the world.

Asylum is not granted by commissions and courts in Europe and elsewhere for four main reasons, none of them persuasive. In some cases, authorities are not well informed on the general situation of religious persecution in China, notwithstanding the large and growing number of international documents denouncing it. In others, they are not familiar with The Church of Almighty God and its persecution in China, or rely on false information supplied by the Chinese embassies or outdated country of origin information (COI). Some authorities require evidence that the asylum seeker has been personally persecuted, while international conventions clearly state that a reasonable “fear of persecution” is sufficient. And others regard the fact that the refugee obtained

a valid passport as evidence that she or he was not persecuted, ignoring the literature on the loopholes of the Chinese system and on the widespread corruption in a country where fugitives can get a passport and the complacency of airport border officers as long as they have money and connections.

Being sent back to China for The Church of Almighty God refugees not only means that they will not be free to profess their faith. They will seriously risk arrest, “torture and other abuses” and “death,” to quote again the USCIRF 2019 Annual Report.

We respectfully urge members of the European Parliament and ambassadors to listen to the voice of the voiceless and to ask their countries to accept The Church of Almighty God refugees, making sure that the principle of non-refoulement will be respected in all countries and victims will not be sent back to their torturers.

We also respectfully urge European Union countries to represent these concerns to friendly countries where the situation of The Church of Almighty God refugees is dramatic, including South Korea and Japan.

We would be pleased to supply further documents and meet you in person.

Yours sincerely,

Signed:

Organizations:

ALL FAITHS NETWORK – UK

ASSOCIATION FOR THE DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (ADHRRF)

BITTER WINTER MAGAZINE

CAPLC – CAP FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

CENTER FOR STUDIES ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION BELIEF AND CONSCIENCE (LIREC)

CESNUR

EUROPEAN INTERRELIGIOUS FORUM FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (EIFRF)

FOB – EUROPEAN FEDERATION FOR FREEDOM OF BELIEF

FOREF – FORUM FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM EUROPE

GERARD NOODT FOUNDATION FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

HUMAN RIGHTS WITHOUT FRONTIERS INT'L (BRUSSELS)

ORLIR - INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATORY OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY OF REFUGEES

VERENIGINGSKERK VAN NEDERLAND

Individuals:

Stephen Eric Bronner

Board of Governors Professor of Political Science

Director of Global Relations

Executive Committee of the UNESCO Chair for Genocide Prevention

Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights (CGHR)

Jamil Maqsood

Director for Brussels & Eastern Europe.

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Association for the Defense Of Human Rights and Religious Freedom (ADHRRF)

Frans de Wolff

Protestant Church in the Netherlands