

**Refugee Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

**Research Response Number:** KOR33212  
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**Questions**

- 1. Is there any up to date information on the cult Young Sang Kyo?**
- 2. Is there a problem with ‘cults’ and ‘gangs’ in South Korea?**
- 3. Is the South Korean police force effective and would they investigate claims of violence threatened by cults and gangs?**

**RESPONSE**

**1. Is there any up to date information on the cult Young Sang Kyo?**

Several previous RRT Research Responses have provided information on the *Young Sang Kyo* (also known as *Yeong Saeng Kho*, *Young Sang Gyo*, *Yongsaenggyo*, Eternal Life Church, Everlasting Life Church, or 영원한 생명 교회). Sources indicate that the *Young Sang Kyo* was formed by Cho Hi-song in 1981, and followers were taught that the world would end soon and only a chosen few would be selected for heaven. Since its formation, the church has been involved in a number of controversial incidents:

- 1984: Three followers confessed to kidnapping and killing a previous cult member
- 1992: Family members of followers alleged the cult had taken their property
- 1994: Church implicated in murder of Tahk Myong-hwan, a religious watchdog.
- 1994: Leader Cho Hi-song jailed for two years for embezzling follower’s donations.
- 1994: Following embezzlement charges, it was alleged the church had disbanded
- 1998: The alleged leader of the cult, Woo Jong-min and six followers were found burned to death in a suspected self-immolation ritual.

(See for example RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response KOR17424*, 11 November – Attachment 1; RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response*

KOR16295, 11 November – Attachment 2; RRT Country Research 1998, *Research Response KOR13115*, 13 July – Attachment 3).

Little other information was found on the activities of the Church in recent years. In 2003 *Joins.com* reported that the bodies of several cult members had been recovered in Gyeonggi province, South Korea, and in 2004 *Joins.com* also reported that Cho Hee-seong (possibly Cho Hi-song), a previous cult-leader of *Yeong Saeng Kho*, had died of a heart attack whilst imprisoned at Seoul Detention Center. No other relevant reports could be found in the searches conducted on the activities of the cult in recent years ('More deaths are tied to religious cult' 2003, *Joins.com*, 16 August – Attachment 4; Su-ki, L. 2004, 'Cult leader linked to killings died', *Joins.com*, 20 June – Attachment 5).

## **2. Is there a problem with 'cults' and 'gangs' in South Korea?**

Little information could be found in the searches conducted on cults in South Korea in recent years. In 2008, several media outlets reported on the extradition of the leader of the *Setsuri* (or 'Providence') cult from China to South Korea following allegations that he had sexually abused followers ('South Korean Cult Leader Arrested In China to be Extradited' 2008, *Kyodo News*, 11 January – Attachment 6; 'China extradites alleged South Korean rapist cult chief' 2008, *Agence France Presse*, 20 February – Attachment 7).

Other, more dated reports indicate that the *Setsuri* cult asked for regular donations from followers. Few reports could be found on the cult's activities in South Korea, where it was initiated, but in August 2006 the *Asahi Evening News* reported on the cult's activities within Japan:

Former members of the cult said the more money they "donated," the higher the recognition they gained in the group, which is believed to have about 2,000 members in Japan, the sources said.

The cult was established by Jung Myung Seok, 61, a South Korean and former Moonie who fled South Korea in 1999 after being accused of sexually abusing a number of female followers. He is currently on Interpol's wanted list.

**According to former cultists in Japan, students, who are believed to account for about half of Setsuri's membership, are required to donate at least 1,000 yen at a regular Sunday service**

**After the students find work, they are told to donate 10 percent of their salaries, as well as their bonuses, the sources said.**

Senior members at each "church" send all the donations from the first week of each month to a female South Korean cultist who is in charge of *Setsuri* activities in Japan, they said.

The other donations are used to cover the operating expenses at each church and for other purposes.

"It was a well-known fact that (the money) was funneled to the guru and the female senior official," said a former member in his 30s who was with the cult for at least 10 years. He said he knew of another man who withdrew his savings totaling tens of millions of yen to help cover Jung's expensive accommodations while he was moving from one country to another.

**Setsuri members are urged to pay additional funds if their church falls short of money and during “special occasions,” such as when the church needs to buy a car.**

**A former member in her 30s living in the Kansai region said she paid about 1.5 million yen a year** (‘The Setsuri (providence) cult collects at least 100 million yen a year from its members and uses some of the funds to help the group leader remain a fugitive from police, sources said’ 2006, *Asahi Evening News*, 1 August – Attachment 8; see also ‘Churches, lawyers and families are planning to take action against an expanding cult led by a former Moonie who is on Interpol’s international wanted list for sexually abusing female followers’ 2006, *Asahi Evening News*, 29 July – Attachment 9).

Another August 2006 report by *Asahi Evening News* commented on crimes relating to the *Setsuri* cult in Japan, and the financial donations required:

A group of lawyers trying to help Japanese members leave the sect has filed a criminal complaint with police against three people in Japan, **including a South Korean woman who is a close aide of the founder, on suspicion of visa offenses and other crimes related to the sect’s activities.** The lawyers say they will also seek to hold the founder criminally liable for his alleged rapes.

Police need to launch an exhaustive investigation into all these allegations against the cult and its founder. A strict crackdown on illegal practices is essential for preventing further victimization of cult followers.

Preaching a doctrine based on unorthodox interpretations of the Bible, Setsuri has gained a sizable following in many countries, including some 2,000 members in Japan. The followers are required to pledge absolute submission to the founder and are forced to live communally and take part in mass weddings among members.

**Followers are evaluated according to the amount of money they donate to the sect. Many young members fall into financial trouble because of their large contributions to the group. The number of parents seeking advice on how to extract their children from the cult is growing rapidly** (‘A religious sect known as Setsuri (providence), which originated in South Korea, is causing serious social problems in Japan’ 2006, *Asahi Evening News*, 19 August – Attachment 10).

Sources suggest that the primary problem with cults in South Korea in recent years has surrounded the sexual abuse of cult followers, and the murder/suicide of followers of the so-called ‘doomsday’ cults. A dated 1999 report on the F.A.C.T.net website, a site dedicated to victims of the abusive practices of religions and cults, suggested that cults were on the rise in South Korea, and they were “notorious for their involvement in swindling scandals, sexual abuse charges, dismemberment of their victims, slave labor, and extortion of money” (‘Cults in South Korea on the rise’ 1999, F.A.C.T.net website, 15 January [http://www.factnet.org/headlines/korean\\_cults.htm](http://www.factnet.org/headlines/korean_cults.htm) – Accessed 22 April 2008 – Attachment 11).

Question 1 of RRT *Research Response KOR33213* from April 2008 addressed the issue of gangs in South Korea. However, no reports could be found in the searches conducted on the links between cults and gangs in South Korea.

### **3. Is the South Korean police force effective and would they investigate claims of violence threatened by cults and gangs?**

Question 2 of RRT *Research Response KOR33213* from April 2008 addressed the effectiveness of the South Korean police force, the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA or NPA) and sources within this differ in their assessment of the KNPA's effectiveness (Research & Information Services 2008, *Research Response KOR33213*, 22 April – Attachment 12; see in particular 'Business Security Information for South Korea: Organised Crime & Corruption' (undated), Security Information Service for Business Overseas website <http://www.sisbo.org.uk/skcorruption.html> – Accessed 17 April 2008 – Attachment 13).

Beyond this, little information could be found on police investigations of claims of violence threatened by cults and gangs. *Research Response KOR33213*, noted above, addressed police investigations of claims involving gangs, but no information could be found in the searches conducted on claims involving the harassment or threat of violence of people by cults.

*Research Response KOR33213* also addresses the issue of police protection, and sources within this note that the "police will also provide full protection to anyone who offers information concerning the activities of gangs" ('Seoul police to crack down on organized crime' 2001, *BBC Monitoring Asia-Pacific*, 6 December – Attachment 14; see also Tae-jong, K. 2007, 'Hanwha CEO Mobilized Gangsters for Revenge', *Korea Times*, 7 May – Attachment 15). However, as noted in *Research Response KOR33213*, no information could be found on the effectiveness of this protection and no other information could be found in the searches conducted on the availability of police protection to people being harassed or threatened by cults (see also Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006, *KOR101074.E – Republic of Korea: Prevalence, activities, and methods of operation of criminal organizations, including Chinese, Japanese, and Russian syndicates; government measures and their effectiveness in reducing the level of crime and protecting victims (January 2004 – March 2006)*, 4 April <http://www.cisr-irb.gc.ca/en/research/rir/?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=450032> – Accessed 17 April 2008 – Attachment 16).

#### **List of Sources Consulted**

##### Internet Sources:

Google <http://www.google.com.au/>  
All the web <http://www.alltheweb.com/>  
Altavista <http://www.altavista.com/>  
Ask <http://www.ask.com/?ax=5>  
Exalead <http://www.exalead.com/search>  
Yahoo! <http://search.yahoo.com/>

##### **Government Information & Reports**

Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb.gc.ca/>  
UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk>  
US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

##### **Non-Government Organisations**

Amnesty International website <http://www.amnesty.org/>  
Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

##### **International News & Politics**

BBC News <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/index.shtml>

Databases:

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

**List of Attachments**

1. RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response KOR17424*, 11 November.
2. RRT Country Research 2003, *Research Response KOR16295*, 11 November.
3. RRT Country Research 1998, *Research Response KOR13115*, 13 July.
4. 'More deaths are tied to religious cult' 2003, *Joins.com*, 16 August. (FACTIVA)
5. Su-ki, L. 2004, 'Cult leader linked to killings died', *Joins.com*, 20 June. (FACTIVA)
6. 'South Korean Cult Leader Arrested In China to be Extradited' 2008, *Kyodo News*, 11 January. (FACTIVA)
7. 'China extradites alleged South Korean rapist cult chief' 2008, *Agence France Presse*, 20 February. (FACTIVA)
8. 'The Setsuri (providence) cult collects at least 100 million yen a year from its members and uses some of the funds to help the group leader remain a fugitive from police, sources said' 2006, *Asahi Evening News*, 1 August. (FACTIVA)
9. 'Churches, lawyers and families are planning to take action against an expanding cult led by a former Moonie who is on Interpol's international wanted list for sexually abusing female followers' 2006, *Asahi Evening News*, 29 July. (FACTIVA)
10. 'A religious sect known as Setsuri (providence), which originated in South Korea, is causing serious social problems in Japan' 2006, *Asahi Evening News*, 19 August. (FACTIVA)
11. 'Cults in South Korea on the rise' 1999, F.A.C.T.net website, 15 January  
[http://www.factnet.org/headlines/korean\\_cults.htm](http://www.factnet.org/headlines/korean_cults.htm) – Accessed 22 April 2008.
12. Research & Information Services 2008, *Research Response KOR33213*, 22 April.
13. 'Business Security Information for South Korea: Organised Crime & Corruption' (undated), Security Information Service for Business Overseas website  
<http://www.sisbo.org.uk/skcorruption.html> – Accessed 17 April 2008.
14. 'Seoul police to crack down on organized crime' 2001, *BBC Monitoring Asia-Pacific*, 6 December. (FACTIVA)

15. Tae-jong, K. 2007, 'Hanwha CEO Mobilized Gangsters for Revenge', Korea Times, 7 May. (FACTIVA)
16. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006, KOR101074.E – Republic of Korea: Prevalence, activities, and methods of operation of criminal organizations, including Chinese, Japanese, and Russian syndicates; government measures and their effectiveness in reducing the level of crime and protecting victims (January 2004 – March 2006), 4 April <http://www.cisr-irb.gc.ca/en/research/rir/?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=450032> – Accessed 17 April 2008.