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Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Asylum Seekers from The Church of Almighty God in Japan

As of January 2019, 270 members of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Chinese Christian new religious movement, have escaped China and applied for asylum in Japan. None of the requests has been granted, within a context where Japanese authorities, to quote the quality newspaper *Business Insider*, have adopted “one of the world’s toughest asylum policies” (“No Entry,” April 11, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-japan-accepts-so-few-refugees-2018-4>).

The CAG is a Christian new religious movement, founded in China in 1991 and also known as Eastern Lightning. Its name refers to the fact that it believes Almighty God has returned to Earth as the second coming of Jesus Christ and incarnated as a Chinese woman (currently living in the United States of America), to guide and purify humans in the latter days and reveal the fullness of the truth.

That the CAG is ruthlessly and cruelly persecuted in China is an established fact. The CAG claims that more than 300,000 of its members have been arrested, and scholars regard the figure as credible based on the frequent references in Chinese media that hundreds or thousands of CAG members have been apprehended in a certain province. The Chinese government maintains a data base of selected court decisions, and there are hundreds of them there showing that CAG members have been sentenced to heavy jail penalties for the only circumstance of being active on a banned religious organization (*xie jiao*). Common members are also arrested and sentenced, not only leaders. NGOs have also reported instances of torture, extra-judicial killings, and organ harvesting.

Most CAG members are sentenced under Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, which makes it a crime, punished with imprisonment from 3 to 7 years “or more,” to “use,” interpreted by the courts as “to be active in,” a religious group included in the periodically updated lists of *xie jiao*. The Chinese expression *xie jiao* is often translated as “evil cults” or “evil sects,” but a more literal translation is “heterodox teachings.” Lists of *xie jiao* have been compiled since the Ming Dynasty era, and they have included groups regarded as theologically “heretic” and hostile to the government. The CAG has been continuously listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995. It is important that authorities abroad understand the difference between the *xie jiao* and the Protestant house churches not included in the *xie jiao* list. While, to the extent that they refuse to join the government-controlled Three Self Church, house churches are also discriminated and persecuted, the repression of groups listed as *xie jiao* such as the CAG or Falun Gong is much more severe, is grounded in a specific article of the Criminal Code and in documents issued by the Central Committee, and is carried out by a specialized unit called Office 610, in coordination with the national security forces. In December 2018, the pro-government newspaper *Caixin News* reported that in Qinghai province, “within the past eight months, 1,500 police officers have been deployed in anti-cult projects that target the Church of Almighty God.”

Religious movements in China end up in the list of the *xie jiao* for two reasons: because they are perceived to be critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and of their rapid growth, which scares the Party. According to governmental sources, although founded as recently as 1991, the CAG has now four million members in China, a spectacular growth that finds a precedent only in Falun Gong (persecuted for the same reasons).

When asked why they suppress the CAG, Chinese authorities give a different answer, stating that the movement is guilty of several serious crimes. Chronology does not cooperate, however, as the CAG is persecuted since its foundation in 1991 and the first serious accusation of crimes surfaced only in the 21st century, showing that the accusations did not *cause* the persecution, although they were used to justify it. What’s more, these accusations have been proved false.

Other incidents are also mentioned, but the most frequent accusations concern the Zhaoyuan McDonald’s murder of 2014. It was the brutal homicide, on May 28, 2014, of 37-year old salesgirl Wu Shuoyan, in a McDonald’s diner in the city of Zhaoyuan, in the Chinese province of Shandong. Six “missionaries” entered the McDonald’s and asked for the cell phone numbers of the customers. Wu refused to supply hers, was identified as an

“evil spirit,” and killed. Several scholarly studies have proved that the accusations against CAG are fake news fabricated by the Chinese government, although unfortunately repeated by some Western media. The homicide was committed by a different new religious movement, who also used the name “Almighty God” to refer to both its two female leaders, “one [divine] soul in two bodies.” Obviously, no member of the CAG would identify God with any person other than the one the CAG recognizes as Almighty God. During the trial, the assassins emphatically denied being members of the CAG and even praised the government for cracking down on the CAG, that they characterized as a “false Almighty God organization.” Other accusations, when studied by independent scholars, have also been debunked as false.

Asylum is often denied in Japan because the individual CAG refugee cannot prove to have been personally persecuted. However, under the Geneva Convention it is not necessary that the asylum seeker proves that she or he has been *actually* persecuted. A credible “*fear of persecution*” is enough. That being a member of the CAG in China means being in fear of being persecuted should be obvious. Some, however, object that, if they were really persecuted, the refugees should have been arrested. The CAG in China is a huge, million-members clandestine religious movement. Chinese authorities admit they have identified only a minority of CAG members, and in fact rewards to those denouncing CAG members to the police (some of these reward offers are advertised on the Internet, and concern *any* CAG member, not the leaders only). CAG devotees may escape arrest for years by moving from province to province, and are protected by CAG underground networks and by family networks, which are important in China. Some tend not to believe the references to family networks, as they may have read on the Internet that the CAG is “against the family” and that members are required to break ties with their families. However, scholars have proved that this is part of the fake news campaigns. Actually, the CAG’s holy scriptures have a positive view of the family, and most Chinese members have been converted by relatives.

Most CAG refugees are middle class or students, with a lot to lose by leaving China. They do not take the decision to flee abroad lightly, and only when they have credible warnings that they may be arrested soon. Since they have all see members of their local CAG communities (who may often be their relatives) arrested and sentenced to heavy jail terms, their fear of arrest and persecution is very much credible.

Some object that, if the refugee was persecuted, a passport should not have been issued. The objection obviously does not apply to those CAG members who had not been identified as such by the authorities. Those who have may exploit loopholes in the Chinese electronic police system called Policenet (they are wider than some Internet reports prepared by NGOs claim), or rely on the widespread corruption in China, where buying a passport is always possible. According to the U.S. State Department, *millions* of cases of police and administrative corruption are reported every year in China. A significant number concerns false or irregular passports. If the officer is corrupted, any problems connected with biometric data or fingerprints may also be overcome. A study by PierLuigi Zoccatelli, an Italian academic specialized both in new religious movements and Chinese immigration, has clarified that controls in Chinese airports are ineffective, notwithstanding all the hypes on the Chinese prodigies of facial recognition, and may be easily eluded.

The conclusion is inescapable, that refugees of the CAG fleeing China and seeking asylum in Japan should be granted it. We acknowledge and respect the problems of Japan in dealing with a high number of asylum requests. However, the members of the CAG seeking asylum in Japan, whose number (270) should not create a national problem, runs the serious risk of being arrested and sentenced to heavy jail penalties, or worse, should they be sent back to China. We urge Japan, a country widely respected for its commitment to human rights, to lend its helping hand to the refugees of The Church of Almighty God.