Taliban frees Korean hostages as Seoul bans Afghan mission work: Church debates safety in missions

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With the release of 19 kidnapped Korean Christians taken hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the leader of the national church council in South Korea said that the traumatic, 40-day event may stimulate church debate in that nation on ways to plan safer and more effective missions.

The Koreans were released at the end of August after the Seoul government announced that it was withdrawing its 200 troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year, as scheduled, and would stop missionary work by Koreans there.

Kwon Oh-sung, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Korea, said it was “natural” that churches would respect the government ruling. “We hope that [the kidnapping] will be a start of enabling us to do more effective and safer services and missions,” said Kwon in a statement August 31. “We will make efforts in various ways, such as holding a major debate.”

The Taliban killed two male Korean hostages in July. Two female hostages were released in mid-August and allowed to return home.

All 23 had been dispatched as volunteer members of a Christian group for medical service and mission from their local congregation near Seoul named Saemmul Church. Its denomination, the Presbyterian Church of Korea, is a member of the Korean church council.

The World Evangelical Alliance noted that the group’s home church had declared that the Christians were in Afghanistan to offer free medical services—not to evangelize.

The WEA’s international director, Geoff Tunnicliffe, who planned to discuss with Korean Christian leaders the implications of Seoul’s ban on Christian workers in Afghanistan, added, “We recognize there is much current debate on the future of Korean missionary work in dangerous or complex situations.” *–Ecumenical News International*