

RUSSIA: USCIRF adopts two religious prisoners of conscience: a Danish Jehovah's Witness and a Russian Scientologist

HRWF (28.09.2018) – The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has just taken a courageous stand by adopting two prisoners of conscience in Russia sharing the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology. Article 18 declares that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". Article 18 defends the rights of individuals to believe what they want to believe in. It does not defend religions based on whether they are historical or not. HRWF does not either.

It is the right of an atheist to believe there is no God and no life after death.

It is the right of a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew to believe in God and to believe that he is the creator of the universe.

It is the right of a Catholic to believe that the body of Jesus Christ is present in the consecrated host that they swallow during the mass.

It is the right of a Muslim to believe in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

It is the right of a Buddhist to believe in reincarnation and to live accordingly.

It is the right of a Scientologist to believe in successive incarnations and in Dianetics.

It is the right of a Mormon to believe in the Book of Mormon and to live according to its teachings.

It is the right of a Jehovah's Witness to refuse to kill and to perform military service.

It is the right of a Raelian to think that the human race was imported in our planet by aliens.

It is the right of Dennis Christensen to believe in the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses and it is the right of Ivan Matsitsky to believe in the teachings of Ron Hubbard.

The Russian Federation has however decided otherwise. It has banned a number of peaceful religious movements of foreign origin, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and it has criminalized legitimate activities pertaining to religious freedom. The objective of this 'xenophobic' religious cleansing pursued by Moscow is to protect historical religions which have shaped the identity of the Russian people throughout the centuries and to reinforce their position in society under its vigilant control. The dramatic consequence is that persons who use their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion to challenge the religiously correct are arrested, sometimes tortured physically or psychologically, fined and sentenced to prison terms.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has courageously taken up the defence of a European citizen, the Dane Dennis Christensen, as it has done with an American citizen imprisoned in Turkey, pastor Andrew Craig Brunson. When will the EU and its member states campaign for the release of one of their citizens imprisoned since May 2017 in Russia? The EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief have been drafted for such a purpose.



Ivan Matsitsky (left) and Dennis Christensen (right)

USCIRF (26.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20h0YHD> – Vice Chair Arriaga said, *“These two cases are examples of the Russian government ‘securitizing’ religion–targeting religious communities it considers illegitimate on the pretext that they pose a national security threat”*

WASHINGTON, DC – [Kristina Arriaga](#), Vice Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)), today announced that she is adopting two religious prisoners of conscience in Russia, Dennis Christensen and Ivan Matsitsky, as part of USCIRF’s [Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). Mr. Christensen, a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, was arrested in Oryol, Russia, on May 25, 2017, following the raid of a prayer service in which he was participating. As of September 13, 2018, Mr. Christensen has appeared 38 times before Oryol’s District Court. He faces a possible sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Mr. Matsitsky, the director of the Church of Scientology in St. Petersburg, was arrested on June 5, 2017, on various charges including involvement in “an extremist conspiracy.” He has been held in pretrial detention since his arrest.

“The cases of Dennis Christensen and Ivan Matsitsky are emblematic of the Russian government’s complete disregard for religious freedom,” stated Vice Chair Arriaga. **“I am committed to doing all I can to raise awareness of Ivan’s and Dennis’**

cases and secure their speedy release.”

The government of Russia considers groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientologists “nontraditional” religious minorities, frequently targeting them with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. In April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an extremist organization.

Vice Chair Arriaga added, **“These two cases are examples of the Russian government ‘securitizing’ religion–targeting religious communities it considers illegitimate on the pretext that they pose a national security threat. But these religious communities only seek to practice their beliefs peacefully and without fear. When they arrested Dennis, he was reading the Bible with fellow believers. The international community must uphold internationally recognized human rights and press for the release of Ivan, Dennis, and the many others imprisoned in Russia for their religious identity or activities.”**

In 2018 USCIRF again recommended that Russia be designated as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). To learn more about religious freedom conditions in Russia, click [here](#).

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief. To interview a Commissioner, please contact USCIRF at Media@USCIRF.gov or Javier Peña at jpena@uscirf.gov or +1-202-674-2598.

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ETHIOPIA: ‘They believe I was cursed with blindness because God was angry’

Girls with disabilities in Ethiopia have been sexually assaulted and are feared for being under the spell of witchcraft.

By Ingrid Gercama and Nathalie Bertrams

Al Jazeera (24.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Ikfbjn> – Newly elected Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has been praised for his recent negotiations culminating in peace with Eritrea, but still has to solve harsh realities at home.

Thousands of boys and girls with disabilities in Ethiopia are

invisible in government statistics, unable to access health services, discriminated against by society and trapped in a cycle of poverty and violence.

A report from UNFPA and the Population Council highlights that one in every three girls living with disabilities has been sexually assaulted. They also face systematic and violent abuse at home and in their communities; they're blamed for being different and feared because they're seen to be under the spell of witchcraft.

Eniyat Belete, 17, has been blind since birth. In her village, as in many other towns all over Ethiopia, disability comes with a heavy stigma.

"They believe I was cursed with blindness because God was angry," explains the teenager.

Fisseha Arage Haile, himself blind, works as a special needs and inclusive education expert for the South Gondar Zone Education Office.

He confirms that teenagers with disabilities are largely excluded from education, health and social welfare services. The Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) law makes it impossible for NGOs and other civil societies to operate in the country, which compounds the severe gap in service provision.

Specialised health and rehabilitation services are not accessible to the majority of the population and medical aids are expensive: crutches cost \$8 on average and a wheelchair costs \$224, unaffordable for most Ethiopians.

Only a fraction of children with disabilities are enrolled in formal education. Ethiopia, with a population over 100 million, only has 164 schools that serve students with hearing, visual and intellectual impairments. There are only two schools for students with autism, both of which are in Addis Ababa.

“There is still much work to be done until we can truly speak of an inclusive society,” Haile, an avid advocate of disability rights and changing the system from within, sighs: “As it is now, it is only inclusive by name.”

[See the article 'In Pictures'](#)

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BURKINA FASO: Botched FGM leaves 50 girls in hospital

Girls as young as four taken to hospital amid fears that cutters are targeting younger girls and crossing borders to avoid detection.

The Guardian (18.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2xjo88s> – About 50 girls, including some as young as four, are being treated in hospital in Burkina Faso after they underwent female genital mutilation.

Two women, along with some of the girls' relatives, have been arrested. Not all the girls who were cut have been traced, the minister of women's affairs, Laurence Marshall Ilboudo, told the BBC.

The procedure is reported to have been carried out in Kaya, north-east of the capital, Ouagadougou. Voix de Femmes, an organisation that runs a centre on the outskirts of the capital for survivors, said it had assisted five girls, while many others were taken to local hospitals.

On Tuesday, campaigners in Somalia announced that a third girl

had died in less than a week after undergoing FGM in the Puntland region. Suheyra Qorane Farah was cut along with her sister, Zamzam. Both bled profusely and fell into a coma. Zamzam's condition improved, but Suheyra's worsened. She was diagnosed with tetanus and died on 17 September.

Her death follows those of two sisters Aasiyo and Khadijo Farah Abdi Warsame, aged 10 and 11, last week in Somalia. The Somali government recently announced its intention to bring the first FGM prosecution in the country's history, following the death of a 10-year-old girl, but little progress has been made.

Hawa Aden Mohamed, executive director of the Galkayo Centre in Puntland, Somalia, which supports girls affected by FGM, said she hoped the deaths would "serve as a wake-up call for those responsible to see the need to have the law in place to protect girls from this heinous practice".

FGM has been illegal in Burkina Faso since 1996, making it one of the first African countries to outlaw the practice. According to the UN's children's agency, Unicef, three-quarters of women aged 15-49 have undergone the procedure. The vast majority of people oppose FGM, Unicef says.

Jean-Paul Murunga, programme officer for ending harmful practices for the NGO Equality Now, said cutters are targeting younger girls because they are less likely to report it. "Previously, girls were cut at older ages like 13, 14, 15 and 16, but [the age] has now decreased because a girl of 13 and above is able speak out," he said.

School programmes that educate students about the dangers of FGM are making teenagers more likely to approach teachers for help.

However, charities fear that cutters and families are increasingly crossing the border with Mali, where there is no law on FGM, and Ivory Coast, where the law is not enforced as strongly. To avoid detection, those practicing FGM are also moving away from group ceremonies to individual cutting in private, the charity 28 Too Many said.

FGM is practiced across all regions, ethnic groups and religions in Burkina Faso. It is most common in rural areas, where insecurity often prevents civil society groups from reaching communities, Murunga said.

“In urban areas, the rates are lower because the infrastructure is much better, the police are more responsive and more proactive,” he added.

He said FGM is becoming less prevalent in Burkina Faso but that prosecution rates remain too low. “The government has not been adequately budgeting the committee that is mandated to [raise] awareness, educate people, arrest and prosecute people who still practice this harmful culture,” he said. “That has meant that a lot of work is done by civil society organisations, which also are not very well resourced.”

Between January and June 2017, 51 people, including both perpetrators and accomplices, were prosecuted for performing FGM on 49 girls.

One recent case, in which 30 girls were cut, led to the arrest of a cutter and 14 others, including family members who had assisted or failed to report the crime. The cutter was eventually sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

Murunga said he hopes the perpetrators in the case in Kaya are prosecuted and jailed: "This [will] send a strong message to the community that this practice has already been outlawed, and it is illegal and criminal as well."

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UZBEKISTAN: Jailings “to intimidate all who speak about freedoms”

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (20.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20cg7M5> – After police and secret police home raids, at least eight bloggers were jailed “to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms”, a relative of one told Forum 18. Tashkent blogger Adkham Olimov, jailed for 15 days and fined at a midnight court hearing, had to pay for his own jailing.

In an attempt to clamp down on public discussions of religious freedoms, police and secret police officers between late August and early September raided without warrants the homes of at least ten bloggers who write on such themes in at least five regions of Uzbekistan. Courts then handed many of them fines and jail terms of up to two weeks, Forum 18 notes. The authorities “wanted to showcase the jailings to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms”, a relative of one of the bloggers told Forum 18.

Names of only eight of the jailed bloggers are known to Forum 18, but human rights defenders suspect that the number could have been greater. As well as those jailed, at least three other bloggers are known to have been raided, detained or questioned (see below).

“We hear that up to thirty bloggers may have been detained in various regions,” human rights defender Surat Ikramov told

Forum 18 from the capital Tashkent on 18 September. "But their relatives are afraid to talk to human rights defenders or the media."

One of the Tashkent-based bloggers, Adkham Olimov, was jailed for 15 days and fined at a court hearing shortly after midnight. He also had to pay for his detention. He twice unsuccessfully appealed against his jailing (see below).

According to Ikramov and independent local news agencies, the eight bloggers were all freed from custody between 6 and 11 September. "The authorities warned them not to speak publicly about their arrests on Facebook and other social media," Ikramov told Forum 18. "It was good that independent media and rights defenders made noise about the arrests, otherwise the authorities could have opened criminal cases against some."

The bloggers had discussed a range of religious and other themes, including calls for women to be allowed to wear hijabs (headscarves), men to have beards and children to be allowed to pray in mosques (see below).

Also punished for expressing his views on religious themes was Fazliddin Parpiyev, Imam-hatyp of a mosque in Tashkent's Yunusabad District. Uzbekistan's state-sponsored Muslim Board dismissed him from his position after he condemned the authorities' pressure on Muslims for wearing the hijab and growing beards and called on Muslims to complain to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Officials at the Muslim Board refused to discuss the Imam's dismissal with Forum 18 (see below).

Asked about the raids and arrests of the bloggers, the Interior Ministry on 20 September referred Forum 18 to Shakhrukh Giyasov, Chief of the Ministry's International Relations Section. Giyasov declined to discuss the cases with Forum 18. Asked why Police carried out a campaign of arrests of bloggers for speaking for religious freedoms, he responded: "It's not ethical to call by phone and ask about such issues." He asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing through the Foreign Ministry.

Censorship

Speaking and publishing on religious themes in Uzbekistan – including in print and online – is under tight state control. The import, production and possession of literature – including the Koran and the Bible – is strictly controlled. This includes material on mobile phones, tablets, personal computers, memory sticks and other electronic devices and media, with compulsory prior censorship by the state's Religious Affairs Committee. Punishments for those who violate these restrictions can be severe, including imprisonment.

Why were bloggers arrested?

The bloggers were arrested for "freely publishing their opinions on religious freedoms on Facebook and other social media and for criticising the authorities for restricting women wearing hijab in public places and state institutions, men growing beards and children attending Mosque", human rights defender Ikramov told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

According to information given him by the bloggers' relatives, "they were all charged for not obeying the orders of the Police", Ikramov added.

A relative of one of the bloggers, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, confirmed this to Forum 18. They said that their relative and other bloggers “were recently actively promoting women’s right to wear hijab and men’s right to grow beards and the right of children to attend Mosque.”

After Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President in 2016, “he released many prisoners of conscience from prisons and allowed public discussions on religious themes and freedoms”, the blogger’s relative told Forum 18. They said that their relative, like others, perceived this as “a beginning for greater freedoms and began writing blogs on these topics”.

Asked why they think the authorities jailed the bloggers, the blogger’s relative told Forum 18: “They do not want greater freedoms, I guess. Maybe these discussions were too much for them. They are afraid that people will become bolder and ask for more freedoms.”

The authorities “wanted to showcase the arrests to intimidate all others who want to speak about freedoms”, the blogger’s relative added.

How many bloggers arrested?

The bloggers known to have been arrested between 27 August and 2 September and handed jail terms are Adkham Olimov (known by his penname Musannif), Miraziz Akhmedov, Tulkin Astanov, Ziyodullo (Rahmon) Kabirov and Ziyovuddin Rahim from Tashkent City; Otabek Usmonov from Andijan Region; Khurshidbek Mukhammadrozikov from Kokand in Fergana Region; and Dilshodbek Khalilov from Namangan Region.

Sulaymon Erkin and Shokir Sharipov (known as Mukhammad Shakur), who lives in Kibrai District of Tashkent Region, were detained and questioned, Ikramov told Forum 18. He could not confirm whether or not the two men were arrested.

Sharipov “was questioned on 27 August and released the same day because he has a disability,” a Tashkent resident who has followed the bloggers and is familiar with the cases, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 17 September. “I know for a fact that those eight were arrested, but I also heard that many more could just have been questioned and released but not arrested.”

In late July or early August, before the moves against other bloggers, Tashkent City’s Uchteppa District Police opened a case against Davronbek Tojialiyev, who runs websites which publish Islamic materials. Forum 18 was told this by Uchteppa Police and Gayrat Ziyakhojaye, a Muslim man who was criminally convicted for downloading religious materials from Tojialiyev’s websites. However, Tojialiyev told Forum 18 on 13 September he is not aware that a case against him is current.

Campaign’s “pre-planned scenario”

Ikramov complained to Forum 18 that the arrests were a campaign carried out “according to a pre-planned scenario by officers of the State Security Service (SSS) secret police and the regular Police in various regions in violation of Uzbekistan’s law and international norms.”

“Up to ten officials in plain clothes would arrive at a

blogger's home in the evening or late at night, and without showing their identification documents or warrant carried out searches," Ikramov complained. "They confiscated desktop and laptop computers, DVD discs, memory chips, and mobile phones of family members. They did not provide the families with copies of the confiscation record."

Typical of the raids was that on Olimov's home in Tashkent. Officers of the SSS secret police and Almazar District Police broke into his flat in Sebzor mahalla [city district] at 19:30 on 28 August, Ikramov complained to Forum 18. Eight officers "without showing their IDs or telling their names carried out an unauthorised search. They seized two desktop computers, two laptop computers, two computer hard drives, DVD discs, memory chips, and three mobile phones as well as several books."

Ikramov told Forum 18 that the authorities have not returned the property. Officers told Olimov that it will have to go through an "expert analysis" and only then will the authorities decide what to do with it.

After raiding their homes in various parts of the country, officers then took the bloggers to police stations and brought them before the courts, Ikramov added.

Jail terms

Judges in their turn "in the absence of defence lawyers and witnesses and without notifying their relatives handed down administrative arrests", Ikramov complained.

Among the early arrests in Tashkent was that of Astanov on 27 August, Ikramov and a Tashkent resident familiar with the cases told Forum 18. A court then jailed Astanov for ten days.

After Olimov's arrest on the evening of 28 August, officers held him for four hours at Tashkent's Almazar Police Station. They then brought him before Almazar District Administrative Court, where Judge Sherbek Inamjanov handed down his punishment at 00:30 am. Judge Inamjanov "in violation of the procedures heard the case in the absence of Olimov's relatives or any witnesses," Ikramov complained.

In the early hours of 29 August, Judge Inamjanov found Olimov guilty under Article 194, Part 1 and Article 195 of the Administrative Code.

Article 194, Part 1 punishes failure to carry out the lawful demands of a police officer or other persons carrying out duties to guard public order with a fine of up to twice the minimum monthly wage.

Article 195 punishes resisting the orders of police officers, and punishments are between three times the minimum monthly wage and 15 days' detention.

Judge Inamjanov handed Olimov a 15-day jail term and fined him 184,300 Soms or one month's minimum wage, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. He also ordered Olimov to pay 27,645 Soms or 15 per cent of the minimum monthly wage for each day spent in prison to "cover the expenses of his

administrative arrest”.

“These were fabricated charges just to put Olimov in custody,” Ikramov told Forum 18. All the other bloggers were brought to trial under “the exact same charges”, he added.

In separate hearings later on 29 August, Tashkent’s Almazar District Administrative Court similarly handed down 15-day jail terms on Kabirov and Rahim, a person familiar with the cases told Forum 18 from Tashkent.

Between 10 and 19 September, officials (who refused to give their names) of Tashkent’s Almazar District Administrative Court, which heard the cases of Olimov, Kabirov and Rahim, refused to discuss them with Forum 18.

Asked why he punished Olimov with administrative arrest, Judge Inamjanov, who heard the case, evaded the question. “He will be released after he finishes his 15-day arrest,” he told Forum 18 on 10 September. Told that human rights defenders and independent journalists complained that his Court had punished Olimov, Kabirov and Rahim for speaking on religious freedoms, the Judge declined to discuss anything more. “Please, send your further questions in writing to the Supreme Court.”

Asked between 10 and 11 September about the arrests of the three bloggers, officials (no names were given) of Almazar Police referred Forum 18 to Lieutenant Colonel Bakhadyr Yusufjanov, Deputy Chief of Almazar Police, as well as Major Makhmud Tolipov, Chief of Almazar Police’s Struggle against

Extremism and Terrorism Division. Both of them refused to discuss why they arrested the three men.

Major Tolipov on 10 September greeted Forum 18, but as soon as it asked why Olimov, Kabirov and Rahim were arrested he claimed that it is a “wrong number”. He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him between 10 and 11 September went unanswered.

Lieutenant Colonel Yusufjanov, reached by Forum 18 twice on 11 September at his landline and mobile phone numbers, provided by Almazar Police officials, claimed that it was a wrong number. “I work for a florist,” he told Forum 18. When Forum 18 asked why Almazar Police arrested the bloggers, he replied angrily: “Who are you to question me?” He then put the phone down.

The rest of the bloggers were arrested between 28 August and 2 September.

Appeals unsuccessful

Judge Jahongir Jurayev of Tashkent City Administrative Court rejected Olimov’s first appeal on 6 September, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The Supreme Court rejected his further appeal on 11 September, Ikramov told Forum 18. Both appeals were heard while Olimov was in detention.

Held for five days in Tashkent City Police basement

The first five days of his arrest Olimov spent in the basement of Tashkent City Police Station, Ikramov told Forum 18. “Neither Almazar Police nor the District Prosecutor’s Office

would tell Olimov's relatives where exactly he was being kept," Ikramov complained. "Not until 4 September was his lawyer allowed to see him."

While Olimov was in custody, SSS secret police and Interior Ministry officers "pressured relatives not to talk to human rights defenders, foreign journalists and international human rights organisations", Ikramov told Forum 18.

Olimov was released on 11 September on the fourteenth day of his arrest, Ikramov said. Olimov paid the fine and an additional 359,385 Soms for the 13 days he spent in prison.

On the day of his release, Olimov told the BBC Uzbek service that "though the law-enforcement agencies did not physically abuse me, they put psychological pressure on me". He was questioned while in prison on the blogger Shokirov and his position on hijabs and beards.

Another of the Tashkent-based bloggers, Astanov, was released on 6 September after ten days of custody, Ikramov and the Tashkent resident told Forum 18. The rest of the bloggers – arrested between 28 August and 2 September – were all released on 11 September.

Imam dismissed for speaking for religious freedoms

Dismissed from his position as Imam-hatyp of the Omina Mosque in Tashkent's Yunusabad District was Fazliddin Parpiyev. Usman Olimov, Chief Mufti of Uzbekistan and Chair of the state-sponsored Muslim Board, dismissed Imam Parpiyev allegedly for

health reasons.

The 8 September Muslim Board decision, signed by Chief Mufti Olimov and seen by Forum 18, declares that Imam Parpiyev was dismissed on the ruling of the Board's Ethics Committee "on the basis of Article 100, Part 2 of Uzbekistan's Labour Code". It does not specify why he was dismissed.

Labour Code Article 100, Part 2 allows an employer to dismiss an employee for "incompatibility of the employee for the job they carry out as a result of their insufficient qualification or lack of health".

However, the independent Uzbek media reported that Imam Parpiyev was dismissed for his "open criticism of the authorities' restrictions on wearing hijab and growing beards as well as on children attending mosque".

The 32-year-old Parpiyev is a graduate of Medina Islamic University and Tashkent Islamic University. He had been appointed Imam of Omina Mosque one month earlier, Uzbek news agency eltuz.com reported on 9 September.

In his 7 September sermon after Friday prayers, Imam Parpiyev "called on his community members to write complaints to President Mirziyoyev about the pressure by the authorities on women not to wear hijab and men not to grow beards."

Eltuz noted that "Parpiyev at first published his sermon on

his Facebook page but then removed it.” He also told his online audience that “he was planning to criticise the Uzbek government’s religious policies.”

Imam Parpiyev “wrote on his Facebook page on 9 September that the public should not expect him to speak on this issue any longer since he was dismissed from his position”, the news agency noted.

Asked why the Imam was dismissed, Akmal Khan Shakirov, the official responsible for international relations at the Muslim Board, asked Forum 18 on 17 September to call back later. “I am busy at a round table,” he claimed. Called back several times between 17 and 18 September he did not answer his phones.

Similarly reluctant to talk about the issue was Abdulazim Mansurov, Deputy Head of the Muslim Board. On 18 September he claimed to Forum 18 that “I cannot talk to you because we are busy with guests.”

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CHINA: Pope Francis: “I will nominate the bishops for China”

Talking with journalists, the Pope claimed he was personally responsible for the agreement with China and that he will have the last word in the choice of bishops.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (26.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2DwWM3Y> – On September 25, in the flight bringing him back to Roma from Estonia, Pope Francis answered a question about China.

A journalist asked, “Three days ago an agreement was signed between the Vatican and China. Can you give us any additional information on its content? Why do some Catholics and in particular Cardinal Joseph Zen accuse you of having sold out the Church to the Chinese government?”

Pope Francis gave a detailed answer, worth quoting in full:

“This is a process that has lasted for years, a dialogue between the Vatican commission and the Chinese commission, to arrange the nomination of bishops. The Vatican team has worked hard, I would like to mention a few names: Monsignor Claudio Maria Celli, who—with patience—has been in dialogue for years and years. Then, Gianfranco Rota Graziosi, a humble 72-year-old curial who wanted to become a priest of a parish and yet he remained in the Curia to help in this process. And then the Secretary of State [Cardinal Parolin], who is a very devoted man, but has a special devotion for the magnifying glass: he studies all the documents: semicolon, comma, hints. This gives me a great confidence. This team with these qualities has moved forward. You know that when a peace agreement is made, both sides lose something. That is the law: both sides. We went two steps forward, one step back... two steps forward and one step back. Then, months without talking to each other. It is God’s time that resembles Chinese time. Slowly, its Chinese wisdom. The bishops who were in difficulty were studied case by case. Each of their files landed on my desk. I was responsible for signing. Then about the agreement: the drafts returned to my desk, I gave my ideas, they were discussed and they went forward. I think of the resistance, of the Catholics who have suffered: it’s true, they will suffer. There is always suffering in an agreement. But their faith is great. They write to me, they send messages to say that what the Holy See, what Peter says, is what Jesus says. The martyr faith of these people today goes on. They are great. I signed the agreement, I signed the plenipotentiary letters. I am the person in charge, the others have worked for more than ten years. This was no improvisation, it’s a true journey. A simple anecdote and a historical fact: when that famous communiqué of a former apostolic nuncio [Mgr Viganò, the former nuncio to the US who attacked Pope Francis] came out, the episcopates worldwide wrote to me telling me that they felt close and prayed for me. Chinese faithful have written to me and the letter was signed by the bishop of the ‘traditional Catholic’ so to speak, Church, and the bishop of the

'patriotic' Church, both together and with both communities of faithful. For me, it was a sign from God.

Then let's not forget that in Latin America for 350 years it was the kings of Portugal and Spain who appointed the bishops. Let's not forget the case of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Other eras, thank God, they won't come back. What is there, is a dialogue on potential candidates, but Rome nominates, the Pope nominates, that's clear. And we pray for the sufferings of some who don't understand or who have many years of 'underground life' behind them."

Three points are worth noting here. First, the Pope claims personal responsibility for the agreement. He was not "misled" by clever diplomats. Second, he does not reveal the content of the agreement, whose text is secret, but insists he will have the last word in appointing the bishops in China. Third, he answers critics that agreements where the Holy See negotiates the appointments of the bishops with secular governments are not "unprecedented" but in fact find several historical precedents.

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