

Vatican signs a 'provisional agreement' with China

– Contrary to exaggerated expectations, the Vatican-China agreement has a limited scope—but is described as “the first step in a process” – MASSIMO INTROVIGNE –

Bitter Winter (22.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2017vb2> – On Saturday, September 22, the Vatican announced that it has signed in Beijing a “provisional agreement” with the Chinese government, dealing with the appointment of Catholic bishops in China, whose details remain secret. The international edition of the Chinese official People’s Daily first denied that a Vatican delegation was visiting Beijing, then after the Vatican’s official announcement—mentioning China’s deputy Foreign Minister Wang Chao as the Chinese party who signed it—had to admit that a confidential agreement had been signed. The curious behavior of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) media confirms that there are opponents of the agreement within the CCP itself.

The Vatican press release reads as follows:

“Today, 22nd September 2018, within the framework of the contacts between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China that have been underway for some time in order to discuss Church matters of common interest and to promote further understanding, a meeting was held in Beijing between Mgr Antoine Camilleri, Undersecretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, and H. E. Mr Wang Chao, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, respectively heads of the Vatican and Chinese delegations.

During that meeting, the two representatives signed a Provisional Agreement on the appointment of Bishops.

The above-mentioned Provisional Agreement, which is the fruit

of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement, has been agreed following a long process of careful negotiation and foresees the possibility of periodic reviews of its application. It concerns the nomination of Bishops, a question of great importance for the life of the Church, and creates the conditions for greater collaboration at the bilateral level.

The shared hope is that this agreement may favour a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China, to the common good of the Chinese people and to peace in the world.”

Earlier this week, The Wall Street Journal anticipated a much broader agreement, for which, as Bitter Winter reported, the Beijing authorities were not prepared.

What really happened may be summarized as follows:

1. The CCP favored in 1957 the birth of a “Patriotic Catholic Church,” with bishops theoretically “elected” by the local Catholics but in fact appointed by the CCP rather than by the Vatican, part of the “red market” of the government-controlled religions in China. The Vatican declared this “Patriotic Church” schismatic and excommunicated its bishops, recognizing in China as truly Catholic only an “underground” Catholic Church, with bishops appointed by the Vatican, which was heavily persecuted by the regime.

2. Since the pontificate of Benedict XVI, and in some instances even earlier, the Vatican and the CCP agreed on the appointments of local bishops, which were both selected by the CCP and recognized by the Vatican. The two Catholic Churches, the official and the “Patriotic,” did not merge but in many dioceses had the same bishops.

3. This happened in a number of dioceses, while in others the Vatican had strong objections against the bishops selected by the CCP and any agreement proved impossible.

4. What happens with the new agreement, although the details

are secret, is that the Vatican and the CCP have agreed to solve the existing problems and to establish a (secret) process to identify together the future bishops of all Chinese dioceses. According to a message of the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the problems have indeed been solved for all the dioceses where previously there was no agreement, as he announced that "today, for the first time, all the Bishops in China are in communion with the Bishop of Rome," i.e. with Pope Francis and the Holy See.

5. What is not happening, contrary to exaggerated expectations or fears, is the exchange of diplomatic recognitions between the Holy See and China, which would also mean that the Vatican should terminate its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan—the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry rushed to publish a note explaining that this is not the case.

6. There is no announcement that the underground and the "Patriotic" churches will merge (which was and is opposed by the top leaders of the Patriotic Church and their supporters in the CCP). Immediately, what we may expect is a gradual extension to all dioceses of the situation already existing in many of them, where the two structures are personally connected by having the same bishop at the top.

7. Clearly, in the medium or long term, this process will probably lead to the merging of the two churches, but this requires the negotiation of many further details. Pope Francis' Vatican has a style of "starting processes" rather than concluding them, and this is yet another example of this strategy.

8. Conservative Catholics, including some in China and Hong Kong, are screaming against the "sell-out" of the Catholic Church to CCP. Their position and concerns are understandable. However, with the new law which came into force on February 1, 2018, the alternative for the "underground" Catholic Church was to come to an agreement with the CCP or being wiped out and heavily persecuted. The "underground" Catholic Church is part of a "gray market" of religion President Xi Jinping vowed to eliminate. While most Protestant house churches, also part

of the “gray market,” do not have the possibility of coming to similar agreements, the Vatican is both a religious organization and a State. It obviously believes it is in a unique position to find an accommodation that would avoid the persecution and secure a modicum of religious freedom for Catholics in China. The Vatican, after its experience in countries such as Poland or Lithuania, also believes that these agreements offer to it a latitude to operate openly within Communist societies, and subtly influence their transformation from inside. Whether this is a realistic perspective or a dangerous illusion, time will tell. But this is the very reason while sectors of the CCP oppose the agreement and, rather than a global, final, and public treaty with the Vatican, so far what we have is a partial, provisional, and secret one.

Massimo Introvigne (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist and intellectual property consultant. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of tens of books and articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*.^[1] and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*.^[2] He is also a consultant on intellectual property rights.^[3] From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In June 2012, he was appointed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as chairperson of the newly instituted Observatory of Religious Liberty, created by the Ministry in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

A too-narrow vision of religious freedom

– The Trump administration embraces a laudable desire to expand religious tolerance, but its own intolerance toward some undermines the message. –

By The Editorial Board –

New York Times (16.08.2018) – <https://nyti.ms/2Pnlu8Y> – Even President Trump's fiercest critics can find something to applaud in the administration's campaign to protect and advance religious freedom around the world.

The State Department's inaugural conference on the subject drew hundreds of activists and scores of foreign officials to Washington last month and produced a statement of core beliefs and a plan to hold follow-up meetings in the United States and overseas.

Invoking the 70-year-old Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the conference's concluding statement asserted that “every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and enjoys the freedom to change faith” and argued that “defending the freedom of religion or belief is the collective responsibility of the global community.” To which we say, amen.

But the initiative's good intentions are in danger of being undermined by the administration's political agenda, which emphasizes the American strain of evangelical Christianity over other beliefs. In addition, the administration is pursuing immigration and foreign aid policies that belie its stated defense of religious rights.

The conference was ostensibly called to address the rising

threat to religious freedom. Some 80 percent of the global population is severely limited in exercising this right, and of the world's 198 countries, 55 countries, or 28 percent, experienced high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion in 2016, according to a recent study from the Pew Research Center.

While the horrific genocides against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and against the Yazidis in Iraq have been widely publicized, there are countless other examples of religious-based persecution and discrimination – against Coptic Christians in Egypt, Muslim Uighurs and Tibetan Buddhists in China, Bahais in Iran, and others.

The Trump administration is not the first to speak up for religious liberty. Since 1998, when Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, the State Department has issued annual assessments on how countries handle the issue and has used various government tools to defend groups and individuals overseas who are persecuted or discriminated against.

The current administration took its advocacy to a new level with the three-day conference, whose invited participants were more diverse than many expected. Despite his own strict Catholic leanings, Sam Brownback, the ambassador for international religious freedom, said the goal was to protect religious freedom for all, “not to say we favor this faith or that faith.”

Yet, the event, headlined by Vice President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian, was clearly meant to appeal most to the evangelicals who are among the president's most fervent political supporters, reflecting a selectivity that is antithetical to the very concept of religious freedom.

One major focus was a demand for the release of Andrew Brunson, an American Christian pastor held by Turkey for

nearly two years on bogus charges of complicity in the 2016 aborted coup. Under pressure from evangelicals, Mr. Trump earlier this month imposed sanctions on Turkey, shaking its fragile economy, in an effort to secure Mr. Brunson's release. The president has been silent about 19 other detained Americans, including a NASA scientist who is Muslim.

The presence of a Hungarian delegation seemed particularly at odds with conference aims of promoting "equality under the law." Although Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has turned the Christian-majority country from democracy to nationalism and Islamophobia, he was praised by the evangelical Christian leader Tony Perkins for supporting persecuted Christians around the world.

President Barack Obama made a point of reaching out to the Muslim world, as well as to other faith communities. And like previous presidents, he tended to consider religious rights within the broad spectrum of human and civil rights. Countries that deny religious freedom invariably restrict other freedoms as well.

Many evangelicals, however, are increasingly promoting religious freedom as "our first freedom," as Mr. Pence did in his speech. Their argument is that human rights are becoming politicized and conflated with economic and social goals, such as equal rights for workers, women and gay and transgender people.

There are other reasons to question the administration's motives, starting with the fact that it has been reliably tough on human rights abuses only when they involve adversaries like Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Last year, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told aides not to let human rights concerns create "obstacles" in pursuing American interests. In a memo, one of his advisers said that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Philippines, whose repressive leaders are admired by the president, should be given a pass on rights

questions.

Then there are Mr. Trump's disgraceful attempts to ban Muslims from some countries from entering the United States; his reprehensible treatment of refugees and immigrants, especially in separating children from their parents; and his continued support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

Such behavior hardly reflects the "tolerance" and appreciation of "human dignity" that conference documents endorsed.

Supporting people facing religious persecution overseas is both a moral burden of the United States and an exercise in self-interest. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, religious freedom is "an essential building block for all free societies." But it is not the only one.

If the Trump administration aspires to truly advance religious freedom, it will need to embrace a far broader vision of human rights.

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CHINA: More destroyed mosques in Xingiang

Seven out of eight mosques in one of the areas of Lianmuqin town in Xinjiang have been demolished; the remaining one is strictly supervised.

Bitter Winter (09.08.2018) – <https://bitterwinter.org/more-destroyed-mosques-in-xinjiang/> – According to a local source, seven of the eight mosques in the Shanshan county's 11th Brigade of Lianmuqin town, have already been destroyed. The local Muslims are allowed to attend the remaining mosque, but there are more than twice as many government officers as worshipers inside it during prayers. The local authorities keep some guards in between the prayers as well. "Every time there are 13 Uyghurs practicing namāz, 37 government personnel are on duty," a local Uyghur Muslim said. "We need to show our ID or give our fingerprints each time we enter the mosque for the five daily namāz prayers. Every time we kneel down and pray to Allah, the government officials stand beside us and stare directly at us. When they're looking right at you, it's impossible to feel calm. I finally stopped going."

Reported by Li Benbo

Chinese Asylum Seekers: An Urgent Appeal to Chancellor

Angela Merkel

Dear Chancellor Merkel:

We are NGOs active in the field of religious liberty, and write about the urgent situation of a Chinese refugee, Ms. Zhao, currently detained at the Aufsichtsund Dienstleistungsdirektion Landeseinrichtung für Asylbegehrende und Ausreisepflichtige in Hamburg, after she resisted forcible deportation to China on July 9.

We urge you to consider that, should Ms. Zhao be returned to China, she would certainly be arrested and might be subject to torture or “disappear” while in custody.

Ms. Zhao is a member of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), also known as Eastern Lightning, a Chinese Christian new religious movement founded in 1991, whose core teaching is that Jesus has returned on earth incarnated as Almighty God, a Chinese woman currently leading and guiding the Church in the U.S.

CAG teaches that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has consistently persecuted Christians, is a manifestation of the evil Great Red Dragon of the Book of Revelation, and that the Dragon will fall under the weight of its errors. CAG does not advocate any revolution and is a non-violent religious movement. Virtually all Western academic scholars who have studied the CAG have debunked the accusation of crimes it has allegedly committed as fake news spread by the Chinese regime.

Because of both its beliefs and its phenomenal expansion (in 2014, CCP sources credited it with four million members), CAG has been persecuted since the 1990s and included since 1995 in the official list of xie jiao.

Xie jiao (normally translated as “evil cults,” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings”) are movements the government does not approve of. Being active in a xie jiao is a crime

punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of 3 to 7 years or “more.”

CAG claims that more than 300,000 of its members have been arrested, more than 40,000 tortured, thousands held in the dreaded “transformation through education” camps, and more than 30 died in jail in highly suspicious circumstances. Bodies returned to the families in several cases had organs missing, evidence that the infamous “organ harvesting” practice has been extended to CAG prisoners. Scholars cannot confirm precise figures, but regard them as believable, as Chinese media and documents report weekly that hundreds of CAG members have been arrested.

A confidential CCP document leaked to Western media indicates that a new massive campaign for “eradicating” CAG has been launched in 2018, thousands of members have been arrested and the number of arrests is still increasing.

Those who have sought asylum abroad are regarded as particularly dangerous members of the CAG and as disloyal citizens, and are prime candidates for harsher jail penalties, with a serious risk of torture and extra-judicial killing.

We urge Germany to honor its well-known tradition of protecting human rights and religious liberty and not to return Ms. Zhao, and other CAG members in similar conditions, to her persecutors, granting them the asylum they deserve.

August 1, 2018

CAP-LC Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience

CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions

EIFRF European Inter-Religious Forum for Religious Freedom

FOB – European Federation for Freedom of Belief

FOREF – Forum for Religious Freedom Europe

HRWF – Human Rights Without Frontiers

LIREC – Center for Studies on Freedom of Belief, Religion and

Conscience

ORLIR – International Observatory of Religious Freedom of Refugees

Soteria International

UKRAINE: 1030th anniversary of the ‘Baptism of Rus’ : the ROC and UOC/ Moscow Patriarchate narrative

Pictures: <https://bit.ly/2LKUYHu>

Heads, members of 10 local Orthodox Churches to celebrate 1030th anniversary of Baptism of Rus in Moscow

Moscow, July 27, Interfax – www.interfax-religion.com/ – Representatives of ten local Orthodox Churches from around the world will come to Moscow to attend celebrations marking the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus.

Delegations from the Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Church of Antioch, the Church of Jerusalem, the Orthodox Church of Georgia, the Orthodox Church of Serbia, the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, the Orthodox Church of Albania, the Orthodox Church of Poland, and the Orthodox Church of Czech Lands and Slovakia are coming to the Russian capital, the Moscow Patriarchate told Interfax-Religion.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia will meet Patriarch Theodore of Alexandria and All Africa and members of other church delegations on Friday.

“It is very significant that our brothers from all across the Orthodox world are now coming to Moscow and Kiev so that we together can express our unity on this date, which is so important for the Russian Orthodox Church,” the spokesman of the Russian patriarch, priest Alexander Volkov, told Interfax-Religion.

In turn, the deputy head of the Synodal Department for External Church Relations Archpriest Nikolay Balashov, described the Baptism of Rus as “an epoch-making event in Russian history.”

“Everything that happened before is lost in the dark and is known to us only in fragments. A new people and a new civilization were born in the Dnieper baptistery, and this event was accompanied by such a strong creative surge that the newly born Orthodox Rus expanded later to new territories, and we received from God a ‘sixth part of the Earth,’ where different people now live, and new state borders are drawn, but with its own history, its own culture, and its global vision united for many centuries to come,” the priest told Interfax-Religion.

“The Orthodox belief in Christ, the belief that St. Prince Vladimir chose, formed all of us, that is, the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, the Moldovans, and all descendants of the Baptism of St. Vladimir, no matter what they call themselves now,” the patriarch’s spokesman said.

“The anniversary of our Baptism is an event of global significance,” and it is not accidental that all of the Orthodox Churches in the world deemed it fitting to attend it, “share their joy with us, sending their hierarchs both to Kiev and to Moscow,” the priest said.

The Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa Theodore will be Russia’s main guest, Father Nikolay said, noting that he “is our long-standing and faithful friend, who

wholeheartedly fell in love with the Russians after spending ten years of study and service in Odessa.”

“Let’s pray together, let’s share our joy and troubles, let’s think about how to build up the unity of our global Orthodox family,” the priest said.

The patriarchs of the Alexandrian and Russian Orthodox Churches, accompanied by members of other delegations, will lead a vigil service on Friday evening.

The Day of the Baptism of Rus was declared a state memorial date in Russia in 2010 at the Archbishop Council’s request.

Over 100,000 pilgrims to attend Kiev cross procession – Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Moscow, July 27, Interfax – The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is expecting even more believers to attend the Kiev cross procession marking the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus than attended last year.

“It is still early to make final assessments, but in any case, there will be more than 100,000 people. I have been on Vladimirskaya Gorka [Vladimir Hill] for more than an hour, waiting for a religious service, and there’s a nonstop flow of people coming here from three streets,” Ukrainian Orthodox Church spokesman Vasily Anisimov told Interfax-Religion.

He expressed hope that the festivities would not be marred by provocations. “God can never be cursed. Let’s hope that everything will be alright,” Anisimov said.

Dozens of buses from western Ukraine were stopped on the Zhitomir Highway leading to Kiev this morning because of they had supposedly been mined, he said.

There were reports of attempts to prevent believers from attending the cross procession in several Ukrainian regions on Thursday.

For instance, Ukrainian Security Service officers have stopped five buses in Zaporozhye for several hours under the pretext that they had been mined, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's press service said.

Cars full of armed people blocked another nine buses from Zaporozhye and Melitopol.

Attempts to keep people from the Kiev cross procession were also undertaken in the Zhitomir and Rovno regions, and obstacles were created for pilgrims from the Nezhin and Odessa dioceses.

Still, tens of thousands of people have come to Kiev, the church's press service said.

The attempts to block the highway have backfired, Archpriest Viktor Zemlianoy of the Rovno Diocese said. "Even more people than expected came because of this resistance," he said.

Kiev cross procession begins

Kiev, July 27, Interfax – A Ukrainian Orthodox Church cross procession marking the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus has begun in downtown Kiev.

After the prayer service on Vladimirska Gorka (Vladimir Hill), believers moved across European Square and along Grushevsky Street toward the Kiev Lavra of the Caves, an Interfax correspondent reported.

Clergymen carrying religious banners and icons are leading the column.

Law enforcement officers are providing security.

In attendance are the co-chairs of the Opposition Bloc faction in the Verkhovna Rada, Yury Boyko and Aleksander Vilkuł, faction members Vadim Novinsky, Nestor Shufrich, Mikhail Dobkin, and Yury Pavlenko, and Vladimir Litvin, an independent

MP.

The situation is calm in downtown Kiev. Due to the high humidity and temperature, some participants sometimes have felt dizzy in the crowd, but ambulances are on site providing aid.

About 250,000 attend cross procession in Kiev – organizers (1)

Moscow, July 27, Interfax – The cross procession held in Kiev on Friday afternoon to mark the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus brought together 250,000 believers from various Ukrainian regions and from other countries, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s press service said.

“Participants in today’s cross procession moved in a mighty flow toward the center of the capital for three hours. It was a marvelously joyful event,” church spokesperson Vasily Anisimov told Interfax-Religion.

A total of 100,000 people attended the celebration last year.

(1) HRWF Comment: No alternative reliable source confirms or denies these statistics. Noteworthy is the fact that the UOC/ Moscow Patriarchate in Kyiv and the ROC in Moscow name the event “the baptism of the Rus” and not “the christianization of the Kievan Rus”.

**Human Rights Without
Frontiers: 30 years of**

fighting totalitarianism

EU Today (18.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2uCzliW> – On 20 June, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) held a reception in Brussels to celebrate its 30 years of existence. Dozens of partners, collaborators, former staff, and volunteers who had contributed to its growth over the last three decades were in attendance, writes Willy Fautré, founder and executive director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

In 1988, the year which marked of the 40th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a group of Brussels-based human rights activists launched HRWF, with a lot of faith and no funding. At that time, there were no mobile telephones, internet, or social media... It was another world. One of the initial main objectives of the organisation was to highlight political and religious persecution in European Communist countries and to help human rights defenders in the Soviet Bloc.

In June 1988, they published the first issue of a magazine in French named "Droits de l'Homme sans Frontières". At that time, Western Europe was under constant threat of Soviet nuclear attack. Unsurprisingly, the first magazine issue covered a summit between Reagan and Gorbachev in Moscow. On that occasion, Reagan had invited 100 Soviet dissidents to the US embassy in the Soviet capital, an unthinkable move after 70 years of communism in the USSR. Also unthinkable at that time was the idea that 18 months later the Iron Curtain would unexpectedly fall and Communist totalitarianism would collapse.

In subsequent issues, the magazine dealt with the apartheid regime in South Africa, Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the genocide in Rwanda, religious persecution in China, and many other human rights issues around the world.

Throughout its 30 years of existence, HRWF has adapted itself to a fast-changing world, to the expansion of the European Union, and to the development of new communication technologies. HRWF now distributes a well-known daily newsletters to more than 10,000 recipients, which serves as an early alert tool meant to sensitize members of the European Parliament, EU member states, think tanks, journalists, and embassies in Brussels, Geneva, New York and Washington to pressing human rights news. HRWF organizes conferences at the European Parliament and regularly advocates human rights in academic seminars, at the UN in Geneva, and at the OSCE.

In the 21st century, the world is now facing new threats, new forms of warfare, and new forms of totalitarianism. One of them is Islamic totalitarianism, an ideology that first wants to radically change the existing nature of Muslim-majority states into some form of a theocratic regime dominated by a radical and retrograde form of Islam. This ideology seeks to change the structures of pluralistic civil societies into societies to be ruled with an iron hand by one religious worldview imported from the Arabic peninsula.

Islamic totalitarianism wants daily life and the behaviours of each individual to be dominated by one religious worldview, as did the late Communist ideology with the political philosophy of Marx and Engels.

Islamic totalitarianism, mainly but not exclusively embodied by ISIS, is a political ideology which instrumentalises the Quran to create an alternative and challenging system of political governance. It is definitely not a religion. Its siren song divides and fragments Muslim communities around the world, and the primary 'collateral victims' of its fight for power are Muslims themselves, who in many countries adhere to a historically peaceful Islam. Christians in Muslim-majority countries are a second category of 'collateral victims'. EU member states are also targeted, suffering from terrorist attacks and the radicalization of young Muslims.

The Islamic totalitarian virus spreads gender segregation and discrimination, the division of society into new social castes, hate speech, anti-Semitism, and many other 'social diseases'. It is infecting the software of the ummah and is trying to infect humankind. Antidotes need to be administered and vaccinations have to be discovered, a challenge to the political researchers and engineers of the defense and security of the EU and of human rights.

Combating Islamic totalitarianism with ideas, with words and in practice is not only legitimate but it is obligatory, it is a duty for the EU and human rights organizations for it is a fight for human dignity, equality, and human rights for all.

By Willy Fautré, founder and executive director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

This article was published in EU Today under the unfortunate title "EU member states targeted by radicalization of young Muslims"

IRAN : Over 130 religious Leaders condemn Iran regime

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Rowan Williams, has led over 50 British bishops and nearly 80 US church leaders to condemn the Iranian Regime for its human rights abuses and mistreatment of religious minorities in a statement released today.

Mohabat News (27.06.2018) – <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4027>
– The statement called on the international community to pay more attention to the plight of the Iranian people,

particularly religious minorities, who have long suffered at the hands of the dictatorship.

The Rt Rev. John Pritchard, former Bishop of Oxford and one of the signatories of the statement, said: "Today, we announce the initiative by Dr. Rowan Williams and supported by more than 50 bishops in the UK along with 78 US church leaders, which highlights the plight of the Iranian people and the religious minorities in Iran, particularly the Christians, calling on the international community to act to defend their rights in the face of government harassment and persecution." The Iranian Regime has been condemned a massive 64 times for its human rights record by the United Nations and many more times by various international human rights organizations. While the majority of those targeted by the Regime are Shiite Muslims, who make up the majority of Iran's population, religious minorities are targets specifically for their faith. Worse still, the situation is not getting better.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the United Nations Human Rights Council in February: "No improvement was observed concerning the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, who remain subject to restrictions. [I] remain concerned by reports of persistent human rights violations of and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities."

While, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2018 report revealed that religious freedom in Iran has continued to deteriorate, with many Christian converts and house church leaders given least 10 years in prison, and many religious reformers facing "prolonged detention and possible execution".

This abuse of human rights is justified by the Regime under their warped version of Islam, but is not recognised by any true believer.

Indeed, Maryam Rajavi, who leads the Iranian opposition and

will be the keynote speaker at their June 30 gathering in Paris, states that Islam does not approve of any form of compulsion, coercion and forcible prohibition, including the use of flogging and terror, imposing the compulsory veil, and especially imposing the rule of a government under the name of God and Islam.

The statement reported that the nationwide anti-regime uprising in Iran showed that the Iranian people want democracy in their country and the religious leaders agreed that the West should support that.

The statement read: “We call on all countries to take into consideration the deplorable situation of human rights in Iran, particularly the painful situation of religious minorities, in navigating their relations with Iran. We urge them to base any improvement of relations with Iran on a cessation of oppression of minorities and on a halt to executions in Iran. The time has come for us to listen to the Iranian people’s demand for freedom, including religious freedom.”

This statement is the latest in a series of public condemnations of the Iranian Regime for its human rights abuses and of support for the Iranian opposition and their Free Iran rally.

**RUSSIA: 16 Jehovah's
Witnesses behind bars as of 8**

June

HRWF (08.06.2018) – The number of Jehovah's Witnesses deprived of their freedom has been dramatically and rapidly increasing in Russia since the ban of their religion in April 2017.

It can unfortunately be expected that the situation will worsen day after day and that young Jehovah's Witnesses will also be targeted for their conscientious objection to military service, as members of a banned extremist religious organization (!).

Here is an updated list of 16 prisoners as of 8 June 2018. Their pre-trial detention is systematically prolonged until their trial starts.

See below the region they are from, followed by the name of the detainee and birthdate, the date of the arrest, the article of the criminal code and the dates of their pre-trial detention.

Charges

Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1: Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity.

Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2: Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity.

List of Prisoners

Oryol Region Oryol

Dennis CHRISTENSEN (18-Dec-72)

25-May-17

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 26-May-18 / 1-Aug-18

Republic of Tatarstan Naberezhniye Chelny

Ilkham Shamilevich Karimov (9-Feb-81)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 29-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Vladimir Nikolayevich Myakushin (6-Nov-87)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1), (1.1) and (2)

Pre-trial detention: 29-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Konstantin Matrashov (1983)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1), (1.1) and (2)

Pre-trial detention: 29-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Aydar Maratovich Yulmetyev (Aug-93)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1), (1.1) and (2)

Pre-trial detention: 31-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Republic of Bashkortostan Ufa

Anatoliy Sergeyevich Vilitovich (15-Sep-86)

10-Apr-18

Article 282.2(2)

Pre-trial detention: 12-Apr-18/ 2-Jul-18

Murmansk Region Polyarny

Roman Nikolayevich Markin (18-Mar-74)

18-Apr-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 23-Apr-18/ 11-Jun-18

Viktor Fedorovich Trofimov (26-Mar-57)
18-Apr-18
Article 282.2(1)
Pre-trial detention: 23-Apr-18/ 12-Jun-18

Vladivostok Region Vladivostok

Valentin Pavlovich Osadchuk (15-Mar-78)
19-Apr-18
Article 282.2(2)
Pre-trial detention: 23-Apr-18/ 20-Jun-18

Orenburg Region Orenburg

Aleksandr Gennadyevich Suvorov (20-Apr-80)
16-May-18
Article 282.2(1)
Pre-trial detention: 19-May-18/ 14-Jul-18

Vladimir Yuryevich Kochnev (15-Oct-79)
16-May-18
Article 282.2(1)
Pre-trial detention: 19-May-18/ 14-Jul-18

Magadan Region Magadan

Konstantin Nikolayevich Petrov (9-Aug-86)
30-May-18
Article 282.2(1)
Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18/ 29-Jul-18

Ivan Grigoryevich Puyda (C.O.)(5-Nov-78)
30-May-18
Article 282.2(1)
Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18 30/-Jul-18

Yevgeniy Anatolyevich Zyablov (9-Mar-77)
30-May-18
Article 282.2(1)
Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18/ 29-Jul-18

Sergey Liviyevich Yerkin (23-Jun-53)

30-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18/ 29-Jul-18

Tomsk Region Tomsk

Sergey Gennadyevich Klimov (C.O.) (26-Mar-70)

3-Jun-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention 05-Jun-18 04-Aug-18

RUSSIA: African Pentecostal student sentenced for illegal evangelism

Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/180517c.html> – On 16 May 2018, Nosisa Shiba, a student of the final year of the Nizhny Novgorod Medical Academy, a citizen of Swaziland (Africa), was summoned to the Department for Issues of Migration of the Sormovsk district, where law enforcement personnel charged her on the basis of article 18.8 of part 4 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law of the RF, with a sentence of immediate deportation through a special detention center. The girl, who has been a protestant since childhood, began going to an evangelical church of Nizhny Novgorod, the Embassy of Jesus Bible Center of KhVE, upon her arrival in Russia. According to the press service of the church, she sang a song about God and his love for people in her church one time. The video of Nosisa's performance was found on YouTube by the Federal Security Service (F.S.B.) of the RF. The deputy of the ruling bishop of the ROSKhVE in the

Volga federal district, the pastor of the Embassy of Jesus Bible Center of KhVE (city of Nizhny Novgorod), Bishop Pavel Ryndich, commented on the situation in his accounts on social networks.

“Today there was a trial again. This time it was of Nosisa, an African who sang in our praise service while being a student of the medical academy. Our sister was convicted because she sang praises. This was considered to be missionary activity without the documents permitting it. And we were unable to prove to the judge that in evangelical churches, everybody may sing. Once again, somebody with a bias dug up somewhere in the vastness of the internet one of my year-old sermons, where he made out the African woman among the worshipers. He identified her. He wrote up a bunch of materials. And with such enthusiasm and ardor that you are amazed. Lo and behold, such good deeds!”

The court issued a relatively positive decision, with a fine of 7,000 rubles and deportation from the country after the completion of her studies. As the clergyman notes, although the student got off with a slight fright, the trend is unpleasant: at first, a trial on level ground, then joy that she will just be deported and not jailed. Then maybe it will be “be happy that you are just jailed and not shot.” The bishop emphasized especially the moment in the trial when the judge asked whether Nosisa had any medical counter-indicators for staying in a special detention center until her deportation—she just about fainted.

Christians throughout Russia demonstrated prayer support for the girl and, the pastor said, there are positive results. Secular news media published actively and described this ambiguous situation. “Today I talked by phone with a Russian scholar of eastern studies, a host on the ‘Vesti FM’ radio station, Evgeny Satanovsky. It is nice that there still are many literate people in the news media,” Bishop Pavel Ryndich shared. (tr. by PDS, posted 17 May 2018)

RUSSIA: A sixth Jehovah's Witness accused of extremism behind bars

Operation "Judgment Day" –

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers –

HRWF (20.05.2018) – On 18 May, one day after the widespread police crackdown against Jehovah's Witnesses called "Judgment Day" in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous oblast), the hearing of Alam Aliev took place and the court ruled that he should be kept in pretrial detention through 14 July 2018 and scheduled his criminal case to begin on 22 May.

Jehovah's Witness in Birobidzhan target of criminal case

TASS/ Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2KHysvh> – According to materials of the criminal case, a resident of the city of Birobidzhan, in the period from February 2017 to May 2018, he is accused of conducting deliberate, vigorous actions of an organizational character directed at resumption and continuation of the illegal activity of a forbidden religious organization, which had been found in April 2017 to be extremist and its activity banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

The illegal actions of the suspect were expressed in convening meetings, organizing religious performances, collecting financial resources in the form of donations for the expenses of a religious organization that has been prohibited by a

court, and also conducting mass events aimed at distributing extremist literature and materials of extremist contents.

The prosecutor's office has taken control of the investigation of the criminal case.

Punishment for commission of the aforesaid serious crime is provided by the Criminal Code of the RF in the form of a fine of from 400,000 to 800,000 rubles or the total of salary or other income of the convict for a period of from two to four years or incarceration for a term of from six to ten years, with deprivation of the right to occupy certain offices or to engage in certain activity for a period of up to ten years and restriction of liberty for a term of from one to two years.

Operation "Judgment Day" against Jehovah's Witnesses

Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Lir3Ue> – At least 9 searches in homes of local residents who are thought to be Jehovah's Witnesses were conducted on 17 May in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous oblast), the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses reports. One of the operatives participating in the searches said that a total of 150 law enforcement officers are participating in this operation, which has the code name "Judgment Day."

In the process of searches, photographs, bank cards, money, and all electronic equipment (even old and broken things) were taken from the citizens.

Thus far there is no information about which criminal case the searches were being conducted about and on the basis of which article it was opened. However, a criminal case has been initiated against one of the Witnesses, Alam Aliev. He is in custody and his trial is expected for tomorrow.

In the morning of 16 May, a series of searches in homes of citizens who are thought to be Jehovah's Witnesses was conducted in the cities of Orenburg and Buzuluk (Orenburg

oblast). According to preliminary information, three citizens were arrested and pledges not to depart were taken from another three. It is known that citizens have been held as defendants on the basis of part 2 of article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the RF (participation in an extremist organization).

It is expected that a decision about the measure for insuring appearance for those arrested will be made on 17 May.

On 17 July of last year, the decision of the Russian Supreme Court finding all 396 religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to be extremist and banning their activity took legal effect. (tr. by PDS, posted 17 May 2018)