

In Prison for their Religion or Belief

20 countries imprison individuals for exercising basic rights guaranteed under Article 18 of the ICCPR, according to the Annual Report of Human Rights Without Frontiers

Twenty Member States of the United Nations have fallen short of their international commitments to protect the free exercise of their religion or belief, guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* according to *Human Rights Without Frontiers International* (HRWF) in its annual world report. **China, Iran and North Korea** hold the record for the highest number of those imprisoned for their religion or belief.

Members of at least **15 minority groups** were targeted by their government last year for this kind of repression of religion or belief.

The HRWF annual report exposes the constitutional and legislative framework of 20 countries of concern and documents various forms of state repression exercised against religious believers and those of non-religious convictions in those countries. Sanctions can include the death penalty, physical punishment and prison terms.

The report covers cases of imprisonment on the basis of national laws forbidding or restricting the right to freedom of religion or belief, such as the case of Meriam Ibrahim, who was imprisoned and sentenced to death in Sudan for declaring that she was a Christian whilst under Sudanese law she was considered a Muslim. In other cases covered in the report, laws were twisted in their application to suit a political end, to silence defenders of freedom of religion or belief or to repress religion or belief minority communities. For instance, in Iran members of religious minorities are routinely jailed on charges of "actions against national security" or attempting to overthrow the government, when all they were doing was meeting peacefully for worship.

Willy Fautre, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, commented that "*the purpose of this report is to identify and put on the radar screen those states which criminalise certain activities related to freedom of religion or belief and imprison their citizens for the simple exercise of this freedom which is protected by the Universal Declaration.*"

The report also aims to assist relevant EU institutions and EU Member States with country policy recommendations based on EU relations with each of the countries in question in an effort to strengthen protections for freedom of religion or belief.

To view the report: <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-annual-reports/>

*Article 18 guarantees everyone the "freedom of thought, conscience and religion," including the right to change one's religion or to hold atheistic beliefs. The right to conscientious objection to military service is also guaranteed by the Universal Declaration.