

# CHINA: Dozens of underground human rights reporters arrested

*“At least 45 Chinese reporters working underground for an Italy-based media outlet were arrested, interrogated, and accused of espionage in China in the last six months,” declared Marco Respinti, a panelist at a conference on religious freedom in China organized this Wednesday at the European Parliament – writes Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.*

By Willy Fautré

EU Reporter (23.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2FS0QtD> – Respinti, a journalist and Director-in-Charge of Bitter Winter (BW), an international online daily magazine on religious liberty and human rights in China published in eight languages by CESNUR in Italy, also reported that in August 2018 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities designated Bitter Winter as a “foreign hostile website” due to BW publishing secret documents and news reports about the CCP’s suppression of religious beliefs and human rights violations.

The CCP authorities retaliated with repeated attempts to hack BW’s website and arresting its local reporters and contributors. BW reporters who are arrested for smuggling out videos, photos, court trial documents, or any other evidence of persecution are usually accused of “divulgence of state secrets” or “involvement in infiltration by foreign forces.”

Bitter Winter covers the persecution of all faiths in its daily reports; all religions are persecuted under Xi Jinping in China. Active believers of all faiths are arbitrarily arrested and forced to sign declarations recanting their religious beliefs and swearing allegiance to the atheist Communist Party. Places of worship are closed or destroyed, and minors are forbidden to attend religious services in places of worship, both in public or private.

One million Uyghur Muslims are forced to attend political “transformation through education” sessions in detention conditions. BW reporters have managed to smuggle out pictures and videos from these camps. One reporter who secretly filmed such a camp in Xinjiang was arrested and has “disappeared” after his arrest.

Pastors are arrested and sentenced to prison terms for holding prayer meetings in private houses; crosses have been removed down from both Catholic and Protestant churches; religious symbols have been removed from religious places and replaced by photos of Mao Zedong or Xi Jinping.

From 28 October to 1 November 2018, thirty-five Buddhist temples were shut down or sealed off in one province alone. Monks and nuns, most of them seniors, were thrown out onto the streets overnight.

Taoist temples have been destroyed on spurious grounds; this was the case with the Yaochi Palace Temple, which has a thousand-year history.

Falun Gong practitioners and members of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) make up the highest number of arrests and prisoners. As of 1 January 2019, the online database of religious prisoners of the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers contained over 2000 and 1600 documented cases, respectively.

In a recent crackdown of a CAG community, five senior leaders were sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Ms Bao Shuguang was sentenced to thirteen years in prison and a fine of USD 19,000, and the four others will each serve an eleven-year prison term and pay a fine of USD 17,000.

More than 2500 CAG members have applied for political asylum in various EU member states. Unfortunately, despite the magnitude of the persecution and their high number of prisoners of conscience, few of them are granted political asylum. The worst offenders in Europe are France, Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland, which issued 203, 33, 10, and 24 orders of departure, respectively. The peaceful believers, mainly young women, might be arrested at any moment, at home or on the street, deported to China, and put back in the hands of their persecutors.

At the conference on religious freedom in China hosted by MEPs Bastiaan Belder (ECR), Christian Dan Preda (EPP), and Josef Weidenholzer (S&D), Respinti urged HR/VP Federica Mogherini and the members of the European Parliament to make full use of their meetings with the Chinese authorities as well as the UN human rights mechanisms to convey their concerns to the Chinese government and urge it to comply with international

standards regarding freedom of religion or belief.

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## **WORLD: US condemns 10 countries for severe religious freedom violations**

By Jennifer Hansler

CNN (11.12.2018) – <https://cnn.it/2Erh0kr> – Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday announced the US has deemed 10 countries guilty of severe religious freedom violations.

The nations – China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar (also known as Burma), North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – were categorized “Countries of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. They were found to have engaged or tolerated “systematic, ongoing, (and) egregious violations of religious freedom.”

“In far too many places across the globe, individuals continue to face harassment, arrests, or even death for simply living their lives in accordance with their beliefs. The United States will not stand by as spectators in the face of such oppression,” Pompeo said in a statement. “Protecting and promoting international religious freedom is a top foreign policy priority of the Trump Administration.”

“These designations are aimed at improving the lives of individuals and the broader success of their societies. I recognize that several designated countries are working to improve their respect for religious freedom; I welcome such initiatives and look forward to continuing the dialogue,” he added.

Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, in a call with reporters on Tuesday, cited a catalog of religious freedom violations perpetrated by some of these nations. They included Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, specifically the case of Asia Bibi, Myanmar’s mass violence against the Rohingya population and China’s imprisonment of the Uyghurs and its treatment of Christians and Buddhists.

“China isn’t backing away from the religious persecution, it seems to be expanding,” he said. “This is obviously very troubling to the administration.”

According to the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, such “egregious violations” include “torture, degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.”

Congress is notified of the designations annually, and sanctions to pressure the country to change its behavior may be imposed if all non-economic means have been used.

According to Brownback, such sanctions are “double-hatted” – meaning the countries are sanctioned in other areas but also considered sanctioned as Countries of Particular Concern. China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea and Sudan are all being sanctioned as such, but Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have had their sanctions waived due to “national interest,” Brownback said.

In addition to the Countries of Particular Concern designation, Pompeo “placed Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerated ‘severe violations of religious freedom,’ ” and designated al Nusra Front, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan and the Taliban as “Entities of Particular Concern,” according to the statement.

Pompeo made the designations in late November.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal government commission established by the 1998 law, said the designation “demonstrates America’s strong and active support for freedom of religion and belief worldwide.”

“We are particularly gratified that, after years of documenting systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom in Pakistan, the State Department has finally added that country to the list of the world’s worst violators for the first time,” Chairman Tenzin Dorjee said in a statement to CNN. “We also welcome the new addition of Russia as a severe violator on the Special Watch List, but question whether Uzbekistan has sufficiently improved to be moved from the CPC list to the Special Watch List. In April 2018 USCIRF recommended that both of those countries should be designated as CPCs.”

Brownback said Uzbekistan had made “substantial changes.”

In December 2017, Pompeo designated China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as Countries of Particular Concern and placed Pakistan on the Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

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