

ROMANIA: Romania ranks second by the number of pending cases at European Court of Human Rights

Romania Insider (24.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2TjMuHR> – The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) had a total of 56,350 pending cases at the end of 2018, of which 8,503 (15.1% of the total) were complaints against the Romanian state. Romania thus ranked second for the total number of ongoing cases at ECHR after Russia, which had a share of 20.9% of the total pending cases, according to the ECHR annual report.

However, the number of applications against Romania the ECHR received in 2018 almost halved compared to 2017, from 6,509 to 3,369. The drop was even bigger compared to 2016, when almost 8,200 cases were filed against Romania.

Most of the complaints for human rights breaches in Romania are about improper conditions of detention as local prisons have been overcrowded for many years. In past years, Romania was forced to pay compensations to dozens of detainees held in improper conditions after ECHR rulings.

The Romanian authorities have tackled this issue in the last two years in ways that raised controversies.

For example, a law granting shorter sentences to convicts held

in improper conditions led to the early release of many dangerous detainees, some of whom were then involved in new violent crimes. Two recent cases in particular caused a wave of outrage and prompted the Government to promise that it would review the rules on early release.

A 25-year old man was killed in Medias, central Romania, by a group of three men, two of whom had benefited from the law granting them early release for improper detention conditions. Another case is that of an old man in Galati who was savagely beaten by a man who had also been granted early release.

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RUSSIA: Almost two-year-long trial of Jehovah's Witness nears end

In trial of case of Danish believer in Orel, defendant himself provided explanations

Russia Religion News (18.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2AVCJZv> – On 15 and 16 January 2019, Dennis Christensen, who is charged with “arranging the activity of an extremist organization” (Art. 282.2 of CC RF), presented to the court his explanations. He confirmed that he professes the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, analyzed the motives ascribed to him by the investigation, pointed out the shortcomings in the indictment, openly exposed the secret witness of the prosecution, and declared his complete innocence.

Concerning his faith and intent

“It is true that I am an elder,” he confessed in court. “Among Jehovah's Witnesses this is not an office but a way of life of a minister of God.” As evidence, Christensen quoted for the court excerpts from the Bible that speak about the high moral requirements for elders. However he decisively refuted the accusation of “convoking meetings” and that he is an “organizer” of worship services. Christensen described in detail that Christian meetings are an expression of Christian love on the part of each person and that they were conducted in Orel before his arrival and will be conducted if he is not there.

In analyzing the motives ascribed to him as extremist, Dennis Christensen described why he likes the religion of the Witnesses: "We call one another brothers and sisters... After such meetings a person feels encouraged. We discuss how to provide practical help to those who are sick. It is possible they need help in purchasing groceries or preparing meals. The elderly often need help if something breaks or a light bulb needs changing. We discuss how to help people so that they will have close relations with God and how to explain biblical truths to them. We discuss how one can improve relations with neighbors, coworkers, and classmates. Sometimes about what we could do in order that our city becomes yet cleaner." He summarized: "As is evident from the aforesaid, when I became a Jehovah's Witness and subsequently, when I came to Russia, I did not have any intention to commit a crime."

Was it forbidden to believe in Jehovah

Back in the SIZO [investigative cell], Christensen received the possibility to acquaint himself with the judicial decision finding the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of Orel to be extremist. He read an excerpt from the ruling of the Russian Supreme Court of 18 October 2016: "The rights of members of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of Orel to freedom of religious confession will not be violated, since they are not denied the possibility of exercising and conducting religious rituals not connected with the distribution of religious literature of extremist contents." After this Christensen declared: "If the Supreme Court considers it legal for believers, including former members of the local religious organization, to conduct and profess their religious rituals, why then was I accused

that in my case these actions are illegal? If the Supreme Court has given such an explanation, why am I accused that I should have understood it differently?"

Christensen explained that the local religious organization of Orel ceased to exist on 18 October 2016 on the basis of a court decision. But this did not mean that believers in the city of Orel were required to cease believing in God. "Since article 28 of the constitution has not be changed up to the present time, I consider that I and my fellow believers had the right to conduct worship services, which were not in any way connected with the legal entity that had been liquidated."

Concerning the secret records of telephone conversations

"The F.S.B. secretly surveilled me in the course of nine months," Christensen said. "And I did not suspect this. And in all of that period I never denigrated anybody, I did not encourage genocide, nor the persecution of other people, nor the destruction of the family, nor violence, nor anything else that I am accused of. The fact that in my telephone conversations various questions were discussed which were connected with my life as a believing person is not evidence that I committed some kind of crime." "In none of my telephone conversations did there even occur the expression 'local religious organization,'" Christensen continued. "Meanwhile the prosecution arbitrarily declares that I talked about the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses of Orel. And I never had anything to do with it either legally or actually. Consequently I never had either the intention nor the desire to revive the activity of this organization."

Exposure of a secret witness

Separately Dennis Christensen focused on the testimony of a secret witness with the pseudonym of "Ermilov." "The court was not able to be convinced of the fact that the real name of this citizen is Oleg Kurdiumov. He is a teacher of the Orel State University," Dennis Christensen said. "Under the pretext of a person who was interested in the Bible, Kurdiumov began, in accordance with instructions of the F.S.B., to take pictures with a hidden camera, and then also on instructions from the F.S.B. to secretly record on a dictaphone our conversations with him. Since the audio and video tapes he obtained did not contain any information about crimes committed by me, Kurdiumov decided to supplement them with his own fantasies, giving testimony under a pseudonym. I regard this act as unworthy of a university instructor... As the witness Kurdiumov explained, much of the information he gave to the court, he read on the internet network. That means, his testimony cannot be used as evidence in the case, inasmuch as it is only hearsay."

"Esteemed court, I wish to emphasize that in contrast with the side of the prosecution, I never viewed the peaceful worship services of believers to be a continuation of the activity of the liquidated local religious organization," Dennis Christensen said in conclusion. "I never had the intention of committing a crime." (tr. by PDS, posted 18 January 2019)

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RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witnesses in prison as of 1 January

HRWF (01.01.2019) – As of 1 January 2019, authorities had placed 25 Witnesses in pretrial detention and 24 under house arrest, and 38 are not allowed to leave the area where they live. All have been charged with organizing, participating in, or financing the activity of an “extremist” organization. In July, officials in Omsk placed the first female Witness in pretrial detention, setting a disturbing precedent.

Officials attempt to justify their actions by citing the April 2017 ban on the Witnesses' legal entities and misapplying Article 282 of the Criminal Code. In reality, they are prosecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for peaceful worship. If convicted, some of those who have been arrested face prison terms of up to ten years.

Since February 2018, law enforcement officers have followed a general pattern when arresting and detaining Jehovah's Witnesses. Heavily armed police forcibly enter Witnesses' homes, often pointing guns at the heads of the residents—including children and the elderly—and forcing them to the floor. While officers search the premises, they

confiscate personal belongings and take some Witnesses into custody for further interrogation. Investigators initiate criminal charges against selected Witnesses for alleged extremist activity and petition the courts to order their pretrial detention. Once the Witnesses are jailed, prosecutors petition the courts to extend the pretrial detentions, and the courts typically grant their requests.

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VIETNAM: NOW! Campaign 2018 report about Vietnamese prisoners of conscience

Latest Count: Vietnam Holds 244 Prisoners of Conscience

VietnamPoCS (03.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2LZCe4R> – Press release: According to the Now! Campaign, an initiative involving 14 international and Vietnamese civil society organizations, the government of Vietnam is holding at least 244 in prisons or similar forms of detention compared to 165 cases in November 2017, when the campaign was launched. This makes the country the second largest jailer of dissidents in Southeast Asia, only behind Myanmar.

The above number includes 224 who have been convicted, typically of political crimes such as “propaganda against the state” and “injuring the national unity,” and 20 others who are held in pre-trial detention. In addition, eight persons who participated in peaceful protests in mid-June of 2018 were given between five months and two years of suspended prison terms.

Many bloggers, lawyers, unionists, land rights activists, political dissidents, and followers of non-registered minority religions have been arrested and detained for peacefully exercising their internationally and constitutionally protected rights, principally the right to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of religion or belief. The list does not include individuals who have engaged in or advocated violence.

In 2018, Vietnam arrested 27 human rights activists and convicted 40 activists with a total imprisonment of 300 years and 69 years under house arrest. In addition, 64 peaceful protesters were convicted in connection to the mass demonstrations that started in mid-June, where tens of thousands of protesters opposed the two bills on special economic zones and cyber security. The demonstrators were

sentenced to a total of 121 years and five months in prison and nine years of suspended prison terms.

Thirty-two of the prisoners of conscience among the 244 identified by the NOW! Campaign are female. With one exception, all of these women come from the majority Kinh ethnic group. The one exception, Rmah Hruth, is an ethnic Jarai woman who was sentenced to five years of imprisonment in March 2014. In total, 186 people, or 76.6 % of the list, are ethnic Kinh. The second largest ethnic grouping on the list are Montagnards, a loose set of religious and ethnic minorities who live in the mountains of the Central Highlands. They account for 24.2% of those on the list. Seventeen of those on the list are Hmong people and two from Khmer Krom ethnic minority.

Most prisoners of conscience have been charged with or convicted of allegations under Articles 109, 116, 117, 318 and 331 in the 2015 Penal Code (previously Articles 79, 87, 88, 245 and 258 of the 1999 Penal Code, respectively):

- 45 activists convicted on subversion (Article 79 of 1999 Penal Code or Article 109 in the 2015 Penal Code);
- 23 activists convicted and five charged with anti-state propaganda (Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code or Article 117 of the 2015 Penal Code);
- 53 people from ethnic minorities convicted for undermining the national unity policy (Article 87 of the 1999 Penal Code);

- 13 activists convicted of or charged with “abusing democratic freedom” (Article 258 of the 1999 Penal Code or Article 331 of the 2015 Penal Code);
- 78 individuals convicted of or charged with “disrupting public orders” (under Article 245 of the 1999 Penal Code or Article 318 of the 2015 Penal Code). Fifty two of them were imprisoned for peaceful participation in or being suspected of planning to participate in the mid-June demonstrations and their aftermath.
- The charge(s) for 16 individuals are unknown or yet to be announced by authorities.

Note that 25 individuals in the Now! Campaign’s report dated October 1, 2018, are not listed in the year-end report due to the limited information on their cases.

Background

In order to maintain a one-party regime, Vietnam’s communist government continues its intensified crackdown on local dissent by arresting and convicting many government critics, bloggers, Facebook users, non-violent demonstrators, environmentalists, and social activists.

To suppress the growing social dissatisfaction, silence activists and discourage critics, the government has used controversial articles in the national security provisions of

the Penal Code to arrest democracy activists and human rights defenders and convict them with lengthy sentences. Democracy campaigner and environmentalist Le Dinh Luong (M) was sentenced to 20 years in prison and five years of probation, the most severe prison sentence given to an activist in the past five years.

The communist regime has employed harsh measures to prevent street demonstrations and used allegation of “disrupting public orders” under Article 318 of the 1999 Penal Code to imprison dozens of peaceful demonstrators.

The largest wave of arrests in two decades

In 2018, Vietnam arrested 26 activists and bloggers. Twenty-one of them were charged under provisions of the Penal Code while the charges against the remaining five have not been announced.

– University student Huynh Duc Thanh Binh (M) was charged with “attempting to overthrow the government” under Article 109 of the 2015 Penal Code.

– Five activists were arrested and charged with “disrupting security” in early September: Hoang Thi Thu Vang (F) and four members of the unregistered Hien Phap (Constitution) Group: Ngo Van Dung (M), Nguyen Thi Ngoc Hanh (F), Doan Thi Hong (F) and Ho Dinh Cuong (M). Security forces kidnapped all of them on September 1-4 without informing their families about their arrests and places of detention. They are facing imprisonment

of up to 15 years if convicted.

– Five activists were arrested and charged with “making, storing or spreading information, materials or items for the purpose of opposing the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” under Article 117: Nguyen Ngoc Anh (M), Nguyen Dinh Thanh (M), Huynh Truong Ca (M), Nguyen Trung Linh (M) and Nguyen Van Quang (M).

– Nine activists were arrested and charged with “abusing democratic freedom” under Article 331 of the Penal Code: Do Cong Duong (M), Le Anh Hung (M), Nguyen Van Truong (M), Doan Khanh Vinh Quang (M), Bui Manh Dong (M), Nguyen Hong Nguyen (M), Truong Dinh Khang (M), and Le Minh The (M). Five of them were convicted and sentenced to between one and five years in prison while four others are in pre-trial detention.

– Charge(s) against Huynh Duc Thinh (M), Tran Long Phi (M), Do The Hoa (M) and Tran Thanh Phuong (M) have not been publicized. Police have yet to hand over their arrest warrants to their families. All of these dissidents have been held incommunicado during the investigation period. They are not permitted to meet with their lawyers, and their families are not allowed to visit them in person and must turn over to the prison authorities food, medicine and other personal necessities intended for the detainees.

In addition, Vietnam arrested hundreds of people participating in peaceful demonstrations in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Da Nang, Dong Nai, Nha Trang, Binh Thuan, Ninh Thuan, Binh Duong, and other localities on June 10-11. These demonstrators

protested the National Assembly's draft bills on special economic zones and on cyber security. The first bill is believed to ignore the country's sovereignty and favor Chinese investors while the second bill is considered a draconian tool to silence online critics.

For the UN review of Vietnam's implementation of the Convention Against Torture, held on November 14-15, 2018, BPSOS and five other civil organizations had submitted a joint report detailing the police's heavy-handed treatment and arrest of peaceful demonstrators in June 2018. Vietnam's security forces have used plainclothes agents to kidnap dissidents and hold them for months without publicizing charge(s) against them or informing their families about their arrest and the allegations made against them. At least ten activists were so taken into police custody in early September, and they are still held incommunicado for investigation on serious accusations including "disrupting security" under the national security provisions of the Penal Code. Among them are bloggers Nguyen Thi Ngoc Hanh (F), Tran Thanh Phuong (M), Hung Hung (M), Ngo Van Dung (M), Doan Thi Hong (F) and Do The Hoa (M) of the unregistered group Hien Phap (Constitution).

In its Concluding Observations following the review of Vietnam's implementation of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Geneva in mid November, the UN Committee Against Torture urges Vietnam to "[g]uarantee that all detained persons are afforded, in law and in practice, all fundamental legal safeguards from the very outset of their deprivation of liberty, including the right to be informed immediately of the charges against them, to have prompt access to a lawyer or to free legal aid during all proceedings, to notify a relative or

another person of their choice about their detention or arrest, to request and receive a medical examination from an independent doctor, including by a doctor of their choice upon request, and to have their deprivation of liberty recorded in registers at all stages...”

Lengthy pretrial detention and failure to promptly bring detainee to court

In many cases, activists have been held for up to 28 months in pre-trial detention. For example, human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai (M) and his assistant Le Thu Ha (F) were in pre-trial detention from December 16, 2015 until their trial on April 5, 2018. During the pre-trial detention, activists are kept incommunicado and not permitted to meet with their lawyers or relatives. In most cases, they may have access to lawyers to prepare for their defense only a few days before being tried.

The case of blogger Nguyen Danh Dung (M) is of particular concern. On December 16, 2016, authorities in the central province of Thanh Hoa arrested him and charged him with “conducting anti-state propaganda” under Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code. There has been no information about him since then. It is unclear whether he had been tried or freed or is still in pre-trial detention.

In its Concluding Observations, the UN Committee Against Torture has expressed concern about the lengthy pre-trial detention faced by human rights defenders and advised Vietnam to “[e]nsure that persons in administrative detention enjoy fundamental legal safeguards such as access to a lawyer or

legal aid, the right to notify their family about their detention; and that their conditions of detention and treatment are not inferior to those of other persons deprived of their liberty.”

Heavy sentences

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Heavy Sentences

In 2018, Vietnam convicted 40 activists, 32 of them being arrested in 2015-2017 and eight in 2018.

– As many as 16 activists were convicted on subversion. They included eight members of the banned group Brotherhood for Democracy: Nguyen Van Dai (M), Nguyen Trung Ton (M), Nguyen Trung Truc (M), Pham Van Troi (M), Truong Minh Duc (M), Tran Thi Xuan (F), Nguyen Van Tuc (M), and Le Thu Ha (F); environmentalist and democracy advocate Le Dinh Luong (M), retired teacher Dao Quang Thuc (M) and five individuals alleged to be connected to the yet-to-be-established Coalition for Self-Determination for the Vietnamese People: Luu Van Vinh (M), Nguyen Quoc Hoan (M), Nguyen Van Duc Do (M), Tu Cong Nghia (M) and Phan Trung (M). They were given harsh sentences of 7-20 years in prison and additional probation of 1-5 years.

– Seven activists were convicted on charge of “conducting anti-state propaganda” under Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code or “making, storing or spreading information, materials or items for the purpose of opposing the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” under Article 117 of the 2015 Penal Code: Vu Quang Thuan (M), Nguyen Van Dien (M), Tran

Hoang Phuc (M), Bui Hieu Vo (M), Nguyen Viet Dung(M), Huynh Truong Ca (M) and Nguyen Dinh Thanh (M). They were sentenced to between 4.5 years and 8 years in prison. The highest sentence was given to Mr. Thuan and the lightest imprisonment was given to Bui Hieu Vo, an online blogger in HCM City. Some of them were given additional four or five years of probation.

– Four activists were convicted on allegation of “abusing democratic freedom to infringe interests of the state” under Article 331 of the 2015 Penal Code: Truong Dinh Khang (M), Nguyen Hong Nguyen (M), Doan Khanh Vinh Quang (M) and Bui Manh Dong (M). They were sentenced to 1 year, 2 years, 27 months and 30 months in prison, respectively.

– Do Cong Duong (M), an anti-corruption activist and independent journalist in Bac Ninh province, was arrested while filming an enforced land grabbing in February 2018. Later, he was convicted on allegations of “abusing democratic freedom” and “disrupting public orders” under Articles 331 and 318 of the 2015 Penal Code. He was sentenced in separate trials to 5 years in prison for the first charge and 4 years in prison for the second charge.

– Nine activists and 64 peaceful protesters in mid-June were convicted for “disrupting public orders” and sentenced to between 8 months and 6 years in prison.

Mistreatment in prison

In July – August imprisoned human rights activists Tran Thi

Nga (F) and Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (aka blogger Mother Mushroom) (F) were reportedly mistreated in prison. Ms. Nga was beaten and given death threats by an inmate. On September 29, Nga was denied of her family's visit. The last time she met with her family was July 26. Her family is concerned about her safety. Ms. Quynh was also threatened by an inmate and was given poor-quality food. She conducted a 17-days hunger strike that lasted from July 7 to July 23 in a bid to protest the prison's inhumane treatment.

Tran Huynh Duy Thuc (M), who is serving his 16-year imprisonment at Prison Camp No. 6 in the central province of Nghe An, started a hunger strike on August 14 to protest the bad treatment by prison authorities, which aimed to coerce him to make false confessions. The hunger strike lasted till September 16.

On August 16, 2018, appearing as witnesses at the hearing of Le Dinh Luong (M), Nguyen Van Hoa (M) and Nguyen Viet Dung (M) informed the presiding judge that their written confessions against Luong had been obtained through torture. They were both taken to another room where Hoa was beaten again by a senior police officer from the Nghe An province's Police Department.

The Ministry of Public Security apparently transfers prisoners of conscience to prison camps far from their families as additional punishment for those who refused to admit wrongdoings. For example, Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, and Tran Thi Nga were sent to prisons located between 1,000 km and 2,000 km from their families. Other documented cases are included in the following table.

No.	Name	Charge	Place of detention	Home location	Distance (km)	Period
1	Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (f)	88	Prison camp No. 5- Thanh Hoa	Nha Trang	1,300	2017-2018
2	Tran Thi Nga (f)	88	Prison camp Dak Trung- Gia Lai	Hanoi	1,250	Currently
3	Tran Huynh Duy Thuc (m)	79	Prison camp No. 6- Nghe An	HCM City	1,400	Currently
4	Tran Anh Kim (m)	79	Prison camp No. 5- Thanh Hoa	Thai Binh	150	Currently
5	Nguyen Dang Minh Man (f)	79	Prison camp No. 5- Thanh Hoa	Vinh Long	1,600	Currently
6	Nguyen Van Oai (m)	88	Prison camp Dak Trung- Gia Lai	Nghe An	1,300	Currently
7	Ngo Hao (m)	79	An Diem Prison camp- Quang Nam	Phu Yen	500	Currently
8	Bui Thi Minh Hang (f)	245	Prison camp Dak Trung- Gia Lai	Vung Tau	1,000	2015-2017
9	Mai Thi Dung (f)	79	Thanh Xuan Prison camp- Hanoi	Dong Thap	2,000	2013-2015
10	Can Thi Theu (f)	245	Prison camp No. 5- Thanh Hoa	Hanoi	300	2016-2017
11	Ho Duc Hoa (m)	79	Ba Sao Prison camp- Ha Nam	Nghe An	300	Currently
12	Le Thanh Tung (m)	79	Prison camp No. 5- Thanh Hoa	Hanoi	210	Currently
13	Nguyen Hoang Quoc Hung (m)	89	Xuyen Moc Prison camp- Ba Ria- Vung Tau	HCM City	100	Currently
14	Nguyen Huu Vinh (m)	258	Prison camp No. 5- Thanh Hoa	Hanoi	300	Currently
15	Nguyen Van Hoa	88	An Diem Prison camp- Quang Nam	Ha Tinh	500	Currently
16	Phan Kim Khanh	88	Ba Sao Prison camp- Ha Nam	Phu Tho	300	Currently
17	Phan Van Thu	79	An Phuoc Prison camp, Binh Duong	Phu Yen	500	Currently
18	Tran Thi Thuy	79	An Phuoc Prison camp, Binh Duong	Ben Tre	150	2013-2017
19	Le Dinh Luong	79	Ba Sao Prison camp- Ha Nam	Nghe An	300	Currently

Release from prison

Ten activists were released from prison this year. Nguyen Huu Quoc Duy (M), Dinh Nguyen Kha (M), Tran Thi Thuy (F), Giang A Vang (M), and Vang A Long (M) completed their sentence. The first three are still placed under probation – they are under the close surveillance of local authorities during the probation period. After years in prison, their health has worsened; diagnosed with a number of severe diseases, they

need urgent medical treatment to partly recover their health.

On the other hand, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (F), Le Thu Ha (F) and Nguyen Van Dai (M) were given amnesty but forced to leave Vietnam to live in exile. On June 7, Mr. Dai, accompanied by his wife, and Ms. Ha left for Germany. On October 17, Ms. Quynh was accompanied by her two children and her mother to the United States.

International responses

Vietnam's persecution against dissidents was met by strong international condemnation, particularly by the United States, the European Union, Germany, and the United Kingdom as well as by international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Along with calling on Hanoi to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally, the international community has urged Vietnam to respect international human rights treaties of which Vietnam is a state-party. The international community has also called on Vietnam to amend its Cyber Security Law, which in its current form would further restrict freedom of expression.

In its Concluding Observations dated December 28, 2018, the UN Committee Against Torture called on Vietnam to immediately cease all acts of torture and other forms of ill-treatment targeting persons deprived of their liberty, especially

prisoners of conscience.

The term “prisoner of conscience” (POC) was coined by Peter Benenson in the 1960s. It refers to any individual “imprisoned for his/her political, religious or conscientiously held beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth, sexual orientation or other status who have not used violence or advocated violence or hatred.”

The NOW! Campaign is a joint campaign initiated by Boat People SOS (BPSOS) calling upon the government of Vietnam to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally. The campaign is supported by 14 non-government organizations:

Boat People SOS (BPSOS)
Front Line Defenders (FLD)
Civil Right Defenders (CRD)
Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)
Defend the Defenders (DTD)
Stefanus Alliance International
Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)
The 88 Project
Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (IJAVN)
Progressive Voice-Burma
Vietnam Women for Human Rights (VNWHR)
Campaign to Abolish Torture in Vietnam (VN-CAT)
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)
Montagnard Human Rights Organization (MHR0)

For more information on the NOW! Campaign, visit

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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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