

8 Member States of the UN Human Rights Council Put Believers and Atheists in Jail

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) has just released its Annual World Freedom of Religion or Belief Prisoners List (*): 3 newly elected member states of the UN Human Rights Council and 5 other members are on its list of 24 countries: China, Morocco and Saudi Arabia – India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Libya and South Korea.

In its report, HRWF lists hundreds of prisoners that were behind bars in 2013 due to laws forbidding or restricting their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB): (1) freedom to change religion or belief, (2) freedom to share one's religion or beliefs, (3) freedom of association, (4) freedom of worship and assembly, or (5) conscientious objection to military service.

Twenty-four countries were identified as depriving believers of their freedom: **Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Libya, Morocco, Nagorno-Karabakh, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.**

The freedom of religion or belief, affirmed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserts that **"everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his [her] choice." This includes the right not to believe at all in a religion.**

In particular, three countries have recently been accepted into the UN Human Rights Council despite their poor religious freedom record and legislation restricting freedom of worship and public manifestation of religion.

For instance, in **China**, a politically Communist state, all religious groups are obliged to register with a state-controlled religious organization to be allowed to carry out their activities legally and may not deviate from the doctrines approved by the state. FoRB prisoners in China belong to groups that are not recognized by the state (Protestant house churches), are banned as 'evil cults' (Falun Gong), profess allegiance to a spiritual leader living outside China (Roman Catholics faithful to the Pope and Tibetan Buddhists faithful to the Dalai Lama) or are suspected of separatism (Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists). The HRWF report documents several mass arrests and a wide range of individual cases of believers of all faiths serving prison terms.

In **Morocco**, a Muslim country, a convert was sentenced to two and a half years in prison and was fined for trying to share his new Christian faith with others.

In **Saudi Arabia**, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, 52 Ethiopian Christians were arrested for participating in a religious service in a private home and subsequently a number of them were deported.

Five other states previously elected and currently members of the UN Human Rights Council have also put believers and atheists behind bars.

In **India**, a democratic country, a number of Protestants were arrested and briefly detained for converting to Christianity or organizing prayer meetings in private homes.

In **Indonesia**, an atheist was sentenced to 30 months in prison for posting the statement "God does not exist" on Facebook, creating cartoons of the Prophet

Muhammad and starting an atheist page. A pastor spent three months in prison for holding religious services without a valid permit.

In **Kazakhstan**, a pastor was detained for two months in a psychiatric clinic after a first arrest for allegedly harming the health of a church member by using hallucinogenic communion drinks and was then re-arrested and prosecuted for extremism on the day of his release from a 4-month detention. An atheist was arrested for allegedly inciting religious hatred in his writings about religion and put in a psychiatric hospital before being sent behind bars and released on bail.

In **Libya**, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, a number of Copts were imprisoned for attempting to convert others. One of them died in prison.

In **South Korea**, a democratic country, by year's end 599 young Jehovah's Witnesses were each serving 18-month prison terms for conscientious objection to military service. Since the Korean War, 17,549 Witnesses have been sentenced to a combined total of 34,100 years in prison for refusing to perform military service.

Human Rights Without Frontiers is alarmed by the evolution of the UN Human Rights Council which accepts as members an increasing number of countries perpetrating egregious violations of human rights and, in particular, of religious freedom.

According to the mandate of the Human Rights Council, "members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights."

"Freedom of religion or belief is a human right guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration, but in 2013, eight member states of the UN Human Rights Council arrested, detained and sentenced believers and atheists to various prison terms practicing the religion or belief of their choice," commented Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based organization **Human Rights Without Frontiers**. "Our best wish for the New Year is that these and the other member states of the Human Rights Council may give the good example to the other nations of the world by releasing such prisoners of conscience and not depriving any other believer or atheist of their freedom in 2014."

(*) The report can be consulted on the homepage of the website of HRWF: <http://www.hrwf.org>

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