

# Mapping countries with religious prisoners, a report of *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

***North Korea, China and Iran top three countries massively arresting and imprisoning believers***

***Press Release, Monday 29 December 2014***

HRWF Int'l (29.12.2014) - In 2014, three countries – **North Korea, China** and **Iran** – have imprisoned thousands of believers on the grounds of laws forbidding or restricting their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB): freedom to change religion or belief, freedom to share one's religion or beliefs, freedom of association, freedom of worship and assembly, or conscientious objection to military service.

**North Korea** is by far the country which is keeping the highest number of people in prisons and labor camps (mainly Christians) although access to information concerning individual cases is practically impossible. In 2014, four foreign Christians (American, Australian and South Korea) were detained for attempting to introduce copies of the Bible and religious books into the country. In the aftermath of the arrest of the South Korean missionary sentenced to life imprisonment in a labor camp, 33 North Koreans were arrested for helping him and could be executed. Thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the United States and Australia, their citizens could be released by the end of the year. "These cases are only the tip of the tip of the iceberg," commented Willy Fautré, director of *HRWF International*.

Indeed, "Countless numbers of persons in **North Korea** who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death," according to the recently released 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) and to a report on "Religion and Belief in the DPRK" published on 10<sup>th</sup> December by the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief in UK.

In **China**, Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively put in prison while 13 Catholic priests and bishops arrested by the police many years ago for being faithful to the Pope instead of swearing allegiance to the Communist Party have been missing since then. Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of house churches out of any state control, Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, systematically suspected of separatism, are also particular targets of the regime.

In **Iran**, the Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, provide the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by home-grown Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who extensively carry out missionary activities despite the risk of imprisonment and execution. Baluchi and Kurdish Sunnis, Sufis and Zoroastrians are also particular targets of the repression.

Twenty countries in all are identified as depriving believers and atheists of their freedom in the 150-page Prisoners List of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*: **Azerbaijan (including secessionist Nagorno-Karabakh), Bhutan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.**

“Our annual list of prisoners covers more than 600 documented individual cases, including a special section on prisoners detained on blasphemy charges in five countries – Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia –”, commented Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int’l*.

On the positive side it is to be stressed that **Armenia** has introduced a civilian service for conscientious objectors and has therefore stopped the systematic arrest and imprisonment of young Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, in **South Korea**, 562 young objectors to military service are currently serving 18-month prison terms for. Since the Korean War, more than 18,000 Witnesses have been sentenced to a combined total of over 34,800 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. Other countries still imprison conscientious objectors: **Eritrea** (73), **Singapore** (15), **Nagorno-Karabakh** (2), **Azerbaijan** (1), and **Turkmenistan**.

“Our best wish for the New Year is that the blacklisted countries release such prisoners of conscience and do not deprive any other believer or atheist of their freedom in 2015.”

The Prisoners List can be consulted: <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

(\* ) *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int’l* has been monitoring freedom of religion or belief as a non-religious organization for 25 years. In 2014 it covered over 60 countries where there were incidents related to freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination.

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