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VIETNAM | UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Visits Vietnam

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, visits Vietnam from July 21-31, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) recommends he demand full access to all parts of the country and all religious communities, raise the concerns and criticisms about the new decree regulating religious affairs, Decree 92, and where officials agree to implementing changes to policy and practice, set down mutually agreed benchmarks for progress.

As part of the Special Rapporteur's mandate to learn more about the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief in the country, and obstacles to the enjoyment of this right, his visit will include meetings with various government officials and local authorities, as well as representatives of religious or belief communities, civil society organizations and the UN. At the end of the visit, Professor Bielefeldt will share his preliminary findings at a press conference in Hanoi on July 31 and will present a report containing his conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in 2015.

Research by CSW in 2013 and 2014 found that violations against religious communities in Vietnam range from harassment, intimidation and intrusive monitoring, to arrest, imprisonment, torture and extra-judicial killing. The victims include new converts and long-established religious communities, leaders and lay people, including Protestants, Catholics, Hoa Hao Buddhists, other Buddhists (including Khmer-Krom Theravada Buddhists), Caodaists, and (Cham) Muslims.

CSW shares the concerns of religious leaders, lawyers and activists who have criticized Decree 92 on religious activities and organizations for being harsher than its predecessor, for its use of vague and ambiguous terminology, and for introducing new bureaucratic obstacles to the peaceful and lawful activities of religious believers.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We warmly welcome Professor Bielefeldt's visit to Vietnam this month. CSW is increasingly concerned by reports of severe violations against religious communities in Vietnam, including ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highlands and the Northwest, and Catholic communities in various parts of the country. We encourage the Special Rapporteur to push for access to these communities and other victims of religious freedom violations, and urge him to raise the concerns mentioned in our reports."