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VIETNAM | UN Expert Finds “Serious Violations” During Visit

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) condemns the surveillance and intimidation of witnesses by police during the visit to Vietnam of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Professor Heiner Bielefeldt. CSW also highlights the Special Rapporteur’s subsequent assertion that “serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Vietnam.”

During his official visit, Professor Bielefeldt met with various government officials and local authorities, as well as representatives of religious or belief communities.

Scheduled visits to An Giang, Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces were interrupted when some individuals Professor Bielefeldt planned to meet were “intimidated, harassed or prevented from travelling by the police.” All three provinces have witnessed religious freedom violations in recent years, including violent attacks against Catholics and Protestants in Kon Tum in 2012 and 2013.

At the conclusion of his visit today in Hanoi, the Special Rapporteur made reference to the “generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practicing religion outside of the established channels,” the lack of specificity around the terms “majority interests” and “social order” and broad limitation clauses concerning human rights, as well as “vague formulations within the Penal Code [...] concerning the ‘abuse’ of democratic freedoms,” and the “absence of sufficiently efficient and accessible legal recourse.”

The Special Rapporteur has concluded that despite some positive developments at the central level, and an increased space for religious practices in recent years, “serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Vietnam”. Professor Bielefeldt will present a report containing his conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in 2015.

CSW’s Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said, “Though concerning, we welcome the UN Special Rapporteur’s observations on the obstacles to freedom of religion or belief in Vietnam, in particular the restrictions on independent or unregistered religious groups, including some Protestant communities. At the same time, we are distressed by reports of harassment and intimidation of those meeting with the Special Rapporteur. We share the concerns of the Special Rapporteur for these individuals, and call on the Vietnamese government to ensure that none of the persons involved in the visit will be threatened, harassed, arrested or otherwise penalized following the Special Rapporteur’s departure from Vietnam.”