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## VIETNAM | Concerns Raised about Legal, Administrative Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In his report presented to the UN Human Rights Council on March 10, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt “identifies positive developments but also a number of serious problems” concerning religious freedom in Vietnam, including legal and administrative restrictions and a “generally dismissive, negative attitude towards the rights of minorities and individuals practicing religions or beliefs that are not registered.”

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the report on the UN expert’s visit to Vietnam from July 21-31, 2014, which was marred by the surveillance and intimidation of witnesses. Planned visits to three provinces were cancelled after Prof. Bielefeldt received credible reports that some individuals he wanted to meet had been “heavily surveilled, warned, intimidated, harassed or prevented from travelling by the police.”

CSW shares the concerns raised in the report, including lack of clarity in legal provisions and broad limitation clauses in legal documents and decrees and burdensome and excessive registration requirements for religious communities. In addition, CSW welcomes the Special Rapporteur’s assertion that “the right of an individual or group to their freedom of religion or belief can never be “created” by any administrative procedures.” Instead, “registration should serve this human right.” As such, the Vietnamese government should not make registration of religious activities and organizations a compulsory legal requirement, and those communities which are not registered should not be subject to violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief.

The UN report also contains a number of recommendations echoed in CSW’s own [2014 report](#). These include the recommendation that the government “broaden and solidify the very limited and unsafe space provided for the free unfolding of religious diversity in Vietnam”; bring legal provisions related to freedom of religion or belief in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and substantially ease restrictions imposed on religious communities under Ordinance 21 in conjunction with Decree 92. The Special Rapporteur also recommends the State investigate allegations of violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.”

CSW’s Chief Operating Officer Andy Dipper said, “Although there have been some improvements in the protection of freedom of religion or belief in recent years, full religious freedom has yet to become a reality for many individuals and communities in Vietnam, including ethnic minority Protestants and Catholics. We welcome the Special Rapporteur’s landmark report, which draws on an analysis of legal provisions, discussions with state officials, and

reports from religious communities, and describes many of the restrictions on religion or belief communities. We particularly welcome the focus on violations against, and lack of protection for, unregistered groups. CSW hopes that this report will draw attention to such violations, and convince the Vietnamese government of its obligations under international law, and as a current member of the UN Human Rights Council, to protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief.”