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## **VIETNAM | Government Urged to Further Revise Religion Draft Law**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), together with over 50 civil society organizations and Vietnamese religious groups, called upon the Vietnamese government to further revise its draft Law on Belief and Religion, to conform with Vietnam's obligations under international human rights law. This is Vietnam's first law on religion and belief, and the current draft is likely to be voted into law by the National Assembly at its session in October-November 2016.

The draft law has been revised several times. The present draft improves on previous versions and now includes provisions for the right to change one's religion, and the right of religious organizations to participate in activities such as education, vocational training, medical care and social and humanitarian assistance. However, basic guarantees of the right to freedom of religion or belief continue to be undermined by onerous registration requirements and excessive State interference in the internal affairs of religious organizations.

In a joint statement, CSW and other civil society organizations called upon the Vietnamese government to revise the law to remove ambiguities which leave space for discrimination and abuse; to bring its definition of religion in line with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and to ensure that registration is not a pre-requisite for the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While there have been some positive revisions to the draft law, the latest draft still falls short of the standards set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This letter draws on the criticisms and concerns voiced by Vietnamese religious communities and shared by international civil society organizations. CSW continues to receive reports of the harassment and arbitrary detention of unregistered Protestants and other religious minorities; we are therefore particularly concerned about the possible impact of this law on unregistered groups. We urge the Vietnamese Government to

consult with religious communities and to revise the law to ensure that registration is not a prerequisite for the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.”