

## Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Southeast Asia

The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) endorsed a [Declaration on strengthening freedom of religion or belief in Southeast Asia](#) at the first regional conference on religious freedom in Southeast Asia, in Bangkok, Thailand, from 30 September to 1 October 2015.

***“This is a very important event because for the first time ever NGOs of the region and beyond, discuss with each other and with international institutions, like the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, to plan to promote and protect religious freedom in the region in a comprehensive way. Cooperation is crucial for us because, as many participants observed, Vietnam is one of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom,”*** said Vo Tran Nhat, VCHR Executive Secretary, who attended to this conference.



This conference gathered approximately 70 human rights defenders, members of religious groups, rights groups, UN agencies and representatives from national and intergovernmental agencies, including from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Rights of Women and Children.

Participants at the event, co-organized by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), and Boat People SOS (BPSOS), were able to deepen their understanding on the right to freedom of religion or belief and how this and other human rights should be interpreted and applied in a complementary manner.

In discussions with the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Heiner Bielefeldt, they also shared challenges and best practice on addressing rights violations related to state control and regulation of religion, as well as extreme interpretations of religion.

***“Many people suffer complex violations of their human rights, for example in the intersection of religious minority status, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or indigenous origin,”*** said Heiner Bielefeldt.

***“The politicization of religion undermines freedom of religion or belief, not only to the detriment of minorities, but also of followers of majority religions who do not wish to see their faith be turned into a tool of political power gambling,”*** he added.

The Conference Declaration commits participants to defending and promoting FoRB as a universal, inalienable and non-derogable human right for all persons, as individuals and in community with others, through their work and respective institutions, by sharing information and mobilizing effective responses. They also committed to work toward the nondiscriminatory realization of FoRB in recognition of multiple and intersectional discriminations and vulnerabilities, including on grounds of ethnicity, indigenous identity, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, and disabilities. In addition, participants pledged to enhance global and regional cooperation by working across geographical, national, racial, ethnic, political and religious boundaries.