

VCHR and EPRID Statement on Prisoners of Conscience

The **Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR)** joins the **European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID)** in condemning abuses of the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world, and calls for the release of all those deprived of their freedom because of their religious or non-religious beliefs. EPRID is a network of civil society organisations, including religious and non-religious associations operating at EU level which aims to contribute to the collective promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief in the world as defined by Article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. VCHR has been a member of EPRID since its creation in 2006.



THE EUROPEAN PLATFORM ON
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION
BRUSSELS

W: WWW.EPRID.EU

E: INFO@EPRID.EU

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EPRID Statement on Prisoners of Conscience

At this festive time, as people around the world gather to celebrate hope-filled traditions, the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) remembers that all people have the right to freedom of religion or belief, which includes the right to freely adopt, change and manifest a chosen faith or none.

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is central to identity, dignity and community. EPRID, however, recalls that discrimination and persecution on the grounds of religion or belief is a disturbing global phenomenon. According to PEW Forum research, around 79% of the world's population live in countries with high or very high levels of government restrictions, harassment and/or social hostilities.

In a season focused on light and joy, we remember and stand in solidarity with people around the world whose rights to FoRB are violated. We call for action in cases where individuals face discrimination, persecution, imprisonment and death and we highlight below the cases of ten men and women who are deprived of their liberty for the peaceful exercise of their religious beliefs and convictions. We call for their immediate and unconditional release:



Abune Antonios - Orthodox Christian - Eritrea - Over 10 years of imprisonment

The Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who was illegally removed from office in January 2006, remains under house arrest and strict surveillance and is held without charge. He had been calling for the release of prisoners of conscience and had repeatedly objected to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs. While he is now able to receive selected visitors, including relatives, he is unable to discuss his situation with them.

Azita Rafizadeh - Bahá'í - Iran - Sentenced to 4 years in prison in 2015

A volunteer lecturer, Azita was imprisoned in October 2015 for “acting against national security” for supporting an informal initiative to provide young Iranian Bahá'ís denied access to higher education with an opportunity to study. Her husband, Peyman Koushk-Baghi, was arrested on similar charges when visiting her in Evin Prison in February

2016. Their only child, Bashir (now aged 7), has, as a consequence, been deprived of his parents' care.

Do Thi Hong - An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist - Vietnam - Serving 13 years in prison

Twenty-two members of this nonviolent Buddhist group were charged with “plotting to overthrow the government” for circulating sermons by the group’s founder urging freedom of religion or belief and protection of the environment, and were sentenced to a total of 299 years in prison and 105 years house arrest at a closed trial in 2013. Mrs Hong is in very poor health due to harsh detention conditions.

Gao Zhisheng - Human Rights Lawyer - China - Held incommunicado since 13 August 2017

Gao disappeared from his home three years after completing a prison sentence which included long periods in solitary confinement as well as beatings and torture. His work focused on cases related to freedom of religion or belief. Gao was initially held in custody in Beijing, but is now missing. His family doesn't know exactly where he is or why he is being held. #FreeGao

Hamed bin Haydara - Bahá'í - Yemen - Detained since 2013 by the Houthi authorities in Sana'a

Hamed is accused of various unfounded charges, including undermining the Yemeni state and spying for Israel. His trial is ongoing. He has experienced excessive pre-trial detention, undue delays in completion of his trial and suffered various forms of torture including being beaten and electrocuted. His case epitomises a recent escalation in harassment against the Yemeni Bahá'ís community which mirrors the systematic persecution suffered by the Bahá'ís in Iran.

Ismayil Mammadov - Said Nursi Muslim - Azerbaijan - Sentenced to 2½ years in prison in 2014

Ismayil was arrested in Baku on 12 April 2014 after attending a gathering of

approximately forty people to study the works of late Turkish Muslim theologian, Said Nursi and the Qur'an. He was charged with "carrying out illegal activity under the pretext of spreading religious faith." The writings of Said Nursi are banned in Russia, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. Nursi readers have been subjected to police raids, confiscation of literature, prison terms and fines in these three countries.

Karam Saber - Atheist - Egypt - Sentenced to 5 years in prison in 2014

In June 2014, Karam was sentenced to five years in prison for "propagating 'extremist ideas to incite strife, insult a monotheistic religion, or damage national unity.'" This related to a book written by Karam called 'Where is God?', which highlighted the stories of poor farmers. Karam states that he writes to expose what he sees as "fake religious discourse" which has "contradictions" and "[oppresses] women".

Nabeel Masih - Christian - Pakistan - Held in pre-trial detention since September 2016

17-year-old Nabeel has been held in pre-trial detention since September 2016 on charges of Blasphemy. He is accused of "liking" a Facebook post which "defamed and disrespected" the Kaaba in Mecca. He has no prior convictions and is a juvenile but remains in prison despite his lawyer's continued efforts to post his bail.

Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh - Christian - Iran - Sentenced to 10 years in prison in May 2017

Naser, an Iranian convert to Christianity, was arrested alongside three Azerbaijanis after security agents raided a wedding party in Tehran. All spent four months in prison and were then released on bail. The Azerbaijanis travelled home but Naser was tried and sentenced in May 2017 for "missionary activities" and "actions against national security". He has had his 10-year prison sentence upheld on appeal.

Thich Quang Do - Buddhist monk - Vietnam - Under indefinite house arrest

A leading advocate of freedom of religion or belief and Patriarch of the Unified

Quê Me

Quê Me: Action for democracy in Vietnam & Vietnam Committee on Human Rights
<https://queme.org/en>

Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Quang Do has been held under house arrest, under constant Police surveillance, at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Ho Chi Minh City since 2003. He has spent the past three decades either in prison, internal exile or under house arrest for his peaceful appeals for freedom of religion or belief and human rights for all.

This statement was signed by the following EPRID members:

Baha'i International Community
Christian Solidarity Worldwide
European Evangelical Alliance
Human Rights Without Frontiers
Open Doors
Quê Me: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights