

Autonomy of religious communities, a crucial test for the development of religious freedom in Viet Nam

HANOI (31 July 2014) – Religious communities in Viet Nam should be able to operate also outside of the officially established channels for religious practice, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, said today at the end of an official visit* to the country.

“Granting autonomy for religious communities to function independently would be a litmus test for the development of freedom of religion or belief in Viet Nam,” Mr. Bielefeldt noted. “In the current situation, their ability to operate as independent communities is unsafe and restricted.”

“Freedom of religion or belief has the status of universal human rights to be respected prior to, and independent of, any particular acts of administrative approval,” he stressed.

Mr. Bielefeldt acknowledged the increasing efforts of the Government to improve freedom of religion or belief via legal instruments. Nonetheless, he observed that serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are a reality in Viet Nam.

These particularly affect independent groups of Buddhists, including Hoa Hao-Buddhists, and of the Cao Dai religion, some Protestant communities and activists within the Catholic Church. “Official registration status with the Government is no guarantee that freedom of religion or belief is fully respected,” Mr. Bielefeldt said.

The independent expert expressed hope that the Government would use the upcoming new legislation on religious affairs to bring the existing norms and practices more in line with everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief.

Mr. Bielefeldt was due to visit Viet Nam from 21 to 31 July 2014, but his planned visits to An Giang, Gia Lai and Kon Tum provinces were unfortunately interrupted from 28 to 30 July.

“I received credible information that some individuals with whom I wanted to meet had been under heavy surveillance, warned, intimidated, harassed or prevented from travelling by the police,” he said. “Even those who successfully met with me were not free from a certain degree of police surveillance or questioning.”

In Hanoi, Tuyen Quang, Ho Chi Minh City and Vinh Long, Mr. Bielefeldt met with various government officials and local authorities in the country involved in freedom of religion or belief issues. He also held meetings with representatives of recognized and unrecognized religious or belief communities, as well as civil society organizations and the UN.

The Special Rapporteur will present a report containing his conclusions and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in 2015.

(*) Check the full end-of-mission statement by the Special Rapporteur (Vietnamese version attached): <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14914&LangID=E>

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Heiner Bielefeldt (Germany) assumed his mandate on 1 August 2010. As Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, he is independent from any government, and acts in his individual capacity. Mr. Bielefeldt is Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Politics at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. From 2003 to 2009, he was Director of Germany's National Human Rights Institution. The Special Rapporteur's research interests include various interdisciplinary facets of human rights theory and practice, with a focus on freedom of religion or belief. Learn more, log on to: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/FreedomReligionIndex.aspx>

An e-Digest on Freedom of Religion or Belief – 25 years of thought by four UN Special Rapporteurs (**download your copy**): <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/RapporteursDigestFreedomReligionBelief.pdf>

Check the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ReligionOrBelief.aspx>

OHCHR Country Page – Viet Nam: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/VNIndex.aspx>

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