



Easter 2020 Newsletter

Jubilee Campaign promotes the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and religious minorities all over the world because we value freedom and democracy and our right to choose, speak, and believe. Much of our work consists of extensive advocacy for disenfranchised communities, such as religious minorities and prisoners of conscience, vulnerable women, and children. By reporting on human rights and religious freedom conditions around the world, we are a ***vital voice for those suffering in silence.***



UN CSW 64

In lieu of the cancellation of the 64th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Jubilee Campaign held an online event with special guest former North Korean defector Ms. Eiko Kawasaki to reveal the ways in which the DPRK is failing to implement Beijing +25 and UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 regarding women's rights and safety.

COVID-19 EFFECTS ON SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES

Recent reports have revealed that the spread of the novel coronavirus could present disproportionately high dangers to vulnerable communities such as religious minorities, prisoners, as well as women and children in poverty. We ask that you keep in your mind and prayers the plight of these individuals.

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

In July 2020, Jubilee Campaign will be submitting reports to the United Nations Human Rights Committee on Nicaragua and Hong Kong, assessing the most egregious human rights violations in these countries. The reports will address the States own reports and review their progress in enacting previous recommendations made by the Committee.

From the desk of

ANN BUWALDA

2 April 2020



Dear Supporters,

Thank you for your love and support during these times; who could have predicted the outbreak of a pandemic and so much we take for granted to grind to a halt?

For our office it has meant cancelled events in New York and Geneva but we were able to hold the United Nations CSW64 event on North Korean women online, more on that in the newsletter.

We are continuing to work on preparing the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) reports on several countries. The UPR mechanism of the Human Rights Council allows states and NGOs to review the human rights situation of all UN Member states. The reports we share suggest recommendations and are compiled into one document that is then distributed among states. Jubilee Campaign has been a part of the reviewing process since the 2000s, we are happy to be able to raise the voices of the persecuted in all avenues.

While COVID-19 has caused cancellations and a change of routine for us, the extreme government lockdown measures of some countries are adversely affecting the poor, religious minorities and women, many who cannot leave their homes to get food and are losing their livelihoods.

It is also particularly difficult for prisoners of conscience and those held in immigration detention centers in Thailand. Many of the POCs are not allowed to meet their loved ones; we ask that you raise them in your prayers. One particular couple whose story we would like to raise is Shafqat and Shagufta in Pakistan. We circulated a letter addressed to the Pakistani Ambassador calling for their release at the beginning of this year. A local court sentenced the couple to death for blasphemy and have kept them in prison since 2013. Their story of turbulence and injustice will be shared in this newsletter.

While the world remains uncertain however, one thing remains. This Easter we are reminded that the spring still comes, the flowers still bloom, and Christ's death and resurrection remains a fact and He is coming back again. While we continue to work for justice in these uncertain times and when circumstances are shifting, we can rest in the knowledge that God is in control and one day everything will finally be set right.

In HIS Grace & Peace,

Ann Buwalda, Executive Director, Jubilee Campaign USA



GREG SCARLATOIU

HUMAN RIGHTS NORTH KOREA

(PICTURED UPPER RIGHT)

Greg Scarlatoiu, Executive Director at [Committee for Human Rights North Korea](#), spoke regarding the subjugation of North Korean women, despite that they have historically "assumed primary responsibility for the survival of their families." Women such as Ms. Eiko Kawasaki have shown tremendous courage by escaping the clutches of the Kim regime and working as advocates and mouthpieces regarding human rights in the DPRK. North Korean women also face a disproportionately high risk of being exposed to the novel coronavirus- women in the household take up the task of regularly attending markets and workplaces- and simultaneously pose risks of spreading the disease to their families, including their children and elderly relatives. Lastly, we should not overlook the growing agency and influence of civil society organizations around the world, and take advantage of this phenomenon allowing and requiring us to keep human rights violations against North Korean women in the media.

CSW 64: 25 YEARS OF REPRESSION AND REGRESSION FOR NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

FEATURING SPECIAL GUESTS

This March, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women was set to have its 64th Session regarding the progress in implementation of the 1995 Platform for Action which was ratified at the Fourth World Conference on Women. In lieu of the recent outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Jubilee Campaign, in collaboration with several North Korean human rights organizations to hold an online panel, "[25 Years of Repression and Regression for North Korean Women](#)" to discuss the failure of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to fully implement the Platform for Action in regards to the plethora of human rights violations waged against women within the border. During our online event, Ann Buwalda, Executive Director of Jubilee Campaign, gave a powerful statement in which she revealed that domestic and sexual violence, physical abuse and torture, starvation, and denial of reproductive rights are perhaps the most egregious violations of human rights that North Korean women face on a daily basis at home, work, and in public. A particularly interesting point made by Ms. Buwalda is that the DPRK has consistently made false claims in their submissions to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW), such as claims that sexual violence and trafficking of women does not exist within the nation, despite observances of many human rights organizations that this is blatantly false.

JOHN SIFTON

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

(PICTURED BOTTOM RIGHT)

[Human Rights Watch's](#) John Sifton states that exposing human rights violations in North Korea "is not a partisan issue," emphasizing that the situation in North Korea should always remain a priority. But nowadays, attention on North Korean human rights violations has been diminishing, and we need to get it back on the agenda. The best strategy for getting human rights back on the agenda is to prioritize the idea that human rights and counter-proliferation are linked. The cash generated by women's rights abuses, both in North Korea and outside North Korea, is used to pay for the nuclear program." Sifton emphasizes that we need to include human rights in our discussions with North Korea, that we cannot afford to ignore such egregious abuses.



EIKO KAWASAKI FORMER DEFECTOR AND FOUNDER OF KOREA OF ALL

Eiko Kawasaki has a wealth of knowledge regarding daily life for women in the oppressive Kim regime. When she was just 17 years old, she, along with nearly 100,000 North Korean returnees were convinced by false propaganda that North Korea had become a "paradise," but were quickly faced by the harsh reality. Ms. Kawasaki made out the best she could in this situation: she went to college, started a career, married, and had children in North Korea. She spent a total of some 40 years in North Korea before gaining the courage to escape in 2003, where she advocated from Japan, founding "Korea of All" and chairing Action for Korea United-Japan.

In her personal statement, Ms. Kawasaki revealed how tumultuous her and other women's lives were in North Korea. She barely had enough food to feed her children; sickness due to malnutrition was a regularity; sexual harassment goes ignored; male coworkers own their female coworkers and husbands own their wives; housewives must work but must also take up cooking, cleaning, and childrearing work. Ms. Kawasaki's status as a woman, combined with her status as an ethnic Korean from Japan placed her at the lowest social position. Tragically, even today, 17 years after her escape and subsequent return to Japan, she still has trouble sleeping, fearing for her children's and grandchildren's safety back in North Korea.

During our online event, she shared her heart-wrenching testimony of life under the regime and answered some audience questions: When asked if the end of the Kim dictatorship could possibly end, Ms. Kawasaki explains that Kim Jong Un is fearful of the power and strength of the United States. Ms. Kawasaki predicts that by the end of 2020, the North Korean economy will completely collapse due to the halt of necessary imports from China amidst the coronavirus threat. "I suggest President Trump meets with Kim Jong Un one more time to present to choices: whether he will save his life or abandon his dictatorship. And I am one hundred percent sure Kim Jong Un will choose to save his own life." One audience member asks how Ms. Kawasaki herself escaped North Korea. She explained that Kim Il Sung's death combined with the death of European communism prompted one of Ms. Kawasaki's friends to ask her how much long she predicted the regime would continue. Ms. Kawasaki predicted only 3 to 5 years, and recognizes now how naive she was. When Kim Jong Il took power, he "abandoned his nation," causing mass starvation and devastation. That is when she decided to leave the nation. One question asked what is the largest violation against women in North Korea. Ms. Kawasaki explained that predomination of men and subjugation of women is the worst problem faced by North Korean women.

PRAYER REQUESTS FOR NORTH KOREA

PRAY THAT...

...**HUMAN RIGHTS** WILL BE RESTORED IN THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

...**NORTH KOREAN WOMEN** WILL BE FREE FROM **VIOLENCE, TRAFFICKING, AND DISCRIMINATION**



Image by 张展滔 from Pixabay

UPDATES: PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

CHINA



PASTOR WANG YI

Image source: ChinaAid

On the last day of 2019, Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church was sentenced by a Sichuan court to 9 years in prison, having been unjustly charged with "inciting state subversion" through his involvement in a religion that has not been approved by the state. Additionally, much of his property has been confiscated by authorities and his political rights have been stripped away. Many other Early Rain Covenant Church members have reported being questioned and harassed by police officials. In his public statement, Pastor Wang Yi states "I firmly believe that Christ has called me to carry out this faithful disobedience through a life of service, under this regime that opposes the gospel and persecutes the church."

NIGERIA



LEAH SHARIBU

Leah Sharibu is one of the 110 schoolgirls kidnapped by Islamic militant group Boko Haram in February 2018. Unlike her peers, Leah has remained unreleased due to her bravery and refusal to renounce Christianity, which has angered her captors. The beginning of 2020 ushered in numerous rumors that Leah had given birth to a son after her coerced marriage to a notable Boko Haram leader; however, these rumors have not been confirmed. According to Christian Post, President Buhari of Nigeria recently expressed his determination to bring Leah home, stating "As we redouble our efforts for Leah's return, we can never allow the terrorists to divide us...all Nigerians have the same worth and rights before the law, and before God."

IRAN



MAHROKH GHANBARI

Middle East Concern has recently confirmed the release of Iranian Christian convert Rokhsareh (Mahrokh) Ghanbari. Ghanbari was initially arrested in late 2018 for her attendance at and participation in Christian house worship. After 10 days of questioning, she was re-arrested in June 2019 and charged with "propaganda against the system" and sentenced to a year in prison. Amidst the spread of the novel coronavirus, Iran has released some 85,000 prisoners to prevent possible infection within the prisons. Ghanbari was originally released for a period of 36 days, but was recently informed that she does not have to return to the prison.

PAKISTAN - SHAGUFTA AND SHAFQAT



Pakistani authorities have held the married couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel in prison since 2013 after a Muslim mosque leader, Muhammad Hussain, reported receiving a blasphemous text he claimed came from a phone registered by Shagufta. The couple's four children have had to live with their paternal aunt, separated from their parents. Before the coronavirus outbreak Shagufta could receive visits from her children and her closest relatives but not from her sister-in-law, cousins or extended family.

Blasphemy is a crime punishable by death in Pakistan and as a result Shagufta is kept in a high-security prison. When Jubilee Campaign NL were able to visit Shagufta earlier to bring food, even the potatoes had to be diced up to make sure there was nothing inside, family photos had to be shown through the prison railing, but Shagufta was never allowed to keep the photos. HVC - a Dutch foundation - has been supporting Shagufta and Shafqat's children with food and paying for their visits to their parents when it was possible.

Due to the Coronavirus outbreak Shafqat and Shagufta cannot receive any visits from family. In addition they are in a volatile position and risk contracting the coronavirus as the prisons conditions are unsanitary with limited access to personal hygiene articles.



PRAYER REQUESTS FOR PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

While many of us are facing a strange time of quarantine and some may have loved ones living through isolation, let us not forget Shagufta Kausar and the other prisoners of conscience

PRAY THAT...

- **THEY WILL BE UNCONDITIONALLY RELEASED.**
- **THEY WILL EXPERIENCE PEACE + COMFORT.**
- **THEY WILL REMAIN HEALTHY + STRENGTHENED BY THE SPIRIT.**
- **THEIR FAMILIES WILL ALSO EXPERIENCE PEACE + GOD'S COMFORT + PROVISION.**
- **THOSE WHO ARE RELEASED ARE ABLE TO HEAL FROM THE TRAUMA OF IMPRISONMENT + ANY PHYSICAL ABUSE, FOR GOD'S PEACE + REST.**

I want to help!

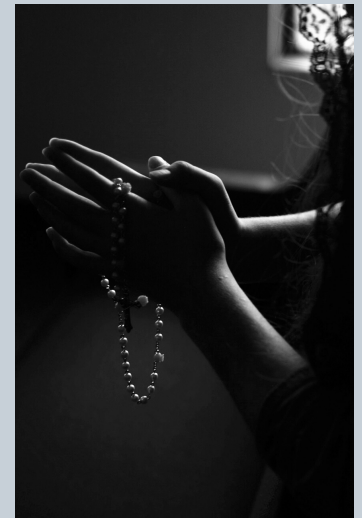
WRITE TO YOUR CONGRESS MEMBER

Jubilee Campaign is working to get Shagufta and Shafqat adopted by a congress member. If you are able, please take the time to reach out to your representative - you can call or email - and highlight the case of Shafqat and Shagufta. If you need more information regarding their case do not hesitate to reach out to us and we can send you a sample letter to use.

PRAY

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Ephesians 6:12

We are reminded of this truth many days especially when we see the suffering in the world: Boko Haram and Islamist violence in Nigeria, the inclusion of human rights violators in the Human Rights Council and consultative groups at the UN, the list goes on. Prayer is able to reach further and Queen Esther asked for both prayer and fasting before she went in to speak to the King. Please continue to pray!



GIVE

Your gifts have helped persecuted families resettle to the USA and other safe countries, raised the persecution of Christians and other persecuted religious and ethnic minorities at the United Nations and provided legal aid and support to prisoners of conscience. Your support has fueled our work in successfully expediting the resettlement of Iranian Christian converts stranded in Turkey and reopening a Pakistani asylum seekers cases in Thailand granting them refugee status and the opportunity to work. Your gifts have bailed out asylum seekers from detention centers allowing them to reunite with their family.

EFFECTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES: RELIGIOUS MINORITIES, PRISONERS, & WOMEN

INDIA - POOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Lockdowns are becoming the norm as governments try to contain the pandemic but the spread of COVID-19 is difficult to contain and extreme measures have been shown to adversely affect the poor whose homes are often unsanitary and depend on their day-to-day work to survive.

The Federation of Indian American Christian Organisations (FIACONA) has reported how in India, due to the lockdown of the country, the Indian government has taken on the sole responsibility of distributing all vegetables and groceries.

They shared the following:

“We know that **the government does not have the capability to deliver supplies to each family** during the lockdown, even though it has one of the best public distribution systems in the world where people could go to a location in every town to collect their basic needs such as grains, flour and oil.

It is clear now that none of our Christian relief agencies who have extensive experience and network on such matters have been approached by the government so far. As the lockdown continues, they are told to stay put where they are. Local efforts to distribute much-needed supplies and medicine by these groups to the most vulnerable is also hampered by indiscriminate lockdown enforced by the police.

As the government lacks sufficient manpower to make home deliveries of basic supplies to each family in the country, we hear that they are planning to tap the RSS's private paramilitary forces to help with this task.”

The RSS paramilitary are an extreme Hindu group that have a history of refusing to deliver relief and aid material to non-Hindus or “anyone who does not agree with their polity” FIACONA shared.

Please pray for India. For those in poverty to have access to food and for the Indian government to find a way to deliver food to all - non-discriminately.

A letter has been shared with President Trump raising these concerns as the US has recently provided a 2.9 million dollar stimulus package to India to fight the Coronavirus.



CHINA - RELIGIOUS MINORITY PRISONERS

China is not the only nation whose prisons are filled with large proportions of religious minorities- in Iran, Christian converts are often falsely accused for subversion, in Eritrea and Russia, Jehovah Witnesses have been detained, and in Vietnam, there are nearly 150 prisoners of conscience languishing behind bars, according to United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback.

China, however, exhibits likely the most overt and widespread trend of arresting religious minorities- in an special briefing on the possible detrimental impacts of the spread of the novel coronavirus on religious communities around the world, Ambassador Sam Brownback said the following:

"In this time of pandemic, religious prisoners should be released. We call on governments around the world to do so. It's a good public health move for their nations and it's morally obviously the right thing to do. We unfortunately have a number of religious prisoners around the world in various countries that are being held, and I just wanted to cite a few of those that are taking place right now..."

China continues to have a number of people imprisoned for their faith. We know that as far as the situation in Xinjiang, but we also know it happens and continues to take place with Protestant and Catholic churches, house church and even officially recognized church, and then the Falun Gong members and Tibetan Buddhists have- a number of them are in prison..."

Such mass imprisonment puts prisoners- including political prisoners and religious prisoners of conscience- at a disproportionately greater risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus; it is a well known fact that close contact between prisoners, coupled with the extremely contagious nature of the virus, poses a great danger for prisoners not just in China, but in prisons around the world, notably those already troubled with overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and insufficient medical care and supplies.

Massimo Introvigne, sociologist and founder of Center for Studies on New Religions, whose recent focus has been on Chinese religious minority groups, explains:

"Already the Uyghurs have issued releases that the virus came to Xinjiang and to the jails in Xinjiang, but in these jails there are not only Uyghurs. Even in the Xinjiang camps, there are members of the Church of the Almighty God, and the Christians. That exposes the population of inmates in jails and camps to a higher risk than the rest of the Chinese population."

Already, one nation who is known for its routine detainment of religious converts, Iran, has decided to release some 85,000 prisoners- some of which included Christian converts- amidst the outbreak in an attempt to prevent the possible spread of coronavirus within prisons. We hope other nations, notably China, follow in Iran's footsteps to release prisoners- both political and religious- at least temporarily in order to solidify its dedication to the health of all Chinese citizens. However, we argue that Chinese individuals who have been detained and tortured simply for their religious convictions should be unconditionally and permanently released in accordance with the international standards of freedom of religion or belief.



Image by Gerd Altmann

IRAN & ERITREA - PRISONERS

Over the past month, Iran has temporarily released some 85,000 prisoners from prisons throughout the country in order to prevent a massive and potentially devastating spread of COVID-19. Unlike China, where it is increasingly difficult to gather information on the status of prisons throughout the country due to heavy secrecy, knowledge regarding Iranian prisons is both accurate and concerning: overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and lack of medical care are confirmed to be experienced in multiple prisons in Iran. And while 85,000 released prisoners is a step in the right direction, much more needs to be done to fight against the spread of the novel coronavirus. Multiple news sources such as Express UK and Fox News reveal the words of one prisoner who is currently serving his sentence at the infamous Evin Prison in Tehran. His testimony was covertly transmitted to media sources via the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), and is written below:

"The situation here is that really we're all ill, we are all having dry cough. We have a fever. There is no test kit for coronavirus or any test kits available. **All we can do is try to reach the clinic by pushing and shoving.** And once there, the guards tell us there is no doctor or that the doctor is not coming, return to your ward or we will use force. If by chance, we happen to find a doctor, all they do is aim their digital thermometer at us, without even approaching us.

Hygienic conditions here are awful. Prisoners who are imprisoned for embezzlement or financial fraud have money. They can afford to buy disinfectants for themselves from outside the prisons, but others and we, without that kind of money, cannot even buy alcohol to clean our hands; we do not have detergents to wash our hands with...

It seems that those whom the regime was unable to kill during November uprisings are being liquidated in the prison by coronavirus. They can eliminate whoever they choose, under the guise that the prisoner has contracted coronavirus, and the prisoner is taken away without anyone knowing about his whereabouts."

Another nation whose prison conditions are on a similar macabre level is Eritrea. However, the government has taken no initiative to release prisoners despite the knowledge of the high risk of spreading the disease within such facilities. Numerous human rights and non-governmental organizations have written letters expressing their concern for Eritrean prisoners and calling on Eritrea to take concrete actions to display their determination to fight coronavirus and consider all citizens' health and human rights in light of the pandemic.

Human Rights Concern Eritrea recently addressed an open letter to Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki which highlighted the dangers that the recent outbreak of covid-19 poses on Eritrean prisoners. HRCE Director Elizabeth Chyrum in this open letter explains that "confined spaces" and "sustained contact" are two major propellants of the spread of COVID-19, and in no location are these two qualifications met better than in prisons, those in Eritrea already being overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous. She states **"On the grounds of sheer humanity and to avoid an enormous death toll from the prison population, we must urge you to start this release program at once, before it is too late."**



Image by Paul Kral from Pixabay

WOMEN

Women are another group who are particularly targeted due to the coronavirus outbreak and the resulting government restrictions. In a recent BBC article titled *Five Ways Virus Upheaval is Hitting Women in Asia*, a number of social problems generated by the coronavirus that affect women:

1) **Economic Burden Due to School Closures** - Many women around the world are held to the standard that, in addition to performing household duties and child-rearing, they should as well maintain a job. However, school closures place these women in a position where they are forced to reconsider their priorities and turn their back from work in order to care for their children who are now home 24 hours a day. Such a drastic change can have serious detrimental economic effects on these families who now must function on one salary per household; single mothers, however, face even greater economic burdens.

2) **Domestic Violence** - BBC reveals that in China, activists and organizations have reported higher caller volume and more incident reports from women who either are experiencing domestic violence at the hands of their partners or have witnessed domestic violence between their parents.

3) **Migrant Domestic Workers** - In many Asian nations, it is common for young women of less fortunate families to go abroad to work in the homes of wealthy families as domestic helpers, in order to send their income to their family home. However, in Hong Kong, government orders that individuals- particularly migrant workers- stay inside. This could potentially have a two-pronged effect. One is that as more individuals are working from home, the need for domestic workers may be driven down as people who are usually unable to stay home are now confined to their homes and may find the opportunity to do the work the domestic worker would otherwise perform. Contrastingly, it is possible that domestic workers who live in the homes of the wealthy families as compensation- amidst new regulations not allowing them to leave- will be coerced into doing extra work without extra pay.

Lastly, UN Women explains another major effect of the coronavirus on women:

"During crises, women are hit harder. Globally, women make up 70 per cent of workers in the health and social sector and women do three times as much unpaid work as men. They are at increased risk of infection, domestic violence and loss of livelihood and have less access to sexual and reproductive health services as healthcare systems become overstretched.



Image by Igor Ovsyannykov from Pixabay

UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

What is the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)?



The UPR is a UN mechanism of the Human Rights Council. Every five years states are reviewed by other members states and civil society in how they live up to their human rights commitments. As a member of the civil society, Jubilee Campaign can recommend changes and amendments the state under review should make to fulfil their human rights obligations. In short, it is like writing a Human Rights wish list.

Even when states under review are irresponsive to the civil society suggestions there are still positive outcomes to be had. Other states who do pay heed to the flagged human rights abuses are able to know what areas the state under review needs to improve on and they in turn are able to place pressure on the state under review in ways we are unable to. Likewise civil society's input is consolidated into an official public report which aids in exposing the *Emperor's new clothes* when the states reviewing - due to geopolitical reasons - remain quiet.

NEPAL

In our 2020 UPR NGO submission on Nepal, we analyzed numerous religious freedom and human rights violations. To start, we discussed that, despite there being clauses in the Constitution which establish freedom of religion, in the Criminal Code, there are two clauses which inherently infringe upon religious freedom.

One such clause is that which prohibits blasphemy- or insult to a religion. **Blasphemy laws are often used unjustly to imprison religious minorities and converts after they are falsely accused of blasphemy.** Moreover, the Criminal Code prohibits evangelism, which violates an individual's right to freely choose or change their religion.

As many nations whose population is predominantly Hindu, cow slaughter laws are applied to the entire population despite that there are thousands of Christians and other Muslims who do not adhere to the Hindu obligation to refrain from killing or eating cows.

In terms of human rights, sexual violence remains a large social problem in Nepal with at least 25% of women reporting to have been the victim of sexual violence. Increasing rates of "dowry-related violence, polygamy, physical domestic violence against women, trafficking, rape and attempted rape" have additionally led to an increase in suicide rates among Nepalese women. Lastly, human trafficking and exploitation- particularly complicity among government officials- remains a big problem in Nepal.

RWANDA

While freedom of religion or belief is presented in multiple articles of Rwanda's constitution, and while laws prohibiting blasphemy were removed from the nation's Penal Code, throughout 2018 and 2019 some 8,000 religious organizations and churches were shut down and notable members of the religious community such as gospel singer Kizito Mihigo and daughter of pastor Deo Nyirigira have died mysteriously and been unjustly incarcerated.

Incidents of sexual violence similarly remain high in Rwanda: 37% of women in Rwanda have reported being the victim of sexual violence, according to UN Women. The UN Population Fund center in Kigali has reported receiving around 10 to 12 victims of violence daily.

Similar to the arrests of religiously-affiliated individuals, numerous political activists, such as Eugene Ndereyimana and Boniface Twagirimana, have disappeared and been detained for their dissenting beliefs.

According to the US State Department, "advocates asserted that military, police, and intelligence personnel employed torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment to obtain information and elicit confessions before transferring the individuals to formal detention facilities," where sanitation and medical care are poor.

Finally, street children are treated as criminals and routinely detained and transferred to detention centers where they experience physical abuse, starvation, unsanitary conditions, infections, and malaria.

MYANMAR (BURMA)

The 2008 Constitution of Myanmar, despite recognizing that Buddhism is the religion practiced by the majority of the nation's population, does not designate it as the state's official religion. However, a problematic approach to religion was taken in 2015 when the government ratified two majorly restrictive bills. The first of which was the Religious Conversion Bill, which instates an age requirement of at least 18 years and requires a state-approved application to convert religions. The Monogamy Bill, which was introduced simultaneously, prohibits consensual sexual relations outside of marriage.



Image by Peggy und Marco Lachmann-Anke

Myanmar is recognized as a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and, additionally, the International Court of Justice has decided that the standards of genocide and crimes against humanity have been met in regards to the treatment of Rohingya Muslims. In January 2018, USCIRF staff visited refugee camps in Bangladesh which were home to thousands of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, and it was revealed through interviews that the most common problems faced by religious minority groups in Myanmar include "institutionalized discrimination," "increasing anti-Muslim sentiment and the related rise of Buddhist nationalism," and "a culture of impunity and lack of accountability for human rights abuses." Furthermore, Rohingya Muslims face difficulties in obtaining citizenship, finding stable jobs, accessing adequate health care and education, as well as finding routes to political participation.

Conflicts between the Myanmar Armed Forces and ethnic militant groups have left thousands displaced, especially in Rakhine and Chin States. Such high frequency of displacement has caused displacement sites to become overloaded, leaving many no choice but to stay in churches, schools, and private homes of strangers. According to UNHCR, "Myanmar authorities estimate that more than 61,000 people are newly displaced in Rakhine State as of 16 March, representing an increase of some 10,000 people as compared to the previous month..."

MAURITANIA

Out of the four nations for which we submitted Universal Period Reports for the 37th Session, Mauritania is perhaps the most oppressive in regards to restrictions on religious freedom. Not only does the constitution establish that Islam is the official religion of the state, but Criminal Code Article 306- as well as its recent additional amendment- establishes that the death sentence will be automatically applied to any individual who is charged with blasphemy or "sacrilegious" behavior. Mauritania legal framework also has a law that states that "whoever encourages an incendiary discourse against the official rite of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania shall be punished by one to five years in prison." This law, however, has since been amended to immediately prescribe the death sentence. In one incident that gained global media attention, Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Mkhatar was charged in 2014 with apostasy (religious conversion) for his blogging activity on religious persecution, and he was handed the death sentence. He spent nearly 5 years in prison before he was eventually acquitted and released in July 2019.

There is no definition of sexual violence or rape in any Mauritanian legal documents, and therefore no punishment for perpetrators. Involvement in sexual relations outside of marriage is strictly criminalized, and "if women and girls cannot convince judicial authorities that a sexual act was nonconsensual, they can find themselves transformed from accuser to accused," according to Human Rights Watch. Such ability to prove that a sexual act was unwanted is made more difficult by lack of evidence and forensic data collection knowledge, procedures, and tools.

Human trafficking also remains a social problem in Mauritania; while Mauritania adopted the Law Against Trafficking in Persons in 2003 and further amended it to include "hereditary slavery" in 2015, it has remained difficult to prosecute perpetrators as court judges are often randomly shuffled and removed, thus eliminating individuals with anti-slavery legislation knowledge from numerous courts. According to the Global Slavery Index, Mauritania ranks 62 points out of 100 on a scale measuring "vulnerability to modern slavery."

Finally, political freedoms such as of speech and assembly are routinely and consistently encroached upon, as the constitution has historically been used more as a means of accusing groups whose views are contrary to the government and less as a tool to protect individuals from such inflated or inaccurate accusations. Human rights organizations have been denied their right to register as legal entities, and anti-slavery demonstrators have been arrested and denied due process.

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

What is the Human Rights Committee?

The Human Rights Committee is a group of individual experts in international human rights whose main task is to review and report on implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) by States party to the Covenant, as well as to offer concluding observations and recommendations to each State party on how to improve their human rights situations. Each State that has ratified the ICCPR is required to periodically submit reports on the progress and setbacks of implementing the Covenant, as well as review any new legislation that has advanced such implementation. Non-governmental organizations are permitted to submit their own reports reviewing a State's implementation or lack thereof of the ICCPR.

NICARAGUA

Violations of religious freedom and practice in Nicaragua have recently been increasing simultaneously with the recurrence of democratic protests and demonstrations, illustrating that the situation of religious freedom is often intertwined with the current political climate of a nation. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), President Daniel Ortega's announcement in April 2018 of an unprecedented change in the nation's pension plan caused an outbreak in protesting by the masses, the relationship between the government and the Catholic Church became strained when the Church began offering places of shelter and protection for protestors being violently targeted by pro-Ortega forces. Throughout 2018 and 2019, numerous attacks on religious community members occurred, including: attacks on religious leaders by pro-Ortega militant groups, mobs ambushing church-goers, and inflammatory remarks on behalf of President Ortega that incited violence against religious communities.



Image by Kjrstie

Violations of human rights similarly are a common occurrence in Nicaragua. The year 2019 saw a large number of arbitrary killings at the hands of government officials and their proxies. According to the United States Department of State 2019 Report on Human Rights, in mid-May, Eddy Montes, a dual citizen of Nicaragua and the United States, was shot and killed by officers while serving his unjust sentence at La Modelo prison. He had been arrested solely for his involvement in pro-democracy activities and demonstrations. For individuals who are not arbitrarily killed, they often face the harsh reality of being detained in prisons where torture and other cruel punishment are routinely practiced against political prisoners. Interestingly, on March 5, 2020, the United States Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control officially sanctioned 3 individuals, one of which being Luis Alberto Perez Olivas, who ran El Chipote Prison, where incidents of sexual violence, physical abuse, and electrocution were reported by numerous prisoners. According to Human Rights Watch, such examples of torture are not exclusive at El Chipote. In numerous prisons in Nicaragua, torture is very common, including: denial of necessary medical care, rape or threats of rape, waterboarding, acid burning, electrocution, and even mock executions.

In the US State Department's 2019 Trafficking in Persons Report, it is revealed that, though Nicaragua has made some surface-level steps to address human trafficking, such as formulating a national action plan and establishing a system of assisting victims, actual implementation and application remains lackluster. The report states that "the government did not prosecute or convict any traffickers and continued a multi-year trend by identifying fewer victims. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in trafficking offenses despite endemic official corruption and widespread complicity." Though there are a number of NGOs working to eradicate human trafficking in Nicaragua, the government has taken few steps to collaborate with them. Finally, lack of sufficient funding and human resources, as well as a lack of a standard definition of human trafficking, have presented obstacles to progress among any and all government-established anti-trafficking organizations.

Once again, we thank you, our supporters, for sharing with us a dedication and deep camaraderie with our millions of persecuted brothers and sisters around the world as we continue to strive to be a **vital voice for those suffering in silence.**

This Easter, we shall join together to be thankful for the many blessings we are granted and pray for the men, women, and children around the world who continue to praise our Lord amidst the myriad dangers they face by expressing their beliefs.

We also ask that you take this time to remember and raise the plight of individuals around the world who are at a disproportionately higher rate of being exposed to COVID-19, such as religious and political prisoners, children, and the brave men and women who work on the frontlines provide essential health and social work.



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