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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 May 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.

Arbitrary Detention of Individuals on the Basis of Faith: Cases from Algeria (People's Democratic Republic of), Eritrea (State of), Iran (Islamic Republic of), Nigeria (Federal Republic of), and Pakistan (Islamic Republic of)

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Council's attention the numerous cases around the world in which faith minorities and religious converts are detained for 'crimes' of blasphemy on exaggerated allegations, or in which they are imprisoned on the basis of their belief or religious activities. We would like to re-highlight the cases we raised in A/HRC/49/NGO/35 – Hamid Soudad (Algeria), Rachid Seighir (Algeria), Suleiman Bouhafis (Algeria), Mahrokh Ghanbari (Iran), Keshav Acharya (Nepal), Nadeem Samson (Pakistan), Stephan Masih (Pakistan), and Zafar Bhatti (Pakistan) –and highlight the additional cases below.

Algeria

Foudhil Bahloul – In April 2021, Christian convert Foudhil Bahloul was arrested alongside three convert friends, and his home was searched and religious possessions and texts seized by Algerian authorities. Bahloul was questioned regarding whether he was receiving monetary donations for his Christian faith; he explained that while he was receiving financial assistance from a friend in Germany who knew of his unemployment, the monetary gifts were unrelated to his faith. In June 2021 at his court trial during which he was provided no legal counsel, Bahloul was charged with “spreading poisonous ideas to the unemployed youth” and “destabilizing faith in Islam” for his work distributing Bibles. The court sentenced Bahloul to six months' imprisonment for those charges and an additional six months regarding his reception of “unauthorized donations”.

Salah Chalah – Salah Chalah, senior pastor of Algeria's largest Protestant church and President of the Protestant Church of Algeria (Eglise protestante d'Algérie) was summoned to court in early December 2021 along with three other unnamed Christians. The group faced charges of “practicing non-Muslim rites without permission” and “calling to organize an unarmed assembly” in connection to their participation in peaceful protests against church closures in Tizi Ouzou province in October 2019. In March 2022, Jubilee Campaign received an update that Pastor Chalah was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment, and the other three Christians received six-month prison sentences each.

Eritrea

Samuel Okbamichael – In late July 2021 in the middle of the night, Eritrean authorities ambushed the home of Pastor Samuel Okbamichael, transferring him to an undisclosed location. Later it was revealed that Pastor Okbamichael is currently detained in maximum-security Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Centre and is facing unknown charges. Pastor Okbamichael's arrest is alarming and dubious considering he was nearing retirement and was only overseeing a few Christian funerals and weddings at the time of his arrest.

Girmay Araya – In nearly identical circumstances, Eritrean authorities detained 75-year-old Pastor Girmay Araya in his home in the middle of night and transferred him to the Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Centre.

Iran

Youcef Nadarkhani –Iranian Christian convert and prominent member of the Evangelical Church of Iran, Youcef Nadarkhani, was originally arrested in 2006 on

charges of apostasy and was sentenced to death in 2010; following his acquittal and release in 2012, Nadarkhani was re-arrested in 2016 for his leadership of a house church. Under revised charges of “acting against national security” and “propagating house churches”, Nadarkhani was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, though this was commuted to six years in June 2020. In April 2022, Nadarkhani was granted a temporary furlough from Evin Prison during which he spent time with his family; he returned to prison on 29 April after his furlough was extended an extra week.

Milad Gourdazi, Alireza Nourmohammadi, Amin Khaki – In November 2020, Iranian intelligence authorities raided the homes of Christian converts Milad Gourdazi, Amin Khaki, and Alireza Nourmohammadi; though the men were not arrested they were warned to cease their Christian evangelist activities. In late July 2021, the three men were charged with disseminating “propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam” and were sentenced to five years’ imprisonment each. The following month, their sentences were reduced to three years, and in November 2021 the men were summoned to begin serving their prison terms.

Sakine Behjati, Hadi Rahimi – In February 2020, four Christian converts – Ramin Kassanpour, Saeed Sajadpour, Hadi Rahimi, and Sakine Behjati – were arrested for their membership in the Rasht local division of the Church of Iran. The group of four received various prison sentences for “acting against national security” and “spreading Zionist Christianity”; Rahimi was sentenced to four years, Behjati to two, Sajadpour to two, and Hassanpour to five. In January 2022, Rahimi was summoned to begin serving his sentence, and on Easter Sunday in April, Behjati presented herself to authorities at Evin Prison to start her sentence as well. It can be expected that Hassanpour and Sajadpour will soon start their respective sentences.

Homayoun Zhavah, Sara Ahmadi – In June 2019, house church members Sara Ahmadi and her husband Homayoun Zhavah were detained by Iranian authorities while vacationing and were subsequently transferred to Evin Prison, where Ahmadi was held for 67 days and Zhavah was held for 30. In November 2020, a Tehran court sentenced Ahmedi to 11 years’ imprisonment for leadership of a house church and Zhavah to 2 years’ for membership in the house church. On appeal one month later, Ahmadi received a commuted 8-year prison sentence, and in March 2021 it was revealed that the couple would likely soon be summoned to begin serving their respective terms.

Nigeria

Mubarak Bala – In April 2020, Mubarak Bala, an atheist and the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria was accused by a Kano State law firm of making blasphemous remarks about the Prophet on the internet, which the firm alleged would lead to “public disturbance”. The following day, Nigerian authorities arrested Bala in Kaduna state and transported him to an undisclosed location. In September 2021, a group of human rights attorneys led by Kola Alpinni sent a letter to the Nigerian government noting that Bala had been held in pre-trial detention for over one year and that he had not received treatment for his diagnosed hypertension. In April 2022, Kano State High Court convicted Bala on 18 criminal accounts, including blasphemy and public disturbance, and sentenced him to 24 years in prison.

Yahaya Sharif-Aminu – Gospel musician and member of the Tijaniyya Sufi Islamic order, Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, was accused of committing blasphemy after audio recordings spread on WhatsApp in which he allegedly “praised an imam” to the point of “elevating him above the Prophet”. In March 2020, Sharif-Aminu was officially detained and in August the same year, the Hausawa Filin Hockey upper Sharia court convicted him of blasphemy and sentenced him to death by hanging. Attorney Alpinni assisted in appealing the sentence and in January 2021, the High

Court of Kano State overturned the death sentence and ordered a retrial. Unfortunately, at this rate, the case will be heard a second time by the very same court that had originally sentenced Sharif-Aminu to death. Attorney Alpinni filed an additional two grounds of appeal, citing that ordering a retrial on the same charge “amounts to double jeopardy”.

Pakistan

Shagufta Kiran – In July 2021, authorities from Pakistan’s Federal Investigation Agency detained Christian woman Shagufta Kiran inside her home without a prior warrant. Her husband, Rafique Masih, explained that the police had also assaulted both Kiran and the couple’s daughter, even threatening to shoot them. He also noted that Kiran was arrested for inadvertently forwarding a blasphemous message that someone else had sent in a WhatsApp group of which she was a member. In November 2021, Jubilee Campaign received an update that Kiran is being held at Adyala Jail Rawalpindi, and that her court hearing during which she will likely be charged and sentenced for blasphemy has been postponed.

Salma Tanveer – In 2013, Muslim woman and private school headmaster Salma Tanveer was arrested for blasphemy after she had allegedly distributed her own writings under the title “Mercy for all worlds”, a quote by the Prophet in the Qur’an. Tanveer spent eight years in pre-trial detention until September 2021 when Judge Ahmed Qureshi convicted Tanveer and sentenced her to death by hanging. This is despite that, years earlier, Tanveer’s lawyers provided medical records in which she was diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder; Judge Qureshi claimed that Tanveer cannot be ill as she was leading a school prior to her arrest.

Recommendations

Jubilee Campaign urges member and observer states of the Human Rights Council to:

1. Urge the governments of Algeria (People’s Democratic Republic of), Eritrea (State of), Iran (Islamic Republic of), Nigeria (Federal Republic of), and Pakistan (Islamic Republic of) to cease the practice of arbitrarily detaining religious and belief minorities and to release unconditionally and immediately all prisoners of conscience.
 2. Urge the governments of Algeria, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, and Pakistan to abolish all laws criminalizing blasphemy, as they are used to detain faith and belief minorities and as they are inconsistent with human rights standards.
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