

human rights issues. We have published their statement on Human Rights and Religious Faith, along with information on Philippine prisoner of conscience Father Teodor Remigio, pages 30-32.)

For people living in many parts of the world, peaceful expression of religious beliefs can result in imprisonment, torture, or death. Today governments deny countless citizens the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, a right guaranteed by international law in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human Rights Day, December 10, commemorates the General Assembly's adoption of the Declaration in 1948. The anniversary carries special significance for persecuted members of religious communities, as well as for those committed to stopping the abuses. The latter include half a million volunteer members of Amnesty International, a non-partisan worldwide human rights movement which works to free men, women, and children imprisoned solely for their ethnic origins, or for the non-violent expression of their political or religious beliefs. The movement will intensify efforts to enlist the aid of religious communities in protecting human rights and in pressuring government to end religious repression.

“Religion is a major factor in the lives of many people, and governments often view religious faith as a threat to their authority,” explains William L. Wipfler, director of the Human Rights Office of the National Council of Churches and a member of Amnesty International USA's Board of Directors. “State authorities, no matter what their political persuasion may be, sometimes fear people's exercise of free conscience or fidelity to a superior authority. Then people of religious faith become targets of repression.”

According to information documented by Amnesty, government repress members of numerous religious faiths, including Ahmadis, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Coptics, Hare Krishnas, and Jews. Christians and Evangelicals who have suffered religious intolerance during recent years include Baptists, Greek Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Orthodox, Pentacostalists, Roman Catholics, and Seventh Day Adventists.

Often governments brand religious groups as heretical or illegal, creating a climate for repression. The Iranian government has accused the Bahá'ís of heresy and of spying for Israel. In 1983 government authorities banned all Bahá'í institutions and subsequently arrested hundreds of members of the faith. Government agents have executed more than 120 Bahá'í men and women during the past six years.

There are various government mechanisms for controlling religious communities and monitoring their activities. Registration usually attaches a prohibition on proselytizing. Certain Baptist congregations in the Soviet Union have refused to accept government-imposed conditions for registration. These congregations have been targeted for persecution. Soviet Jews also come into conflict with government authorities usually for asserting their rights to freedom of expression (teaching religious beliefs), and freedom of movement (requesting to

emigrate). Charges of “circulating anti-Soviet slander,” and anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” are used to imprison dissenters for exercising their freedoms in ways disapproved of by the authorities.

Religious organizations which protest government policies may also risk persecution. In South Africa several church leaders who opposed apartheid have been detained without charge or trial since the government imposed a state of emergency on July 21. In Haiti church leaders who charge government officials with human rights violations have been imprisoned. Some of those arrested have suffered torture. Members of the Republican Brothers sect who criticized the Sudanese government’s application of Sharia Islamic law also suffered arrest. The government executed the sect’s leader early this year.

Other governments seek to eliminate bonds between domestic and foreign religious groups. For example, the Chinese government asked church leaders in 1949 to purge themselves of “foreign imperialist forces.” Several Roman Catholic priests who refused to break ties with the Vatican were arrested and many of them have now spent more than 20 years in prison.

Amnesty members learned this fall that Gong Pinmei, the Bishop of Shanghai, has finally been released from a Chinese prison. Bishop Gong, held for more than 30 years, was the longest serving prisoner “adopted” by Amnesty members. They will continue to campaign for the unconditional release of other priests imprisoned in China for expressing their religious beliefs.

Members of Amnesty’s community volunteer groups “adopt” individual prisoners and continue letter-writing, public education, and publicity efforts on the prisoner’s behalf until he or she is freed. Amnesty also supports an Inter-religious Urgent Action Network, through which clergy and lay people obtain information on religious people in urgent need of support from citizens around the world. The information sent to the Network members each month contains letter-writing instructions. This program affords “the opportunity to be useful to persons in need,” Rabbi Max Slinger of Temple Israel in Kinson, North Carolina, recently wrote to Amnesty.

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