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France, Belgium Severely Criticized Again at U.S. Congressional Hearing

Cesnur Website <http://www.cesnur.org> (10.06.1999) - On June 8, 1999 the U.S. Joint Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe held a new hearing on "Religious Freedom in Western Europe: Religious Minorities and Growing Government Intolerance", hearing as witnesses Willy Fautré of Human Rights Without Frontiers, attorney Alain Garay of Paris, and Pastor Louis Charles DeMeo, leader of an independent Baptist group blacklisted as a cult in France. This was part of an ongoing investigation of continuing religious intolerance in Western Europe, and CESNUR's Executive Director Massimo Introvigne had testified before the same Commission at a previous 1998 briefing. A number of international scholars who had just participated in CESNUR 99 conference in Pennsylvania also attended the June 8 hearing. In turn Karen Lord, Counsel for Freedom of Religion of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and Jeremy Gunn, of the newly instituted Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State, were guest speakers at the CESNUR 99 conference, and told participants how important CESNUR's role was in first alerting U.S. agencies about religious intolerance prevailing in some Western European countries. Of particular interest at the June 8 hearing was a discussion of discrimination in the workplace of members of both the Jehovah's Witnesses and of the Baptist group pastored by Rev. DeMeo. The discussion then focused on the causes of the peculiar situation prevailing in France and Belgium (while Italy, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands were offered as examples of religious tolerance). In a lively discussion with the witnesses and on the basis of data offered by them, Chairman Smith concluded that two influences explain why intolerance of minority religions is particularly widespread in France and French-speaking Belgium. Firstly, the anti-cult and often simply anti-religious lobbying efforts of continental Freemasonry (a secular humanist brand of Freemasonry which is not in communion with mainline U.S. and British Freemasonry). Secondly, the strong residual presence in French-speaking culture of socialist and communist elements, both anti-American and anti-religious. Efforts by an Eastern Europe anti-cultists may thus use developments in France as evidence that democratic countries in the West have an anti-cult policy similar to Russia and other post-Communist countries. Chairman Smith was particularly severe with the French Mission to Fight Cults and ridiculed efforts by its president to attack one of the members of the U.S. delegation that visited France as "part of a dangerous international totalitarian cults", while she is a member of a small U.S. Christian congregation. The French attitude is "intolerable", Smith said, and it would be a serious mistake for France (and Belgium) to think that this is a minor matter for the U.S., while it stands "at the top" of U.S. human rights concerns.

Intolerance Towards "Non-Traditional Religions" in Both

New and Established Democracies

Vienna, 16 March 1999 (IHF). In its new report "Religious Discrimination and Related Violations of Helsinki Commitments," the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) documents that numerous European democracies and former Soviet republics violate their international commitments regarding the freedom of religion or religious tolerance.

"Many OSCE countries are taking legal measures to suppress religious activity and to interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities, violating not only the Helsinki commitments but also the European Convention on Human Rights," according to Aaron Rhodes, IHF Executive Director. "Unfair treatment of religious minorities expresses and increases the latent tendencies toward chauvinism and intolerance, which threaten pluralism and political stability in the region." Several countries, e.g., Austria, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Macedonia, Russia, and Uzbekistan, have recently adopted restrictive domestic laws on religious associations. Others have taken steps to restrict the spread of "new religions" which they deem to be dangerous, for example Belgium, France, and Germany. Anti-Semitism remains a problem, a recent example being anti-Semitic statements by leading Russian politicians and the failure of the State Duma to denounce them clearly. In new democracies, the goal of restrictive laws often appears to be to strengthen the position of the majority religious communities, which are regarded as part of national identity, as in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. On the other hand, such laws sometimes express the values of atheistic pro or former-communist circles, which still reflexively attack religion as such. In Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) the main target seems to be Islamic fundamentalism (or "Wahhabism"), but under this cover, the authorities have taken measures that restrict the rights of most minority religions; in Western Europe, hundreds of unpopular minority religions are targeted as dangerous and harmful 'sects'. Most European states require that religious groups have to be registered, just like all other associations. Restrictive laws include various categories of state recognition, providing privileges to majority religious communities, and discriminating against minority communities. The most privileged religious organizations are granted the right, for example, to enjoy significant tax reductions; to give religious instruction in state-run schools and religious counseling in public institutions such as hospitals; to establish their own schools; to publish or import religious literature; or to be represented in various state administrative bodies. Because of the introduction of new restrictive laws in Russia and Austria, minority religions will have to wait for 15 years and 20 years respectively before being allowed to introduce an application for the status of the most privileged religions. Moreover, the provisions typically include a minimum number of members to be registered at all; restrictions on activities outside sites of worship; limitations on publication, distribution and importation of religious literature; prohibitions on the activities of foreign teachers or preachers; and imposition of heavier taxes than those on majority religious organizations. While Western governments and human rights groups have typically focused their attention on increasing restrictions in formerly communist countries, less attention has been paid to similar developments in the established democracies of Western Europe. In addition to restrictive national legislative and other measures, the European

Parliament unsuccessfully tried to draft a report on "cults"; it was rejected on two occasions by the plenary session. The Council of Europe also prepared a report on "cults," but, in September 1998, it was rejected and sent back to the Committee on Legal affairs and Human Rights for further examination. In several West European countries enquiry commissions on sects have been established to observe minority religions. On 19 June 1998, the German Inquiry Commission issued its report. It recommended that the so-called Church of Scientology be kept under observation, but stated that "cults and psycho groups" do not represent any danger to the democratic state. And recent Swedish and Swiss reports take a relatively positive approach to minority religions. In Russia, the Jehovah's Witnesses are facing a trial that might create a precedent for a ban on their activities-and those of other minorities. Small Protestant churches have reported harassment equivalent to persecution during the Soviet era. In Austria, new religious groups have to wait for 10 years before being allowed to ask for the most privileged status, which does not mean they will be granted it. The French government has recently set up an Inter-Ministerial Mission for Fight against Sects and has appointed its head Alain Vivien, chairman of an anti-cult movement. Also, the government has for the first time applied the new tax legislation revised in 1992 on a number of the 172 minority religions blacklisted as "dangerous or harmful sects".

In Greece, the Greek Orthodox Church can legally regulate the rights of the minority religions, including the right to build sites of worship. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Islamic "Fundamentalism" is the main target. In practice, however, most religious minorities suffered under regulations supposedly meant to target the so-called "Wahhabism".

In Uzbekistan, authorities carried out arbitrary mass arrests, tortured persons in custody and practiced religious discrimination in the name of the fight against Islamic Fundamentalism.