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Vatican fears anti-Christian feeling

by Philip Pulella

Reuters (03.12.2004)/HRWF (03.08.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Anti-Christian feeling is spreading in Muslim countries and other parts of the world because the war on terrorism is seen as linked to Western political strategy, says the Vatican's foreign minister.

Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, in a speech to a U.S.-organised conference on religious freedom on Friday, was the latest Vatican official to decry what the Church fears will be a difficult future in regions where Christians are in the minority.

"It should be recognised that the war against terrorism, even though necessary, had as one of its side-effects the spread of 'Christianophobia' in vast areas of the globe," he told the conference.

Lajolo, the Vatican's second-ranking diplomat, said anti-Christian feeling existed where political strategies of Western countries were believed to be driven by Christianity.

He said this was why the Vatican had insisted that "Christianophobia be condemned together with Islamophobia and anti-Semitism" in recent U.N. human rights documents.

While he did not specifically mention Iraq, his comments appeared to be a reference to it and other Islamic nations where minority Christians have come under attack.

A spate of bombs have hit churches and hospitals in the past few months, leaving numerous dead and injured.

Iraq's 650,000 Christians, mostly Chaldeans, Assyrians and Catholics, comprise about 3 percent of the population. Many have left Iraq and the Vatican fears more will go if attacks go on.

Washington justified invading Iraq by saying Saddam Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction and claiming there were links between Baghdad and al Qaeda. No such weapons have been found nor hard evidence of pre-war al Qaeda links.

The Vatican strongly opposed the invasion.

Lajolo later told reporters the perceived dislike of Christians was taking place because "their institutions and their activities are seen as attempts to win converts or interfere in local cultures".

John V. Hanford III, U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom, said Washington was concerned about any Christian exodus from Iraq but that the U.S.-led intervention could not be blamed for the religious strife.

Participants at the conference also said they feared for the fate of Christians in other countries including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Vietnam and China.

"There are well over half a million Catholics, mostly guest workers from the Philippines and other countries, but there is not a single church building in all Saudi Arabia," Hanford said.

He said Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, had made some "good first steps" such as revising their textbooks to remove inflammatory statements against minority religions and trying to rein in the "sometimes overzealous religious police".

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A religious-freedom blacklist grows

U.S. State Department Targets Saudi Arabia

Zenit (25.09.2004)/HRWF (26.09.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - On Sept. 15 the U.S. State Department published its sixth annual Report on Religious Freedom, covering the 12-month period ending June 30. The document observes that almost all nations have signed one or more international agreements committing them to respect individual freedom of thought, conscience and belief.

"In practice, however, this freedom is often restricted, abused or denied, and many people continue to suffer solely for following the dictates of conscience," the report contended.

One of the features of this year's report was the addition of Saudi Arabia to a list of countries where religious persecution is particularly harsh. The International Religious Freedom Act that mandates the production of the annual report also requires the State Department to determine which countries have committed particularly severe violations of religious freedom. These are then designated as a Country of Particular Concern.

Five countries continue to be on the list: Burma, China, Iran, North Korea and Sudan. Three more were added: Saudi Arabia, Eritrea and Vietnam. John Hanford, ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom, explained at a press conference that the government in Saudi Arabia "rigidly mandates religious conformity."

Arrest and torture

Non-Muslims are not the only ones who suffer in Saudi Arabia. Those Muslims who do not belong to the Wahabi strand of Islam favored by the Saudi government "face discrimination and sometimes severe restrictions on the practice of their faith," said Hanford.

The government prohibits all public non-Muslim religious activities. "Non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, imprisonment or deportation for engaging in religious activities that attract official attention," he noted.

The report itself noted that "There were frequent instances in which mosque preachers, whose salaries were paid by the government, used violent anti-Jewish and anti-Christian language in their sermons." Moreover, non-Muslims "risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation and sometimes torture for engaging in religious activity that attracts official attention."

Regarding the other two countries added to the list of Particular Concern this year, Hanford explained that the government in Eritrea since 2002 has shut down all religious activity outside of four officially recognized groups. More than 200 Protestants and Jehovah's

Witnesses remain in prison for their faith, he said. "Some reportedly have been subjected to severe torture and pressured to renounce their faith and many others have been detained and interrogated," added Hanford.

In Vietnam he explained that at least 45 religious believers remain imprisoned, including members of the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai faiths. Pressure, and even physical force, has been used against many ethnic minority Protestants in an attempt to make them renounce their faith, said Hanford. Moreover, hundreds of churches and places of worship in the central highlands have been shut down.

"Enemies of the state"

The report groups together a number of countries listed as "totalitarian and authoritarian regimes," where authorities seek to control religious thought and expression. "Such regimes regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state because of their religious content," affirms the report. Among these countries are the following:

-- Burma. The government is guilty of "particularly severe violations of religious freedom," according to the U.S. State Department. This includes infiltrating and monitoring meetings and activities of organizations, discouraging or prohibiting minority religions from constructing new places of worship, and coercive promotion of Buddhism.

-- China. "The Government's respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience remained poor," according to the report. The situation varies from region to region, but members of unregistered Protestant and Catholic groups "were subjected to restrictions, including intimidation, harassment and detention."

-- Cuba. "Surveillance, infiltration and harassment against religious groups, clergy and lay persons" is regularly practiced by the island's Interior Ministry. As well, authorities restrict the importation and distribution of religious literature and materials and monitor church publications. The government also almost never authorizes construction permits for churches. Nor are churches allowed to establish schools, universities, hospitals or clinics.

-- Laos. Authorities continue to display intolerance for minority religions, particularly Protestant denominations, the report noted. Some Christians were forced to renounce their faith, while others were arrested. The law allows people to be held for lengthy periods without trial, according to the State Department. And someone arrested or convicted for religious offenses has little protection under the law, the report said.

-- North Korea. "Genuine religious freedom does not exist, and particularly severe violations of religious freedom continued," is the blunt assessment offered by the report. In addition to severe repression of unauthorized religious groups, "there are unconfirmed reports of the killing of members of underground Christian churches." Some defectors from the country have also affirmed that Christians were imprisoned and tortured for reading the Bible and talking about God.

Discrimination and harassment

The report grouped together another set of countries where minority religions face hostility and repression.

Iran. Members of minorities such as Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Jews and Christians have reported "imprisonment, harassment, intimidation and discrimination based on their religious beliefs." The problems faced by minorities are particularly evident in the areas of employment, education and housing.

Pakistan. The constitution requires that laws be consistent with Islam, and the "Government fails in many respects to protect the rights of religious minorities," the report alleges. More than 100 deaths were attributed to sectarian violence during the period covered by the report. As well, there are reports that Hindus and Christians alike have been abducted and forcibly converted.

-- Sudan. "There are many restrictions on non-Muslims, non-Arab Muslims, and Muslims from tribes or sects not associated with the ruling party," the report states. The last building permit for a church issued by authorities to a non-Muslim group was around 1975. And many non-Muslims state they are treated as second-class citizens when it comes to government jobs and contracts, notes the report.

-- Turkmenistan. In spite of some improvements during the past year the State Department accused the Government of continuing to maintain a tight control over the practice of religion. Authorities determine the appointments of the leaders of both Russian Orthodox and Sunni Muslim groups. Moreover, the government must approve all religious instruction. Laws also restrict the freedom to meet and worship in private.

Uzbekistan. The law governing religious activity "contravenes internationally recognized norms," notes the report. There are severe restrictions on seeking converts, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction.

Bright spots

The report continues with an even longer list of countries that practice religious repression to some degree. However, it also notes that in some nations there have been significant improvements in the past year.

In Afghanistan, the constitution ratified in January contains provisions that help to secure religious freedom. As well, in schools both the curriculum and textbooks have been changed, to eliminate extremist views.

In India, the previous government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party had started to take steps toward toleration of minorities. The new government, in power since late May, has pledged to respect both secular government and religious tolerance, and to pay particular attention to the rights of religious minorities.

In Georgia and Turkey and other countries, major improvements were reported, though minority believers in those lands still face problems. Too often, in many nations, full religious freedom remains only a hope.

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UN urged to protect Muslims who change religion

by Patrick Goodenough

CNS News (02.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (03.08.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Campaigners for religious freedom have urged the United Nations to act to protect "Muslims who choose to convert to another faith."

A petition signed by almost 90,000 people in 32 countries was presented last week to U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, the organization spearheading the campaign said Monday.

The Barnabas Fund, a UK-based charity working among Christians in Islamic societies, said Muslims who change religions, often called "apostates," should be "free to do so without having to face a lifetime of fear as a result."

The organization's advocacy manager, Paul Cook, said the petition was launched a year ago on behalf of apostates who face persecution and prejudice in many countries.

Under Islamic (shari'a) law, Muslim men who decide to adopt another belief and refuse to return to Islam -- usually within a limited period of time -- may be put to death.

It remains a contentious point in Islam, but countries where people have been accused or convicted of apostasy include Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Mauritania.

In 2002, a shari'a-based penal code was introduced in a Malaysian state controlled by an Islamist party. It said any Muslim who converted to another faith had three days to repent, failing which he faced having his property forfeited and being sentenced to death.

The criminal code of Mauritania similarly provides for a three day period of reflection and repentance for any Muslim guilty of apostasy "whether by word or action." "If he does not repent within this time limit, he is to be condemned to death as an apostate and his property will be confiscated by the Treasury."

Although the Koran says "there is no compulsion in religion" (sura 2:256), the Islamic canonical tradition called the Hadith contains references to execution for apostasy, including one in which Mohammed commands, "Any [Muslim] person who has changed his religion, kill him."

No reply

According to the Barnabas Fund, even in countries where converting to another religion is not punished by law, apostates often face hostility from their families and communities.

The organization said supporters of the campaign had over the past year written to Muslim political and religious leaders around the world, "urging them to speak out on this crucial issue."

In Britain, it said, not only has there been no reply from the Muslim Council, the main umbrella body, but also "virtually no response" from leaders of major Christian denominations who had been contacted.

"It is a tragic day when so few politician or religious leaders can be found who are prepared to stick their necks out by simply publicly affirming the most basic of human rights to change one's religion," said Barnabas Fund international director Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo.

He noted that the right to change religion had been enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for more than 50 years.

Sookhdeo said he hoped and prayed that campaign would "help to end the turning of a blind eye to the suffering of converts from Islam, and instead put their desperate needs firmly on to the international human rights agenda where they very much belong."

Last April, four experts held a panel discussion on apostasy in Geneva where the U.N. Commission on Human Rights was holding its 60th annual session.

One of them was Dr. Younas Sheikh, an intellectual who was freed in November 2003 after spending three years in prison in Pakistan accused of "blasphemy," most of that time on death row.

The Arabic word kafir has been used to describe both an "apostate" and a "blasphemer."

The Barnabas Fund says many people accused of "apostasy" are not converts at all, but rather Muslims who have questioned fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and called for a more tolerant approach.

They include Sudanese Islamic scholar Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, who was executed for apostasy in 1985, after publishing a leaflet calling for the reform of Islamic law to make it more just and humane.

In 2002, Iranian history professor Hashem Aghajari was sentenced to hang for blasphemy, after saying in a speech that Muslims were not "monkeys" and "should not blindly follow" clerics.

The death sentence was later reviewed after widespread student protests, and a retrial saw him jailed for five years instead. Last week, Aghajari was freed on bail.

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Religious freedom: Where it stands

U.S. Commission Publishes Its Annual Report

Zenit.org (29.05.2004) / HRWF Int. (01.06.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom published its annual report May 12 amid little media attention. The commission was established in 1998 to monitor religious freedom and to advise the president, secretary of state, and Congress on how best to promote it.

The timing of this year's report might strike some as inauspicious. In the wake of revelations about abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers, many have criticized the pretension of the United States to portray itself as a defender of human rights. But the most obvious alternative, the United Nations, has also drawn fire for its inconsistencies.

During this year's meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, for instance, China, Russia and Zimbabwe escaped any censure, Reuters reported April 15. And a U.N. press release announced May 4 that among the countries elected by the U.N. Economic and Social Council to serve on the Commission on Human Rights was Sudan, a country singled out by independent watchdog groups as responsible for grievous rights violations.

Afghanistan and Iraq

In reviewing its activities during the last year the U.S. commission explained that a major focus was ensuring that the newly formed governments in Afghanistan and Iraq will respect religious freedom. The commission argued for protecting this freedom in both countries' new constitutions. The commission noted that its efforts were successful in Iraq, with the interim constitution being "a document which potentially stands as a model for the region."

In Afghanistan, however, "there was more limited success with respect to the constitution." The report commented that the constitution does provide for the freedom of non-Muslim groups to exercise their faith. But it lacks more explicit protections for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

A cause for concern is that the Afghan Constitution does not fully protect individuals against unjust accusations of religious "crimes" such as apostasy and blasphemy. Moreover, the U.S. commission observed that Afghanistan's Supreme Court Chief Justice Fazl Hadi Shinwari "has shown little regard for those who disagree with his hard-line interpretation of Islam."

6 more of "particular concern"

One of the commission's tasks is to identify those governments guilty of systematic and grave violations of religious freedom. In February the panel recommended that the U.S. State Department place 11 nations in the category of "Countries of Particular Concern." The recommendations included six countries not previously included: Eritrea, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and Vietnam. The other five -- Burma, China, North Korea, Iran and Sudan -- were already singled out in previous reports.

The U.S. commission also said that Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria and Uzbekistan would remain on a watch list of countries where the state of religious freedom is of concern because of violations engaged in or tolerated by their governments. Belarus, Cuba and Georgia would also be added to that list, the panel said.

Explaining the additions to the list of countries guilty of grave violations, the report charged that the Pakistani government continues to inadequately deal with vigilante violence by Sunni militants against Shiites, Ahmadis and Christians. And official government policies result in other religious freedom violations, including imprisonment under the anti-Ahmadi and blasphemy laws.

In India, meanwhile, violence against Muslims and Christians continues, and the government has not yet addressed adequately the killing of an estimated 2,000 Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002.

In Eritrea, the government "engages in particularly severe violations of freedom of religion and belief," affirmed the U.S. report. Problems range from the closing of all churches not belonging to officially recognized religious denominations, to the arrests of participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings.

Turkmenistan, the commission said, "is among the most repressive states in the world today and engages in particularly severe, ongoing violations of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief." The situation further deteriorated with a new law that took effect last November. That law effectively bans most religious activity and calls for criminal penalties for those found guilty of participating in "illegal religious activity." The report also accused President Saparmurat Niyazov of promoting a state-controlled version of Islam and of rendering any independent religious activity impossible.

In Vietnam, the already poor conditions of religious freedom have deteriorated over the last 18 months, the U.S. panel said. Religious dissidents have been harassed and detained, and the Vietnamese government has continued its crackdown against minorities in the northwestern provinces and the Central Highlands, including beatings and the forced renunciation of faith.

Muslim exceptions

The report noted that freedom of religion "is not well protected in the Middle East or among countries where Islam is the religion of the state." Many constitutions of these states lack provisions guaranteeing freedom of religious practice, and the rights that do exist are usually expressed only in general terms.

Yet, the commission pointed out some exceptions. Bangladesh, Pakistan and Malaysia -- countries where Islam is the state religion -- are said to "have constitutional guarantees that compare favorably with international standards." Other predominately Muslim countries such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Mali and Senegal also have adequate safeguards.

Saudi Arabia was singled out for special mention in the U.S. report. The 2003 report recommended that Congress authorize a study to determine the role played by the Saudi government and members of the royal family in propagating a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hate and violence toward members of other religious groups. Consequently, several members of Congress wrote to the comptroller of the U.S. General

Accounting Office last April requesting that the agency find out what the American government is doing to identify and monitor sources of Saudi funding for institutions that advocate violence and intolerance.

In terms of the internal situation in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. report noted that violations include torture and cruel and degrading treatment or punishment imposed by judicial and administrative authorities; prolonged detention without charges and often incommunicado; and blatant denials of the right to liberty and security of the person.

Changeless China

Also under scrutiny is China. "Repression of religious freedom continues to be a deliberate policy of the Chinese government," the report said. The commission accused authorities of intensifying their violent campaign against religious believers, including evangelical Christians, Catholics, Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists. Maltreatment has included imprisonment and torture.

The report noted that Catholic clergy in Fujian, Zhejiang, Jilin and Jiangxi provinces were harassed, detained and arrested. Last July, five priests were sentenced to three years in a labor camp after having been convicted of practicing "cult." And in October, Hebei provincial officials reportedly arrested 12 priests and seminarians attending a religious retreat. As well, at least 10 bishops reportedly are under arrest.

Religious freedom is also severely lacking in Cuba, according to the U.S. commission. Registered and unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment and repression, the panel said.

The Castro government continues to prohibit the construction of new churches. It also enforces a regulation that prevents any Cuban or joint enterprise from selling computers, fax machines, photocopiers or other equipment to any church, except at exorbitant prices.

Private religious schools continue to be prohibited, and religious groups are required to receive permission from Communist Party officials before being allowed to hold processions or events outside of religious buildings. For many in the world, religious freedom remains an elusive luxury.

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"The return of paganism"

Zenit.org (07.02.2004) /Human Rights Without Frontiers Int. (10.02.2004), email: info@hrwf.net, Website: www.hrwf.net -- Like European politicians who continue to block any mention of Christianity in the draft of the continent's Constitution, public officials around the globe increasingly are adopting measures that favor a return to pre-Christian paganism.

Denmark has announced it will allow a group that worships Thor, Odin and other Norse gods to conduct legally-valid marriages, the Associated Press reported Nov. 5. "It would be wrong if the indigenous religion of this country wasn't recognized," said Tove Fergo, the government Minister for Ecclesiastic Affairs and a Lutheran priest.

The 240-member Forn Sidr sought recognition in 1999, said its president, Tissel Jacobsen. About 1,000 people worship the ancient gods in Denmark, Jacobsen said.

Across the ocean, a U.S. federal judge in the state of Virginia ruled in favor of a Wiccan who was barred from saying a prayer to open a Chesterfield County board meeting. U.S. District

Court Judge Dennis Dohnal said the board discriminated against Cyndi Simpson when it prohibited her from joining a list of clergy who deliver the invocations, the Associated Press reported Nov. 14.

Wiccans consider themselves witches, pagans or neo-pagans, and say their religion is based on respect for the earth, nature and the cycle of the seasons, according to the Associated Press. The American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia and the Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed the lawsuit on behalf of Simpson after she was turned down by the board.

Wiccans are also active in Canada, where recently they celebrated the winter solstice, the Vancouver Sun reported Dec. 22. Heather Botting, a pagan chaplain at the University of Victoria, told the newspaper that the solstice, marking the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, is a sacred day.

An ex-Jehovah's Witness, Botting was appointed five years ago by university authorities. She is also authorized to perform marriages. At the university interfaith chapel, members of the 30,000-strong student body were able to mark the solstice with dances that paid reverence to stag antlers as symbols of the cycle of life. Revelers dipped a ceremonial knife into a cast-iron cauldron of wine, to symbolize the unity of male and female divinity.

In the Greater Victoria area, population 280,000, more than 1,000 people officially told Canadian census-takers they were pagans, the Vancouver Sun said. Paganism is Canada's fastest-growing religion, according to Statistics Canada. There are 21,080 declared pagans in Canada.

The census figures underestimate Wicca's spread, claims Inar Hansen, vice president of the university's 150-member Thorn and Oak Student Pagan Club. Hansen maintains that tens of thousands of residents on Canada's West Coast practice paganism.

Meanwhile, in the state of Victoria, Australia, a legal battle is being played out between Olivia Watts, a self-proclaimed witch and transsexual, and Rob Wilson, a Christian.

The conflict began last June when Wilson, a council member in the Melbourne-area municipality of Casey, issued a statement warning against a satanic cult that was allegedly planning to take over the area, the Age newspaper reported Dec. 27. Watts, who was named in the statement by Wilson, took the matter to the Equal Opportunity Commission. The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal will also look into Watts' case. Watts is getting help from the Sydney-based Pagan Awareness Network.

Rebirth for the Blairs

On Jan. 26 and 27, the Guardian newspaper in Britain published ample extracts from Francis When's new book, "How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions." When recounts the rise of gurus, spiritualists and assorted pagan beliefs. One of the most successful modern gurus is Deepak Chopra, who earns around \$20 million a year. Since his 1993 appearance on the Oprah Winfrey television show -- which led to sales of 400,000 copies of his book within a week -- Chopra has authored 25 books. He heads the Chopra Center for Well-Being in La Jolla, California. His admirers run a wide gamut, from Michael Jackson to Mikhail Gorbachev and Hillary Clinton.

When also recounts that Cherie Blair, wife of the British Prime Minister, is keen on alternative forms of spirituality. Her adventures include inviting a feng-shui expert to rearrange the furniture at 10 Downing Street, and wearing a "magic pendant" known as the BioElectric Shield, which has "a matrix of specially cut quartz crystals" that surround the wearer with "a cocoon of energy" to ward off evil forces. Both Cherie and Tony Blair underwent a Mayan rebirthing experience while on holidays in Mexico in 2001.

Also increasingly popular in England is Kabbalah, an ancient Hebrew philosophy. At London's Kabbalah Center -- whose premises were reportedly paid for by the singer Madonna for 3.5 million pounds (\$6.3 million) -- followers can buy books, sign up for a 10-week course, or buy bottles of Kabbalah water, the Financial Times reported Dec. 20.

According to recent figures, fewer than 3% of Londoners are now regular churchgoers. At the same time, non-Christian practices such as Kabbalah, Buddhism, Hinduism and crystal healing are flourishing, the newspaper noted.

"For many westerners, particularly women, it has become the norm to master Buddhist chanting in a meditation class, learn about ancient Hindu philosophies during a yoga class, light an (aromatherapy) candle and say a prayer (to a nameless God) back at home," commented the article. A further sign of the triumph of alternative spiritualities came with the recent appointment of a spirituality editor by the British womens magazine Cosmopolitan.

Christless Christmas

While paganism gains legal protection, Christianity continues to be singled out for exclusion. Last Christmas season, for example, the British Red Cross banned the mention of Jesus from its shops, the Sun newspaper reported Nov. 11. Also barred were Christmas cards with nativity scenes and Advent calendars showing Mary and Joseph and the three wise men.

Meanwhile, the Christmas card sent out by the United Kingdom's culture secretary, Tessa Jowell, featured Hindu dancers and drawings of mosques, the Telegraph reported Dec. 7. What the card failed to show was anything about Jesus or Christmas.

And, in Australia, the Victorian state minister for transport, Peter Batchelor, opted for a Christmas card with an Aboriginal dream scene, without any Christian reference, the Age reported Dec. 19.

Scotland's Parliament also abolished any reference to Christianity in its cards. That was too much, even for self-declared agnostic Jim Sillars, who complained of the move in a commentary published by the Scotsman newspaper on Dec. 3. "Such decisions aren't a matter of showing greater tolerance of non-Christian religions," observed Sillars. "I have yet to meet the Jew, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh who has ever objected to us having Christ as the center of Christmas. Take Christ out and you have a pagan celebration."

Delving into the reason behind anti-Christian prejudices, Christine Odone, deputy editor of the British magazine New Statesman, commented that the "chattering classes" share a common prejudice against Christians. In an extract of the annual Tyndale lecture given by Odone and published Oct. 28 in the Guardian, she noted that in an era that prizes individual freedom, Christians believe in authority and have a clear sense that there is a right and a wrong.

"Moral certainty grates against the spirit of the age," she observed. And this certainty "throws into relief the brittle edifice that houses the secularist's morals." Re-Christianizing an increasingly pagan society will not be easy.

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U.S. State Department's Annual Report released

[Zenit.org](#) (31.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (03.02.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net -- Just before Christmas the U.S. State Department published a report on religious freedom for the year ending last June 30. Some countries such as China reject the

annual survey as an unjustified intrusion into domestic affairs. Yet, religious freedom is a right guaranteed by numerous international documents including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.S. report noted.

The report groups a number of nations where religious freedom is lacking because of the threat religion may represent to the regime. Those nations are:

- **Burma.** Government agents regularly infiltrate or monitor the activities of virtually all organizations, including religious groups, notes the U.S. State Department. Abuses included restrictions on Buddhist clergy who promote human rights and on Christian groups that seek permission to build new churches. All religious publications are censored.
- **China.** The report accuses authorities of continuing to harass members of unregistered religious groups. Some local authorities continued a selective crackdown on unregistered churches, temples and mosques. "Many religious leaders and adherents were detained, arrested or sentenced to prison terms," comments the U.S. report.
- **Cuba.** The government continues "to engage in efforts to control and monitor religious institutions and activities, and to use surveillance, infiltration and harassment against religious groups, religious professionals and lay persons," says the report. Authorities also ignore some applications by religious groups for legal recognition and continue to deny permits for the construction of churches. Severe restrictions hinder the operation of church-run schools and the printing of religious material.
- **Laos.** The report cites a moderate improvement in some parts of the country, but deterioration in other regions. In general, the government "continued to inhibit religious practice by all persons, especially those belonging to minority religions." Some local officials pressure Christians to renounce their faith, while the government prohibits foreigners from proselytizing.
- **North Korea.** "Genuine religious freedom does not exist," is the report's blunt judgment. Repressive measures include executions, torture and imprisonment. Evidence about North Korea is hard to collect, but the report noted that in April 1999 and also in May and June 2002, witnesses testified before Congress that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs generally were treated worse than other inmates.
- **Vietnam.** Significant restrictions still exist on religious groups not recognized by the government. "Religious groups faced difficulties in training and ordaining clergy and encountered some restrictions in conducting educational and charitable activities." The report also says that in some Central Highland provinces, police have harassed and detained religious believers and destroyed houses of worship.

Security threats

The U.S. State Department places in a separate category those countries where governments are hostile to religious groups seen as a threat to "security." They are:

Iran. The report notes that members of the country's religious minorities -- Bahais, Jews, Christians, Sunni and Sufi Muslims -- suffer degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, including intimidation, harassment and imprisonment. Followers of the Bahai faith, derided as a kind of "wayward Islamic sect," suffer the most.

Iraq. Before his ouster, Saddam Hussein used repressive measures "against any religious groups or organizations deemed as not providing full political and social support to the regime." And authorities continued to strictly repress the Shiite religious leadership.

Pakistan. The report accuses the government of failing to protect the rights of religious minorities. Discriminatory laws reigned at the national level. And authorities "failed to intervene in cases of societal violence directed at minority religious groups," particularly Shiites.

Saudi Arabia. "The government continued to enforce a strictly conservative version of

Sunni Islam and suppress the public practice of other interpretations of Islam and non-Muslim religions," states the U.S. report. Non-Muslim worshippers faced the threat of "arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation and sometimes physical abuse for engaging in religious activity that attracted official attention." The report also draws attention to government-paid mosque preachers who use "violently anti-Jewish and anti-Christian language in their sermons." On a positive note the report notes that authorities have replaced more than 2,000 imams for extremist preaching.

Sudan. The report says the Khartoum government continued its policy of Islamization, "relegating non-Muslims to de facto second-class citizenship." Non-Muslim religious groups have difficulty obtaining registration. Authorities refuse to permit the construction of any churches in the Khartoum area or in the district capitals. And the assets of various Catholic relief projects were confiscated when the projects closed temporarily or moved locations.

Turkmenistan. The report accuses the government of continuing to restrict all forms of religious expression. Public agencies and courts interpret laws in such a way as to discriminate against those practicing any faith other than Sunni Islam or Russian Orthodox Christianity, "which are controlled by the government." Other groups are prevented from gathering publicly, proselytizing, or distributing religious materials. Authorities also restrict the number of Muslim mosques and control access to Islamic education. Moreover, the government imposes the use of President Saparmurat Niyazov's spiritual guide, "Rukhnama," in educational institutions, mosques and Russian Orthodox churches.

Uzbekistan. Mainstream religious groups are allowed to operate, but the government restricts the freedom of minority religions. The report notes harsh action taken against Muslims seen as extremists, as well as continued harassment of Christian groups with ethnic-Uzbek members. Other restrictions include an overly strict registration process for religious organizations that force many groups to operate illegally.

Partiality condoned

Some governments, notes the report, have laws that favor certain religions and place others at a disadvantage. This is often the result of the historical predominance of one religion. In Belarus, respect for religious freedom worsened during the period covered by the report, states the document. Eritrea also comes in for mention due to its harassment of Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and adherents of the Bahai faith. And in Russia, some federal agencies and many local authorities continued to restrict the rights of religious minorities.

Israel came in for criticism for discrimination against non-Jews in education, housing, employment and social services. Evangelical Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Reform and Conservative Jews complained of incidents of harassment, threats and vandalism directed against their buildings and other facilities.

Another category of countries cited are those whose authorities fail to act with sufficient vigor against violations of religious freedom. Singled out for mention here are Bangladesh, India, Egypt, Georgia, Guatemala, Indonesia and Nigeria.

As in previous years the report criticizes some Western European nations -- Belgium, France and Germany -- for laws that are held to "stigmatize minority religions by associating them with dangerous 'cults.'" The U.S. State Department observes that these laws have also been criticized by other bodies, such as the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and the Council of Europe.

The report observes: "Promoting religious freedom is a core goal of U.S. foreign policy, and U.S. officials around the world play active roles in this advocacy." Some may reject the idea that one nation should take upon itself this role. But persecuted believers around the world are probably grateful for all the help they can get.

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