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UN Special Rapporteur accused of anti-Buddhist bias

by Janaka Perera

Asian Tribune (06.06.2005) / HRWF Int. (08.06.2005) / Website <http://www.hrwf.net> – Email info@hrwf.net - The Joint Committee of Buddhist Organizations, Sri Lanka, has accused United Nation's Special Rapporteur Asma Jehangir of falsifying and distorting facts in a press release on the issue of unethical conversions in the island.

In a letter to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, JCBO Coordinator Gamini Perera has expressed his "astonishment" over her denial that there was no concrete proof of anyone being forced or coerced into giving up his/her ancestral religion.

The full text the JCBO's letter to the UNHCHR is available at:

http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=14657

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U.N. calls for combating 'defamation' of Islam

by Stephanie Nebehay

Reuters (12.04.2005) / HRWF Int. (15.04.2005) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> – Email info@hrwf.net - The United Nations Commission on Human Rights called on Tuesday for combating defamation of religions, especially Islam, and condemned discrimination against Muslims in the West's war on terrorism.

The 53-member state forum adopted a resolution, presented by Pakistan on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), deploring the intensification of a "campaign of defamation" against Muslims following the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States.

Western countries, including the United States and European Union (EU), voted against the text, calling it unbalanced for failing to address problems suffered by other religious groups.

The OIC resolution was adopted by a vote of 31 countries in favor and 16 against, with five abstentions and one delegation absent, Indonesia's ambassador Makarim Wibisono, who chairs the annual six-week session, announced after the public vote.

"Stereotyping of any religion as propagating violence or its association with terrorism constitutes defamation of religion. It unfortunately breeds a culture of hatred, disharmony and discrimination," Pakistan's envoy, Masood Khan, said in a speech on behalf of the OIC, which links 57 Islamic nations.

There was "a growing trend of defamation of Islam and discrimination faced by Muslims and the people of Arab descent in many parts of the world," he said, citing attacks on places of worship and religious symbols.

In a recent report, the U.N. special investigator on racism, Doudou Diene, cited examples including "Islamophobic violence" after the murder last November of Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh, and an "alarming number of expulsions of imams" in Europe.

Delegations from Cuba and China, which has been accused by rights activists of repressing its own Muslim Uighur minority, were among the countries to take the floor during the debate to back the OIC resolution.

"Islam has been the subject of very deep campaign of defamation. All you have to do is look at the films which have come out of Hollywood the last few years," said Cuba's delegate, Rodolfo Reyes Rodriguez.

But the United States, Canada and the EU rejected the resolution as focusing almost exclusively on Islam.

"This resolution is incomplete inasmuch as it fails to address the situation of all religions," Leonard Leo, a member of the U.S. delegation, said in a speech.

The Netherlands, speaking for the EU, said religious intolerance was a "matter of grave concern" within the bloc, adding that it regretted the EU had been unable to agree on a "more balanced" joint text with the OIC.

"Discrimination based on religion or belief is not confined to any one religion nor to any one part of the world," said Dutch ambassador Ian de Jong.

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Minority religions in Eritrea, Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and EU

61st Session of the Commission on Human Rights Statement of the International Helsinki Federation

Mr. Chairman,

The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights would like to draw your attention to the plight of believers of minority religions in a number of countries.

Eritrea is without any doubt the country with the worst religious freedom record. It is the UN member state, which has imprisoned the highest number of believers who were practicing their faith peacefully. For years, Jehovah's Witnesses have been the primary target of the Eritrean authorities and have been arrested in great numbers. They have also been deprived of their Eritrean citizenship.

The repression has however extended to other denominations: Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox. At mid-March this year, Eritrean security police arrested 16 Protestants for watching a Christian video in a private home in the town of Adi-Kibe. On February 19 last, 131 Orthodox children aged between 2 and 18 were rounded up by a group of policemen as they were attending their classes at an Orthodox church in the capital Asmara. In early January Eritrean authorities arrested and jailed 25 members of the Catholic Church during a wedding rehearsal in Asmara. Hundreds of believers of various denominations are now in prison, including objectors to military service.

In **Russia**, religious freedom is shrinking. The greatest blow in the last year was the local court decision in Moscow banning that city's branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Though formally the court decision applies only to Moscow, it has triggered crackdowns in other regions. Moreover, the European Court of Human Rights is now processing a complaint concerning a case in which the police raided and shut down a lawful and peaceful meeting of 150 deaf Jehovah's Witnesses in Chelyabinsk.

The denial of permission to rent public buildings for worship services is a continuing problem for many Protestant congregations.

Another new development is the destruction of churches and the firing of religious believers from their secular jobs. The most vulnerable targets seem to be those affiliated with the unregistered "Initsiativniki" Baptists.

For Roman Catholics, the greatest difficulty lately has been the issuance of visas for their clergy.

In **Turkmenistan**, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Hare Krishna community and Muslims have suffered from having their places of worship demolished by the government. Protestants in north-eastern Turkmenistan have been threatened for holding services and preaching Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses are still deprived of freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Police and national security officers interrupt small religious gatherings while they are being conducted in private homes; they detain all in attendance, verbally abuse them, and at times brutally beat the detainees. Afterward those present are given heavy fines, with the owner of the home subjected to an even heavier fine. Some Witnesses were dismissed from their employment.

Turkmenistan is also imprisoning those who refuse on religious grounds to serve in the armed forces. There are now five known religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan, four of them Jehovah's Witnesses and one Muslim, the former chief mufti. Religious prisoners of conscience in Turkmenistan have been harshly treated, being regularly beaten, threatened with homosexual rape.

Imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service is also common practice in **Armenia**, in **Nagorno-Kharabakh**, where the usual sentence is 4 years in prison, as well as in **South Korea**.

In **Uzbekistan**, a Protestant church in the town of Chirchik, a suburb of the capital Tashkent, and the capital's Jehovah's Witness congregation have been denied registration. Refusal to register a religious community is the most common tactic to obstruct activities of religious communities and make them illegal.

On March 8, Women's Day, the security services arrested once more Ahmadaliyeva Rahima, the wife of an imam of a mosque in Taschkent who is in hiding. She has been jailed for several years and severely tortured. Released in the framework of an amnesty, she has been, harassed by the authorities, arrested and beaten on several occasions. She leaves four children behind.

In a number of member states of the **European Union**, it is noteworthy that many minority religions are unduly labeled as harmful sectarian movements, which fuels religious intolerance towards their members. Peaceful Muslims also complain of discrimination, harassment by the authorities and undue interference of the state in their internal matters. The latest event this year was the enforcement of internal elections on the Muslim minority by a special law in **Belgium** despite the opposition of the Muslim representative organs duly elected and recognized by the state in 1998 for a period of 10 years. Complaints are currently pending with the Council of State and the Court of Arbitration.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief presents an annual report at the 61st Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights

Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.* (from Geneva)

HRWF Int. (04.05.2005) / Website <http://www.hrwf.net> – Email info@hrwf.net - On Monday afternoon April 4, 2005 Asma Jahangir, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, presented her annual

report at the 61st session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, focusing on freedom of expression and defamation of religions, religious symbols, forced conversions, inter-religious violence, attacks on places of worship, anti-terrorist legislation, and religious minorities.

Freedom of religion and freedom of expression

A number of situations where members or non-members of religious communities have criticized, in different ways and at various intensity, the religion or beliefs of others have been brought to the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

During the interactive dialogue between the Special Rapporteur and the UN Commission, the Permanent Mission of Pakistan raised the issue of the collision that sometimes occurs between freedom of religion and freedom of expression. Asma Jahangir answered that it is not always easy to draw a line between the legitimate use of one's freedom of expression on one hand and religious intolerance or defamation of religion, on the other. "Limitations permitted by the relevant human rights instruments have to be strictly applied and the right balance has to be struck," she said. When does freedom of expression violate freedom of religion or belief remains an open question that needs further examination and will be addressed more extensively in her next annual report, she promised.

The question of religious symbols

In this regard, the Special Rapporteur noted that the specific legislation or draft laws in a number of countries do not discriminate against any religion or belief but she also stressed that the display of religious symbols is a "manifestation" of religion or belief, which is susceptible of limitation. She confessed that in certain situations it is not easy to resolve the question of restrictions on voluntary display of religious symbols but in any case, children should not be excluded or marginalized from the school system. "The dress code in schools may be better addressed within the public schools themselves, encouraging the participation of children," she said. And she announced she was planning to visit France this year.

Forced conversions

The Special Rapporteur raised this issue in a number of communications addressed to the Governments of China, Saudi Arabia, Laos, Egypt and Turkmenistan. The Permanent Missions of Norway and Argentina expressed deep concern about conversions to Islam enforced on non-Muslim women in case of mixed marriages. The Special Rapporteur condemned such practices and also mentioned the case of women who cannot turn back to their original religion when they get divorced or become widows.

The Permanent Mission of Switzerland strongly condemned laws providing for death penalty in some UN member states, without naming any, in cases of conversion to another religion.

The Special Rapporteur plans to visit Sri Lanka, a country where anti-conversion legislation is being passed.

Inter-religious violence and non-State actors

The Special Rapporteur noted that in a number of countries violations of the freedom of religion or belief are due to inter-religious tensions or conflicts or to situations where one religion is predominant and does not tolerate the presence of religious minorities. Their perpetrators are often non-State actors even if, in many cases, State authorities have been implicated to varying degrees. "States are obliged to ensure the free exercise of freedom of religion or belief by protecting religious minorities, to enable them to practice their faith in all security, to bring the perpetrators of acts of violence or of other acts of religious intolerance to justice and to promote a culture of religious tolerance," she said.

The Permanent Mission of Indonesia, a country where there are regularly such eruptions of violence, reacted by saying that inter-religious conflicts are not always caused by religious intolerance.

The Special Rapporteur announced that she had recently visited Nigeria, another country where for years there have been serious clashes between Muslim and Christian populations as well as massacres,

destruction of places of worship and other religious buildings and properties. Her report is expected in the near future.

Attacks on such places, cemeteries, monasteries, community headquarters or shrines have usually been committed by non-State actors. The Special Rapporteur is of the opinion that States should pay attention to attacks on such places and ensure that all perpetrators of such attacks are properly prosecuted and tried.

Anti-terrorist legislation

Over the last few years, many States have adopted legislation and other measures designed to fight against terrorism. The Special Rapporteur regretted that these policies had established a simplistic link between terrorism and religion which, in turn, may have contributed to provoking even more acts of religious intolerance leading to violence. She stressed that freedom of religion or belief is not susceptible of derogation, even in time of emergency or because of national security concerns, as is clearly stated in article 4 of ICCPR.

Religious minorities

The issue of the protection of religious minorities and their members, especially the Baha'is, was raised by the Permanent Missions of Australia, Brazil, Canada and Peru.

The Special Rapporteur expressed great concern about the situation of the Baha'is in a number of countries, without naming them, and said that she hoped to get an invitation from Iran to investigate about their situation in this country. And she added that her next report would also focus on religious minorities.

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NGOs urge U.N. to fight bias against all faiths

Reuters (01.02.2005) / HRWF Int. (04.05.2005) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net - The United Nations should stop paying special attention to discrimination against Jews, Muslims and Christians and treat all religious prejudice equally, according to an appeal by Christian and human rights groups.

The non-governmental groups have urged the U.N. Human Rights Commission to reverse recent steps to highlight anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia because they implied a hierarchy favoring the "religions of the book."

"No form of intolerance or discrimination based on actual or supposed religion or belief, or non-belief, is acceptable," they said in a statement submitted for the Geneva-based Commission's annual conference scheduled from March 14 to April 22.

Prompted by the Vatican and several traditionally Catholic countries, the Commission agreed at its 2004 conference to add the term Christianophobia to a "special problems" list requiring monitoring of discrimination against Jews and Muslims.

The new term got a mixed response. Some rights activists supported it while others expressed concern that listing specific religions diluted the overall commitment to defend freedom of religion for everyone everywhere.

The statement was submitted by Christian groups representing Quakers, Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Franciscan order as well as the International Association for Religious Freedom and the International Service for Human Rights.

"It's not that we're not concerned about religious discrimination against certain groups -- on the contrary, we are very concerned," said Rachel Brett of the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva. "But we're equally concerned about everyone."

Hierarchy of intolerance?

Christianity and Islam are the world's largest faiths, with an estimated 2 billion and 1.3 billion members respectively. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and the ranks of atheists and agnostics all count more than Judaism's estimated 14 million adherents.

Human rights diplomats at the United Nations and the Vienna-based Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe said Buddhist and Sikh groups might start pressing for special consideration now that Christians had been singled out.

The statement said listing only "religions of the book" -- the three monotheisms that trace their lineage from the Biblical prophet Abraham -- "creates an impression of a hierarchy -- either of religions or of victims/discrimination or both."

This also ignores strains among different groups within the same religion, it argued. "The implication that religious intolerance and discrimination are only practiced by 'outsiders' is not only wrong but misleading."

Peter Prove of the Lutheran World Federation, one of the groups involved, added this would also overlook issues of conscience that might not be based on a religious belief system, such as a commitment to pacifism.

"Once you start listing, then where do you stop?" he asked.

Doudou Diene, the U.N. special rapporteur on racism and xenophobia whose reports first used the term Christianophobia, told Reuters recently that the Commission was equally concerned with all religious discrimination.

He noted the many cases around the world that it investigated at its meetings showed it did not focus only on intolerance against Jews, Muslims and Christians.

He said some countries tried "to put a hierarchy among different forms of discrimination" but did not name them.

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