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## **26 Catholic workers killed on mission in 2005**

Fides (30.12.2005) / HRWF Int. (30.12.2005) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Once again this year Fides has the sad task of issuing the names of pastoral workers who died a violent death in 2005. According to the information collected, 26 Catholics were killed on mission this year one was a bishop and other 25 were priests, religious and lay people.

The number is almost double that of last year 2004. As in recent years our list includes besides missionaries ad gentes in the strict sense who died a violent death also other church personnel who conscious of the risk, rather than give up their mission of witness and apostolate, sacrificed their lives. Some of them, whose bodies were found only hours or even days later, appeared to have been killed by thieves or other criminals in a social context of extreme violence, human degradation and poverty which the missionaries were committed to improving with their presence and work.

With respect for any judgement the Church may make in their regard, we ask you to remember these men and women in your prayers and to thank God for enabling them to make a generous contribution to further the growth of the Church in many different parts of the world at the service of human promotion and evangelisation.

With regard to the place of death, in 2005 the continent of America registered the highest number of Church personnel killed: 8 priests, 2 Brothers and 2 Sisters. More in detail once again this year Colombia had the highest number of victims, 4 priests and 1 woman religious. In that country where social conflict is acute the Church pays a heavy tribute for her efforts to promote social reconciliation and justice in the name of the Gospel and the victims of the long and bloody conflict included also two Catholic priests "mistakenly" murdered by guerrillas.

In Mexico two priests working in areas of extreme poverty, violence and illegal trafficking were killed. In Brazil a woman religious, a member of the Pastoral Land Commission in support of farm labourers and two priests were killed. In Jamaica two missionary Brothers working to alleviate the suffering of the poor, were killed in their community in the capital Kingston by the same bullet: a sign of the situation of violence and insecurity in that city.

Africa was bathed in the blood of one missionary bishop, 6 priests and a layman. All 8 were murdered in their homes probably victims of criminals in search of easy money, or deliberately eliminated with bloody ferocity in Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo Brazzaville and Nigeria. Among them a courageous Congolese priest Rev Francois Djikulo savagely murdered with the lay man who accompanied him on a peace mission to convince feared rebel chief Kyungu Kyungu, alias Gedeon, to disarm and stop terrorising the local people.

The continent of Asia also paid its tribute of blood to the cause of the Gospel in 2005, 3 Catholic priests were killed in India and 1 in Indonesia. One of the Indians, Rev Ignazio Bara, a martyr of peace, was killed while trying to prevent open conflict between a community of Tribals and a group of Hindu extremists in an area afflicted by inter-ethnic tension and disputes.

Also in Europe two Catholic priests died a violent death: one of them was assisting immigrants and anyone who came knocking at his door in Brussels and the other was rebuilding a parish community not far from Moscow in Russia.

Lastly and not to be forgotten, many more possible “unknown soldiers of the faith” in remote corners of the planet whose death may never be reported. We hope their number is small and welcome information in this regard and also any corrections to the list of names for this year or any previous year. (S.L.)

**Fr Thomas Richard Heath**, Dominican, from the USA, aged 85, on mission for 13 years in Kenya after 10 in South Africa and Lesotho, he died on 13 January 2005 of gun shot wounds suffered on January 4 during a robbery in the Community House in Kisumu where he was living. A deeply appreciated preacher and teacher, he formed whole generations of Kenyan priests. In his Community he was admired for his fidelity to the religious life and his genuine concern for others. (see Fides 19/1/2005)

**Rev Thomas Harsidiyono**, 50, Indonesian, found dead in his parish at Purworejo (central Java) on 14 January 2005. Probably murdered by thieves, he died of serious head injuries. People who knew the priest said he had no enemies and had not received threats of any kind.

**Rev Jan Hermanovsky**, 70, Slovakian, killed on 20 January 2005 by two young thieves who broke into the parish house in the town of Brjansk (Russia). Rev. Jan was committed to promoting Christian unity and totally dedicated to helping the poor and the outcasts. He used to go in person to the local railway station to take food to the homeless. He gave everything he had to the poor. He studied for the priesthood in Italy, where he was ordained a priest and ministered until 1995, before he returning to Slovakia. In 1998 opted to go to the Russian Federation where priests were needed for the Catholic communities coming to life again. For a time he worked in a Catholic parish at Oriol in Moscow. He was then sent to the town of Brjansk to reorganise the old Catholic parish. (see Fides 25/1/2001)

**Rev Manuel Delgado, OFM**, 42, found dead on 6 February 2005 in the town of Bufalo, Ciudad Jiménez, Chihuahua state in Mexico following an anonymous phone call. According to the post mortem the priest died on 5 February of numerous stab wounds and the body showed signs of torture. The priest, who was wearing civilian clothes when he was killed, was from Tampico, Tamaulipas, north Mexico. He was parish priest of the church of Santo Cristo de Burgos. According to the investigators the attackers were thieves.

**Sr Dorothy Stang**, 73, born in the United States of America naturalised Brazilian a Sister of Notre Dame. She was shot dead on 12 February 2005 40 km from the town of Anapu, in the western Brazilian state of Parà. For over twenty years Sister Stang had been a member of the local diocesan Pastoral Commission for Land Rights in support of peasant labourers in the Trans Amazon region of Para state. Because she courageously denounced fazendeiros and grileiros for violence she had received many threats to her life since 1999. She had in fact filed a report of the threats received on February 9 only a few days before she was assassinated. In recognition of her work to help the poor in 2004 she was made an honorary citizen of Para and for her work to promote respect for human rights she received the José Carlos Castro Award presented by the Brazilian Association of Lawyers. (see Fides 15/2/2005)

**Rev Mathew Uzhuthal**, Vicar general of the diocese of Patna, Bihar state, he died on May 1 of stab wounds suffered on 11 April in his parish office. The assassin was a local youth in search of money. He was at first rushed to the small local Nazareth Hospital, and then later moved to the more specialised Kurji Holy Family Hospital. He died after an agony of 19 days and will be remembered as a passionate and tireless missionary. Mathew Uzhuthal was from Kerala and moved the Patna diocese in 1953. He was ordained a priest in 1964 by Pope Paul VI during an International Eucharistic Congress in Bombay. In forty years of ministry he served in various parishes, assisted families in need and taught doctrine at the Diocesan Centre for Catechesis. (see Fides 15/4/2005; 16/4/2005; 7/5/2005)

**Fr René de Haes**, 72, a Belgian Jesuit, shot dead by two armed men in the late evening of 7 May 2005 while he was driving back to the college where he was living in Kimwenza district in northern Kinshasa capital of Democratic Congo. In Africa since 1959, he was known for his activity as a teacher and as the author of various theological works, Traditional African religions and pseudo religious sects. He was also very active in the social field.

**Rev Robert De Leener**, 54 from Brussels in (Belgium) murdered during the night of 4 June by an immigrant waiting for a residence permit who had been staying at the parish house. Fr De Leener was parish priest at Holy Cross parish Watermael-Boitsfort, Brussels and helped at other parishes. The immigrant had been sent away from the parish house the day before for bad conduct. He returned the next day and stabbed the priest to death in front of the victim's elderly mother. Parishioners said the priest was too good and opened to door to anyone who asked for help.

**Bishop Luigi Locati**, vicar apostolic of Isolo, north east Kenya, shot dead on 14 July 2005, in front of the local Pastoral centre. Bishop Locati, aged 77 was from the Italian diocese of Vercelli and had been on mission in Kenya for forty years where he was sent as a Fidei Donum priest. He was about to retire having reached the age limit. Even as a bishop he continued to live very simply. He was known as a man of honesty and a champion of justice. Having received several death threats Bishop Locati had to be accompanied by two body guards when he went out in the evening. (see Fides 15/7/2005)

**Rev. Luis Enrique Rojas**, 76, from Andes, Antioquia-Colombia, parish priest at Santa Marta cathedral Barranquilla-Colombia, he died after three week of agony on 21 July 2005 of injuries inflicted by criminals at the parish house on July 2. Apparently no locks were broken and nothing was stolen from the house. For 25 years parish priest of the cathedral, Rev. Rojas was known for his assistance to the poor. He was attacked six months earlier on 8 December 2004 but with less violence.

**Rev Paulo Henrique Machado**, 36, Brazilian, assistant co-ordinator for pastoral in Nova Iguacu district, killed by a commando on 25 July 2005. His body was found in his automobile under a railway bridge in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Although the priest's wristwatch, mobile and wallet were missing, he was probably murdered by local criminals for his activity to promote respect for human rights. He was known as a happy and committed priest who instilled peace among the poor people he served. He was part of a support-group for families of the victims of a massacre in the Nova Iguacu district one of the most violent in the capital and had repeatedly denounced drug traffickers for abuse.

**Rev Godwin Okwesili**, 42, Nigerian, killed on 2 August 2005 at St. Dominic Catholic Church in Yaba, Lagos (Nigeria). In the afternoon three young men appeared at the priests' house under the pretence of delivering a parcel to one of the priests and started an argument. When Fr Okwesili came out of his room to see what was happening he was shot dead in the doorway.

**Rev Jesus Adrian Sanchez**, 32, Colombian from the diocese of Espinal (Tolima), parish priest at El Limon, killed on 18 August 2005 while giving a class of religious instruction at Camacho Angarita school in the rural area of Chaparral (Tolima). Around 10 in the morning a man broke into the classroom, ordered the priest to go outside and shot him dead. The priest was involved in the pastoral care of local youths whom he tried to persuade not to join the ranks of the guerrillas and criminals but to continue studies. The President Colombian Bishops' Conference issued a statement condemning the murder as a "violent and sacrilegious act", imploring the criminals to convert their hearts and calling on the people of Colombia to pray for the strength to "overcome the culture of violence and death which has no respect for the lives of those who build peace and bear witness to the truth and the life".

**Rev Vicente Roza Bayona, 50, and Fr Jesus Emilio Mora, 65**, Colombian priests of the diocese of Ocaña, parish priests of the only two parishes in Convencion, killed in the morning of 15 August 2005 on the way to a celebration. The car in which they were travelling was attacked by guerrillas on the Teorema-Convencion road, El Diviso area, in Colombia.

The priests and two passengers, surveyors charged with building an army barracks in the area, were shot dead by machine gun fire. The following day the ELN guerrillas issued a statement claiming responsibility for the murder but stating that it was a tragic mistake due to the conflict in the area. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Colombia issued a statement condemning the "atrocious crime", "violent and sacrilegious act", attack on the "aspirations for reconciliation and peace preached by the Church".

**Rev Francois Djikulo**, Congolese priest of the diocese of Manono (Democratic Congo). In August on his own initiative he went on a peace mission to try to convince the feared rebel leader Kyungu Kyungu, alias Gedeon, to disarm and stop terrorising the local people. For months nothing was heard of his whereabouts. Only in November was it known that Fr Djikulo and his companion **Simon Kayimbi** had been savagely mutilated and then burned alive in Mutendele, district of Pweto, about 75 km from the parish of Dubie diocese of Kilwa Kasenga. (see Fides 21/11/2005 - 23/11/2005)

**Rev Mathew Nellickal**, 65, Vicar general of the diocese of Tezpur, India, found dead in the Diocesan Centre on the morning of 3 September. He was probably killed around 9.30pm on 2 September. The priest's body was found by co-workers concerned when he failed to appear for mass the next day. Fr. Mathew had been stabbed at least ten times in the head and various other parts of the body.

Police said the priest may have known his murderer since the residence showed no signs of breaking and entering. The priest came from Palai, in Kerala. He joined the Salesians and made his profession as a lay brother. Some years later he asked to study for the priesthood and was ordained for the diocese of Tezpur of which he was appointed vicar general in February this year. For 30 years he had ministered in Assam. He had been headmaster of Don Bosco High School, rector of the minor Seminary and parish priest. Local church sources say the priest was a man at peace with all. He was loved by everyone and went out of his way to serve all irrespective of caste or race, social standing or religion.

**Rev Giuseppe Bessone**, fidei donum priest from the Italian diocese of Pinerolo stabbed to death during the night of 2 September 2005 in his lodgings at St Antonio parish at Blumenau (Brazil) where he was parish priest. The murderer, a 16 year old boy who had been taken in by the priest was arrested. He told the police that he attacked the priest because he wanted money. Rev Giuseppe was ordained on 25 June 1967. After ministering for a few years in the diocese of Pinerolo, in 1975 he was sent as fidei donum priest to Brazil and was assistant priest at the parish of Our Lady of Glory in Blumenau. Later he was parish priest at Our Lady of Fatima in Joinville then St Ines in Indasal and more recently St. Antonio in Blumenau. He had only just returned to Brazil after a short period of rest in Italy.

**Fr Angelo Redaelli**, 40, of the Lombardy province of Friars minor was killed by a mob on 12 September 2005, after accidentally killing a little child with his car who ran unexpectedly into the road as he drove through a village 30km from Owando in central north Congo Brazzaville. Fr. Angelo had been on mission in Congo for two years and was well accepted among the people. Lately he had worked mainly in the parish of Mekua north of Owando not far from the village where the sad episode took place. He worked mainly with street children organising basic healthcare and training catechists. He was killed while on his way to a local School for Catechists.

**Rev Ignatius Bara**, 48, killed while trying to prevent fighting between a community of Tribals and a group of Hindu extremists on 12 September 2005, in an area known for inter-ethnic tension and disputes in the diocese of Simdega in the north east Indian state of Jharkhand.

The priest, who was headmaster of Banabira Middle School at Simdega, tried to settle a public dispute. In Simdega a Tribal association Adivasi Adhikar Rashka Manch organised a meeting to discuss the next local elections and elect political representatives. The meeting was in from claiming their rights. Rev. Ignatius stepped in to defend the Tribals and calm the attackers and the crowds dispersed. However later in the day the priest was stabbed to death by two men on a motorcycle.

**Rev Luis Velasquez Romero, 51**, a Mexican priest from the diocese of Tijuana, found in a car at a shopping centre in the morning of 25 October 2005 shot dead with his hands tied. The priest who ministered in a parish in the Colinas district of Agua Caliente de Tijuana was a judge of the Diocesan Court and was much loved by the people. Tijuana a town on the border with the United States is known as a centre of urban violence and clashes between gangs of drug traffickers.

**Brother Suresh Barwa, 31, and Brother Marco Candelario Lasbuna, 22, murdered in Kingston, Jamaica, 27 October.** The Brothers were Missionaries of the Poor MOP, a congregation of diocesan right whose members work among the poor and excluded people in Jamaica, and also in India, Uganda and the Philippines. The Brothers were with other people in the kitchen of Corpus Christi MOP House in central Kingston. The Brothers were shot dead by the same bullet as they washed up after a party for one of the confreres. Brother Marco from the Philippines had been in Kingston for 5 months and Brother Suresh from India had been there for two years.

**Sr Margarita Vásquez Sandino, 87**, a Good Shepherd Sister, killed while caring for sick Sister at the community home on 11 November 2005 in Medellin, Colombia. She was attacked by a young man who had done some painting work for the Sisters and who probably intended to steal. Sr Margarita organised a regular Christmas campaign in aid of children mutilated by antipersonnel mines.

**Fr Philip Valayam, 46**, Salesian priest (SDB) killed in the early hours of December 25 as he was returning to his community at Don Bosco Youth Educational Services, Nairobi, Kenya, after celebrating midnight mass. Reportedly the priest was attacked by robbers and shot in a struggle to defend himself. Fr Valayam was well known and appreciated. Born in Koodaranhi-Calicut, India, he was ordained a priest in 1988. He joined the East Africa Inspectorate in 1995 and was sent as a missionary to Tanzania. In 2001 he was transferred to Nairobi in Kenya.

### ***Names, Origin, Institutes, Place and Date of death***

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Institute</b>	<b>Place and date of death</b>
1	Fr. Thomas Richard Heath	USA	Dominican OP	13 Jan – Kisumu, Kenya
2	Rev. Thomas Harsidiyono	Indonesia	Diocesan	14 January Purworejo- Java, Indonesia
3	Rev. Jan Hermanovsky	Slovakia	Diocesan	20 Jan- Brjansk-Moscow, Russia
4	Fr Manuel Delgado	Mexico	Friars Minor OFM	6 Feb- Bufalo, Mexico
5	Sr. Dorothy Stang	USA	Sisters of Notre Dame	12 Feb – Anapu, Brazil
6	Rev. Mathew Uzhuthal	India	Vicar General Patna	1 May – Patna, India
7	Fr René de Haes	Belgium	Jesuit SJ	7 May – Kinshasa D.RCongo
8	Rev. Robert De Leener	Belgium	Diocesan	4-5 May – Brussels, Belgium
9	Bishop Luigi Locati	Italy	Vicar Apostolic of Isiolo	14 July - Isiolo (Kenya)
10	Mgr. Luis Enrique Rojas	Colombia	Diocesan	21 July Barranquilla, Colombia
11	Rev. Paulo Henrique Machado	Brazil	Diocesan	25 July Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
12	Rev. Godwin Okwesili	Nigeria	Diocesan	2 Aug - Lagos. Nigeria
13	Rev. Jesus Adrian Sanchez	Colombia	Diocesan	18 Aug –Chaparral, Colombia
14	Rev. Vicente Rozo Bayona	Colombia	Diocesan	15 Aug -El Diviso, Colombia
15	Rev. Jesus Emilio Mora	Colombia	Diocesan	15 Aug -El Diviso, Colombia
16	Rev. Francois Djikulo	DR Congo	Diocesan	A. ug Mutendele D.R. Congo
17	Simon Kayimbi	DR Congo	Lay man	A. ug Mutendele D. R. Congo

18	Rev. Mathew Nellickal	India	Vicar General of Tezpur	2 Sept -Tezpur, India
19	Rev. Giuseppe Bessone	Italy	Fidei Donum	2 Sept -Blumenau, Brazil
20	Fr Angelo Redaelli	Italy	Friars Minor OFM	12 Sept-Owando, Congo
21	Rev. Ignazio Bara	Italy	Diocesan	12 Sept -Simdega, India
22	Rev. Luis Velasquez Romero	Mexico	Diocesan	25 Oct -Tijuana, Mexico
23	Br. Suresh Barwa	India	Missionaries of the Poor (MOP)	27 Oct -Kingston, Jamaica
24	Br. Marco Candelario Lasbuna	Philippines	Missionaries of the Poor (MOP)	27 Oct -Kingston, Jamaica
25	Sr. Margarita Vásquez Sandino	Colombia	Good Shepherd Sisters	11 Nov- Medellin, Colombia
26	Fr Philip Valayam	India	Salesian SDB	25 Dec -Nairobi, Kenya

#### **Killed on mission in 2005**

1 bishop  
20 priests  
2 Brothers  
2 Sisters  
1 layman

#### **Country of origin**

America: 10 (2 United States of America, 5 Colombia, 1 Brazil, 2 Mexico)  
Asia: 7 (1 Indonesia 1 Philippines, 5 India)  
Europe: 6 ( 3 Italy, 2 Belgium, 1 Slovakia)  
Africa: 3 (1 Nigeria, 2 D. R. Congo)

#### **Place of death**

America: 12 (2 Mexico, 3 Brazil, 5 Colombia, 2 Jamaica)  
Africa: 8 (3 Kenya, 3 R. D. Congo, 1 Congo Brazzaville. 1 Nigeria)  
Asia: 4 (3 India, 1 Indonesia)  
Europe: 2 (1 Russia, 1 Brussels).

(Agenzia Fides 30/12/2005)

#### ***Pastoral workers killed in the past 25 years***

**Vatican City (Fides Service)** - It emerges from information gathered by Fides News Service that in the decade 1980-1989 **115 missionaries died a violent death**. However these were only the reported cases and the number is certainly higher.

Between 1990-2000 as far as we know a total number of **604 missionaries were killed**. The number is considerably higher than in the previous decade, and the following factors must be taken into consideration: the genocide in Rwanda (1994) in which 248 members of church personnel were among those killed; news travels faster thanks to modern media; the names listed besides missionaries *ad gentes* members of Church personnel who died a violent death or sacrificed their lives rather than abandon the people entrusted to their care and described by Pope John Paul II as "martyrs of charity".

In the five years 2001-2005 **129 pastoral workers were killed**.

YEAR	total	bishop	priest	deacon	brother	sister	seminarian	ICL*	catechist	lay person	lay missionary
1990	17		10			7					
1991	19	1	14		1	3					
1992	21		6		2	13					

1993	21	1C+1	13			4	1	1			
1994	26		20		1	4	1				
1994G	248	3	103		47	65		30			
1995	33		18	1	3	9				2	
1996	48	3	19		8	13	1	2	1	1(ct)**	
1997	68	1	19		1	7	40				
1998	40	1	13		5	17	4				
1999	32		17			9	4		2		
2000	31		19			7	3	1			1
2001	33		25			5	1	1		1	
2002	25	1	18		1	2	2	1			
2003	29	1	20		1		3			2	2
2004	16		12			1				3	
2005	26	1	20		2	2				1	

G = figures refer only to genocide in Rwanda.

\* = Member of institute of consecrated life

\*\* = catechumen

C= Cardinal

(Agenzia Fides 30/12/2005)

**FOR MORE FIGURES COMMENTS AND INFORMATION ON PASTORAL WORKERS KILLED IN RECENT YEARS SEE:**

<http://www.evangelizatio.org/portale/martirologio/index.php>

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## **Pope says religious liberty under threat**

Reuters (04.12.2005) / HRWF Int. (15.12.2005) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Pope Benedict said on Sunday that religious freedom was not universally respected, even in some countries that officially recognised it as a human right.

"Religious freedom is far from being effectively guaranteed everywhere," the Pope told a large crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square to hear his weekly Angelus blessing.

"In some places it is denied for religious and ideological reasons. Other times, even if it is recognised on paper, it is hindered by political powers or else, in a more subtle fashion, by the predominant culture of agnosticism or relativism."

Benedict did not mention any specific countries on Sunday but his speech echoed previous warnings from the Roman Catholic Church that "Christianophobia" was spreading around the world.

The Pope's warning also echoed a speech he made shortly before he was elevated to the papacy in April, when he told fellow prelates that the Church had to reject "a dictatorship of relativism" that denied the existence of absolute truths.

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## **Helsinki Commissioners praise State Department Report and say religious freedom 'endangered'**

CSCE (09.11.2005) / HRWF Int. (10.11.2005) – Website: [http:// www.hrwf.org](http://www.hrwf.org) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net)  
– More work still remains to be done among the participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the area of religious freedom. That is the conclusion of U.S. Helsinki Commissioners in response to the State Department's 2005 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom.

"I am pleased that the State Department continues to maintain intense scrutiny of the problematic OSCE participating States," said Commission Chairman Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS). "The report makes clear that freedom of religion remains at the top of the list of endangered human rights, and I congratulate the State Department and Ambassador John Hanford for their work in bringing this to the public's attention."

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency that monitors progress in the implementation of the provisions of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce.

"The State Department report goes to the heart of the problem, and I congratulate Ambassador Hanford for his work. Belarus continues to violate religious liberties, and I am especially troubled that Turkmenistan was listed as having made 'significant improvements' in the promotion of religious freedom," said Commission Co-Chairman, Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ). "The reforms that were instituted by the Niyazov regime over the past year did not go far enough, and even the report itself states that serious violations of religious freedom continue."

The Annual Report on International Religious Freedom was mandated by Congress under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Under the Act, the President can designate certain states to be "Countries of Particular Concern" if he finds there are "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" occurring. "Particularly severe violations" means there are "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom" State Department and the Office of International Religious Freedom taking place.

"The State Department report is a useful tool for shining a spotlight on a grim picture. In fact, I think it even somewhat understates the problem," said Commission Ranking Member Rep. Ben Cardin (D-MD). "The fact that Uzbekistan was not listed as a 'Country of Particular Concern' is surprising. Uzbekistan has one of the worst records on religious freedom in the entire 55-nation OSCE area. It needs continued close scrutiny."

Among the OSCE participating States noted in the Annual report were Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia and Turkey. In Western Europe, Belgium, France and Germany were also highlighted.

"Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have clearly received more credit than the facts would warrant," added Brownback. "The Congress will not make excuses for states that are not living up to their most basic human rights commitments. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan should not conclude from this report that they are out of the woods."

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## Apostasy in Islam and death penalty

*Open letter of the International Religious Liberty Association (\*)*

Mrs Louise Arbour,  
High Commissioner for Human Rights  
Palais Wilson  
1291 Geneva

Dear High Commissioner,

As main United Nations representative in Geneva of the International Religious Liberty Association, I have the honor of bringing your kind attention to the opportunity to aid the Commission on Human Rights in condemning, through its resolution on religious intolerance, the most extreme form of intolerance represented by the death penalty for Moslems who leave Islam.

The international community is fully engaged in the fight against international terrorism caused by Islamic religious extremism. Islam is a religion of justice, of freedom and of peace, but it is the erroneous interpretations of Islam which lead the Islamic extremists to sow hate, violence, and death.

It is by applying an erroneous penal measure of Islamic law (sharia) that the Islamists massacre Moslems, considering them as "infidels" and "apostates" because they do not accept their totalitarian vision of Islam.

Clearly this penal measure of sharia, which is alive in some Islamic countries (Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, the Sudan, Yemen, and others) and which require the death penalty for the Moslem who leaves Islam, is a totally unacceptable manifestation of religion because it violates the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to life.

The freedom to change religion is an essential aspect of the freedom of religion or belief; it is explicitly proclaimed by article 18 of the Universal Declaration and thoroughly confirmed by General Observation No. 22 of the Committee of Human Rights, by the report (E/CN.4/1997/91) of the special *rapporteur* of the Commission on Human Rights and by all the resolutions on religious intolerance of the Commission on Human Rights beginning in 1999.

Everyone who wishes to change their religion clearly has that right. To change religion is to exercise a fundamental right clearly recognized by the international community. One totally cannot accept that human beings may be condemned to death for the sole reason of exercising a fundamental right.

The Commission on Human Rights should not restrain itself from condemning this punitive measure, above all because this rule is solely the fruit of human tradition and is certainly not an ordinance sanctioned by divine revelation. Neither the Koran, nor the practice of the prophet Mohammed can be invoked to justify this extreme form of religious intolerance.

There are many Moslem who affirm this and who fight with a view to eliminating from Islamic theology this archaic invention of the ulemas, considered today the greatest "tare" of sharia.

For brevity I will limit myself to citing three declarations: one from a mufti, one from a minister, and the third from a modern Islamic movement.

On the occasion of the seminar "Enriching the Universality of Human Rights: Islamic Perspectives on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," which was organized by the United Nations High

Commission for Human Rights and which was held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on November 9 and 10, 1998, Mr. Soheib Bencheikh, Mufti of Marseille declared, among other things:

“The great problem of Moslems today is that they have made sacred Islam and the theological work of their ancestors; they have taken for religion the text and the ancient interpretations of the text...

“In effect, the problem is that this “hardened-artery” theology which has come down to us, reveals an era where nations hardly met each other, or if they did, they were animated by a spirit of imperial rivalry which set them in opposition to each other. It is a theology that does not care anything about living together, nor the least idea of pluralism controlled by universal rules such as religious freedom applied and accorded to all confessions or none on the same basis of equality...

“We call to mind here themes which are in urgent need of revision in Moslem theology. They are not many, but their continuation as they are represents a dangerous menace for international and inter-religious harmony:

- Forbidding apostasy
- Forbidding the travel and stay of non-Moslems in certain parts of the Moslem world
- The law on non-Moslem minorities.”

On the subject of the ban on apostasy and more precisely the death penalty for the Moslem who leaves Islam, the Mufti of Marseille stated, “This sanction applied in the initial period of Islam is based on a “hadith” (statement attributed to the Prophet): “Whoever changes religion, behead him.” But the Mufti underlined the difficulty of knowing whether this hadith was really from the Prophet, the more so because it is in flagrant contradiction with a multitude of verses from the Koran. In his presentation the Mufti cited four verses of the Koran which clearly show that Islam cannot be a religion of force but a religion of freedom. Here are the four verses he cited:

“No compulsion in religion.”

“Is it for you to force them so they might become believers?”

Say: “The truth of your Lord: whoever wishes, believe, and whoever does not wish, do not believe.”

“To you your religion, and to me mine.”

After a long and clear argument on the weakness of the hadith in question, the Mufti of Marseille concluded thus: “So we easily refute this hadith and consequently this intolerance with regard to the punishment promoted by Islamic law against those who leave Islam.”

The second statement is that of Mr. Mohamed Charfi, former minister of Education and Science of Tunisia, contained in his book, “Islam et Liberte: le malentendu historique.” [Islam and Freedom: Historic Misunderstanding]” (Editions Albin Michel, 1998, Paris, pp.78-80).

“The most disastrous idea the ulemas hadt– heir most horrid invention, and which today remains the worst “tare” of the sharia– as to raise apostasy from Islam to a infringement penalized by the highest punishment, the death penalty.

“As surprising as this might appear, the ulemas created this obvious violation of freedom of conscience without any Koranic basis. ().. Not only does no verse foresee this infraction and this penalty nor does it even come close to any such suggestion, but further the Koranic text says exactly the contrary. We have already noted the verse which says, “No compulsion in matters of religion” (Koran, II, 256). Verse 29 of sura XVIII, “The Cave,” can also be added, through which God addresses himself to his Prophet in these terms: “The truth is that which comes from your Lord. Whoever wishes to, believe it, and whoever wishes to, deny it,” also verse 99 of sura X, “Yunus,” “If god had wished it, the whole universe would have embraced the true faith. Do you wish to compel men to be converted?” ()..

“Not finding a Koranic basis for the rule that they have prescribed, the ulemas have attached it to a hadith attributed to the Prophet saying: “Whoever changes religion, kill him.” A weak argument because this hadith is in the ‘ahad’ category, that is, reported by a single person, and so of doubtful

authority; and the doubt becomes greater when one realizes that the companion who reported this hadith is Ibn Abbas, who, at the time of the Prophet's death, was just a thirteen-year-old adolescent! This juridical foundation is even more feeble because it is contradicted by the conduct of the Prophet, for during his life there were declared apostasies, notably those of Kindi. When he learned of them, the Prophet blamed their four kings (Gamad, Mihwas, Misrah and Abdaa). This blame was even so a legitimate reaction on his part. But there never was a question of war or of punishment."

The third statement is that of the non-governmental organization "Sister in Islam," a group of professional Moslem women engaged in the promotion of human rights in the context of Islam.

This group has fought in Malaysia against the adoption of penal measures for apostasy from Islam.

"Many prominent ulama throughout the centuries have held the view that apostasy is not a hadd (singular for hudud) offence. This view is founded on the fact that the Qur'an is completely silent on the death penalty for apostasy.

In fact, freedom of religion is a fundamental tenet of Islam. In Surah al-Baqarah, 2:256, Allah explicitly states: "Let there be no compulsion in religion." This Medinan verse was revealed when some Companions asked the Prophet for permission to compel their relatives to profess Islam. It has been widely interpreted to mean that no one can be compelled to embrace Islam because religion depends on faith and will, and this would be meaningless if induced by force. Islam itself means submission to the will of God; and the willing submission of the self to faith and belief must be attained through conviction and reason, not through coercion and duress.

"Islam began by inviting and persuading people to embrace it on the merit of its rationality and truth. In Surah Yunus, 10:99, a verse revealed in Mecca at the advent of Islam, Allah says: "Had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Do you then force people to become believers?" This and verse 2:256, together with the *nor* of Shari'a which affirms freedom of religion, have led many Muslim countries today, including Malaysia, to include in its Constitution an article on freedom of religion as a fundamental right.

"In his book, "The Punishment for Apostasy in Islam," the former Chief Justice of Pakistan, SA Rahman, noted that even though the subject of apostasy occurred no less than 20 times in the Qur'an, the Holy Book remained silent on death as a punishment.

"Surah An-Nisa', 4:137, states that "those who believe, then disbelieve, then believe again, then disbelieve, and then increase in their disbelief— Allah will never forgive them nor guide them to the path." If indeed it was Allah's intention to impose the death penalty for apostasy, then such occasion of repeated apostasy could have provoked such a punishment. But neither the first instance of apostasy, nor repeated apostasy brought about capital punishment.

"Those who advocate the death penalty for apostasy based their reasoning on a hadith which proclaims, "*kill whoever changes his religion*". But this hadith is open to varying interpretations on several grounds.

"First, this hadith is considered a weak hadith with just a single isnad (this means there is only one chain of transmission or narration) and thus according to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence, it is not enough to validate the death penalty.

"Second, this hadith is also considered a general ('amm) hadith in that it is in need of specification (takhsis); for it would otherwise convey a meaning that is not within its purpose. The obvious reading of the hadith would, for example, make liable the death punishment on a Hindu or Christian who converts to Islam. This is obviously not the intention of the hadith. According to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence, when a text is interpreted once, it becomes open to further interpretation and specification. Therefore, many scholars interpret this hadith to apply only to cases of high treason (hirabah), which means declaring war against Islam, the Prophet, or God or the legitimate leadership of the ummah.

“Third, and most importantly, there is no evidence to show that Prophet Muhammad or his Companions ever compelled anyone to embrace Islam, nor did they sentence anyone to death solely for renunciation of the faith.

“Based on these three reasons and the Qur’anic principle of freedom of religion, prominent ulama from the seventh to the twentieth centuries have come out with the position that there can be no death penalty for apostasy.

“According to Professor Hashim Kamali in his award-winning book, “Freedom of Expression in Islam,” two leading jurists of the generation succeeding the Companions, Ibrahim al-Nakha’i and Sufyan al-Thawri, both held that the apostate should be re-invited to Islam, but should never be condemned to death.

“The renowned Hanafi jurist, Shams-al-Din al-Sarakhsi wrote that even though renunciation of faith is the greatest of offences, it is a matter between man and his Creator, and its punishment is postponed to the Day of Judgement. The Maliki jurist Abul Walid al-Baji and the renowned Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyyah have both held that apostasy is a sin which carries no hadd punishment.

“In modern times, the celebrated Sheikh of al-Azhar University, the later Mahmud Shaltut who was esteemed for his vast knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and Qur’anic interpretation, wrote that many ulama are in agreement that hudud cannot be established by a solitary hadith and that unbelief by itself does not call for the death penalty. The current Sheikh of al-Azhar, who was Egypt’s former Grand Mufti, Dr Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, also declared that apostasy is not a capital crime.”

Madam High Commissioner,

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, on the occasion of the seminar “Confronting Islamophobia” which was held in New York on 7 December 2004, clearly affirmed the necessity of combating Islamophobia, but he also declared, “Efforts to combat Islamophobia must also content with the question of terrorism and violence carried out in the name of Islam. (). All of us must condemn those who carry out such morally reprehensible acts, which no cause can justify. Muslims themselves, especially, should speak out, as so many did following the 11 September attacks on the United States, and show a commitment to isolate those who preach or practice violence and to make it clear that these are unacceptable distortions of Islam.”

So, even the Secretary General of the United Nations affirms that it is necessary to expose the distortions of Islam which are unacceptable and which lead to violence and terrorism.

The law of the death penalty for apostasy from Islam is one of these unacceptable distortions that the Islamic terrorists use. In Algeria, hundreds of thousands of Moslems have been massacred as “apostates,” because they would not share the extremist vision of Islam. In many countries, Moslems who have dared to promote moderate, liberal, and progressive interpretations of Islam have been suppressed by Islamists.

In all the countries with a Islamic majority, all Moslems who decide to change their religion are victims of hostility and sometimes of persecution and death.

Concerning the terrible situation of Moslems who change their religion, the Barnabas Fund presented you on the 28 July 2004 with a petition signed by 88,890 persons from 32 countries.

Madam High Commissioner,

On the basis of the considerations which I have presented here, I express the conviction that you will do all that is possible so that the Commission of Human Rights will address itself to this problem and adopt the necessary measure.

In my humble opinion, the Commission must condemn this law of the death penalty for apostasy from Islam through its resolution titled “Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance” in a clear manner,

but without any specific reference to Islam or to Moslems, in order to avoid the charge of Islamophobia and because this condemnation could also serve against possible extremist measures of other religions.

The Commission could add to the draft of point number 2 of its resolution on religious intolerance of last year (2004/36) the phrase: "notably the extreme form of intolerance, the death penalty for changing religion." So the draft of point number 2 of the resolution of this year would be: "Condemns all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, notably the extreme form of intolerance, the death penalty for changing religion."

It is not about taking a position against Moslems and so to carry out an act of Islamophobia, but on the contrary it is about fighting against Islamic terrorists and helping Moslems to liberate themselves from a distortion of Islam in which they are still sadly prisoners, and place them in a situation of respecting actively and fully the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in harmony with the teachings of the Koran.

Madam High Commissioner,

I sincerely thank you for your kind attention and for all that you will do.

Please accept, Madam High Commissioner, my very best wishes,

Gianfranco Rossi

Viganello-Lugano, 3 february 2005

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