

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

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Working Session 2

Tolerance and non-discrimination II – Review of the implementation of commitments on promotion of mutual respect and understanding

Social Hostility in Armenia, France, Georgia and Ukraine

Recommendations

Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l is deeply concerned about the increasing number of acts of vandalism and violence committed against members and buildings of new religious movements in countries of Western Europe, Central Europe and Eastern Europe whatever their political regime and recommends to the OSCE Participating States

- to combat any form of social hostility and any act of violence against any religious or belief community, not just Christians, Muslims or Jews;

- to organize human rights seminars with a wide range of religious institutions in order to promote inter-religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

An increasing number of non-state actors – religious, non religious and anti-religious – perpetrate acts of vandalism against places of worship and buildings, including arson, belonging not only to so-called historical religions but also against so-called new religious movements. Members of these religious minorities have also been victims of verbal insults and physical aggressions committed by people who were influenced by the hate speech and defamatory statements made by institutions or high-ranking personalities of some mainstream religions, anti-sect organizations as well as some state and private media outlets. This is the case in many Participating States of the OSCE. Some examples.

Armenia

On 9 September, the Armenian Apostolic Church Archimandrite Komitas Hovnanyan claimed at a press conference that there are more than 215 cults functioning in Armenia which are political organizations. He claimed that the “cults” receive annual funding of half a billion dollars and have the aim to destroy the State of Armenia. He addressed the government proposing them to develop a plan that will protect national interests, without which it will be impossible to unite the nation for the fight against destructive cults. This hate speech received a large mass media coverage and did not remain without consequences.

Two days later, on 11 September, a young man intruded the Evangelical Church of Yerevan with a knife in his hand with the intention to kill the pastor, Rev./Dr Levon Bardakjian.

On 13 September 13 at around 08:45, a Syrian-Armenian, Judy Mussah who is the secretary of Levon Bardakjian the Pastor of Evangelical Church of Yerevan, was attacked at Ulnetsi Street in Qanaqer-Zeytun district by three unknown aggressors asking twice if she was the pastor’s employee.

They forced her to sit with them in their car by pulling her hair and arms. Fortunately, she could hit one of those men with her handbag and managed to run away.

France

Since the beginning of the year, acts and threats against Muslims have increased in France by 35% compared to the same period in 2012.

In February, the mosque in Ozoir-la-Ferrière was vandalised with racist slogans and swastikas. French Interior Minister Manuel Valls said that his government would never tolerate speech or actions directed against Muslims in France. However, the Minister kept silent after a firebomb attack was directed against a Jehovah’s Witness meeting hall on the evening of 31st July in the city of Ajaccio in Southern Corsica. Residents heard three separate explosions and summoned fire fighters, who quickly extinguished the blaze.

France is the country of the European Union where Jehovah’s Witnesses are most targeted by verbal insults, physical aggressions and acts of vandalism, including arsons, against their places of worship.

Moldova

In 2011, UN Special Rapporteur of FORB made a fact-finding mission in Moldova and noted in the conclusions of his report: “Important sectors of society see Orthodox Christianity, in particular the Moldovan Orthodox Church, as constituting the backbone of national identity. Extremist groups go as far as to explicitly demand, often in an aggressive manner, that followers of other denominations – such as Protestants, Jews and especially Muslims – be marginalized. Although these extremist groups seem to account only for a small minority, they apparently are not met with much criticism from within the Church, thus leading to the perception that they somehow speak on behalf of the country's Orthodox believers in general.”

35. (...) The Special Rapporteur “received credible reports about manifestations of intolerance against members of minorities and even some incidents of intimidation or vandalism, especially in rural areas. Such incidents have also been reported in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.

37. Reportedly, even the burial of deceased members of religious minorities in rural areas is occasionally met with the resistance of certain Orthodox groups who want the local cemetery (owned by the municipality) to remain free of graves of other denominations, such as Baptists, Methodists or Pentecostals. As a result of such aggressive opposition, in some cases, funerals had to be postponed and the bereaved faced difficulties in burying their loved ones in a dignified way, which is obviously an appalling situation. In addition, according to information received from different interlocutors, incidents of vandalism against Protestant houses of worship have occasionally occurred, such as the breaking of windows or the tearing down of walls during construction. The Special Rapporteur could not find any examples of the Orthodox Church clearly condemning such acts of violence or hostility sometimes perpetrated in the name of Orthodox Christianity.

38. The best documented case of public manifestation of religious intolerance against a religious minority was the removal and the demolition of the Jewish Chanukah Menorah displayed in a public place in Chisinau, in December 2009.¹⁰ A mob of around 100 people led by an Orthodox priest removed the Menorah and subsequently dumped it upside-down on a nearby monument to Stefan cel Mare, a medieval Moldovan prince and saint in the Moldovan Orthodox tradition. While political authorities and the media expressed outrage at this public manifestation of religious intolerance, no condemnation, let alone apology, was publicly made by the Moldovan Orthodox Church to the Jewish community. This was a missed opportunity to emphasize that central public places belong to everyone on a non-discriminatory basis. The priest was eventually sentenced to paying a small fine.

Ukraine

Between 2010 and 2013, places of worship of Jehovah's Witnesses were increasingly victims of vandalism and arson.

In 2010 there were 5 reported incidents of vandalism and arson, 15 in 2011, 50 in 2012 and already 23 in the first five months of 2013. All these cases are detailed in their submission which was uploaded on the UN website:

http://www2.ohchr.org/English/bodies/hrc/docs/NGOs/EAJCWitnesses_Ukraine_HRC108.pdf

Numerous pictures of the damages illustrate their report.