

Report for the OSCE meeting, 1 October 2012

**Russian Non-governmental Organization for religious liberty
protection**

Secretary General Oleg Goncharov

Dear ladies and gentlemen! Let me thank you on behalf of the Russian Non-governmental Organization for religious liberty protection for the opportunity to speak in such a high forum.

Russian Non-governmental Organization for religious liberty protection (hereinafter the Organization) was established in 2009 on the base of the International Religious Liberty Association Eurasian office founded in 1992 to help religious and non-governmental organizations in solving the problems of religious liberty. The organization members are representatives of non-governmental and religious organizations, scientific associations. The Organization carries out the monitoring of religious situation in Russian Federation, organizes different events in order to involve government officials, community, scientific associations and religious organizations for discussing the urgent issues of religious liberty. As a result of the Organization events a collection of documents are published and spread to various state and non-governmental institutions. In cases of religious liberty violation the Organization sends applications and appeals to different authorities of all levels. The applications and appeals are posted on the Organization's website (<http://www.svobodasovesti.org>). Also the site contains the news about religious freedom, conference materials, photos and video. The Organization collaborates with the International Religious Liberty Association (www.irla.org).

We live in the complex world where the diversity of religions, nationalities and cultures is increasing. Existence of this diversity makes it difficult to achieve the consensus in our society. For solving the problems of religious liberty it is necessary to consolidate all the society groups. This is a difficult task requiring integrated actions to tackle.

In April of this year the Seventh World Congress for Religious Freedom of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) was held in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic; its participants were more than 900 delegates from 65 countries. The Congress participants pointed out two major poles of the problem in religious freedom: the imposition of religious views on secular society and the secular world attempts to impose its worldview and lifestyle on religious communities. It was mentioned that these problems are aggravated by the active state and governmental institution interference. There is an obvious insurmountable conflict between

the values of religious communities and secular culture. The solution for these problems of religious liberty is a task of the international community in the field of freedom of conscience.

Militant secularism tends to exclude any religion from society by putting pressure through the adoption of discriminating laws against religious organizations. "If intolerant ideological secularism attacks our religious values, we must stand up to their defense with confidence", - said Ted Wilson, the President of the World Seventh Day Adventist Church, at the Seventh World Congress for religious liberty in Punta Cana. Examples of militant secularism pressure to religious communities are: the prohibition on wearing of religious clothing and religious symbols, the imposition of abortion on medical religious-based organizations, the ban on creationism teaching in public schools, the imposition of teaching the Darwinian theory in religious schools or imposition the values of homosexual persons on religious organizations. For example, the Christian adoption agency is under threat of losing their legal recognition, if it refuses to consider the same-sex couples as potential parents. Such an attack of secularism on the religious traditions is justified by observance of human rights. But in this case, the rights of a secular person infringe the rights of believers. If human rights are universal, the rights and liberties of both believers and non believers must be respected.

Another danger is in the case when the state or other authority institutions gives preference a religious value system to other ones infringing the rights and freedoms of religious minorities. Thus, as a rule, a religious system supported by the government is imposed on the rest of community; those who do not agree are persecuted and discriminated. For example, it is going on today in the so-called "Arab Spring" countries, where the process of radicalization is in a progress. The International Conference "Religious freedom: the problem of discrimination and persecution of Christians" was held on 30 November - 1 December, 2011 in Moscow and was attended by the Christian, Islamic and Jewish Religious Communities representatives from Russia, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Italy, Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, USA, Pakistan, Poland, Ukraine and France, diplomats, scientists, non-governmental and government leaders. The delegates expressed their concern about the position of Christians in many parts of the world, especially in those countries where they are a minority. Special attention was paid on the position of Christians in Iraq, Egypt, and several other countries in the Middle East and in North Africa, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Northern Sudan, Indonesia, Eritrea, Indonesia, and India. There were the numerous examples at the conference: the destruction of Coptic Christian churches and killing the Coptic Christians in Egypt, the persecution

and murder of Christians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the escalation of inter-religious conflict in Indonesia and India.

Like many countries in the world, today Russia is a part of the world financial, economic and political system, and the processes occurring in the world cannot but have the influence on issues of religious freedom in the country.

In 2012, militant secularism has led a massive attack on the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. The performance of the punk band in the Christ the Savior Cathedral offended the religious feelings of millions of believers in Russia, sawing memorial orthodox crosses, drawing offensive graffiti on temples and shrines, insulting the clergy and violence against them are a part of the secular world large-scale attack on the religious institutions, defending their identity and religious traditions in Russia.

Today in Russia a massive debate started about what response to such attacks should be from the state and society. This is a difficult question. On the one hand you cannot condone with the acts of vandalism and sacrilege towards the religious sites of any religious organizations. Also it is necessary to define clearly the criteria for legal review of such actions in order not to violate the fundamental human rights of expression beliefs and to avoid the abuse of law against religious minorities.

Another problem reflecting the above-mentioned global processes is a problem of radicalization of Muslim communities in Russia. Murders of religious leaders protecting the position of traditional Islam in various regions of Russia are a very alarming indicator. The state cannot but respond to these problems and has to take certain preventive actions. Particularly a lot of measures to carry out the control in the sphere of religious education were worked out and have already been applied since the most radical beliefs penetrate into Russia through the graduates of foreign religious schools. However, we should make clear distinctions in this issue. Restriction of opportunity to study abroad and restriction in attracting some foreign teachers to Russian religious schools for other religious organizations not related to the radical religious movements can be a significant infringement of their religious freedom.

One more problem area of religious freedom in Russia is a violation of religious minorities' rights. In Russia, the religious minorities include the Protestant communities - Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists, Evangelicals, and the so-called new religious movements - the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church of Scientology, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc. Problems of religious minorities in Russia are associated with the formation and development of regional and municipal authority institutions for the

recent years. There is a shortage of specialists in the area of church-state relations at regional and local levels, the officials at the local level have not yet formed the state thinking – concern about the future of the country, realization of its integrity and multi-confessions. Often local officials are guided not by the national interest and the constitutional norms in relation to religious minorities but by their own biased understanding of confessional relations, religious involvement and short-term political interests.

For example, religious minorities in Russia are experiencing the problems with official registration and construction of religious buildings. Local authorities do not always meet the religious minorities' desire in the allocation of land for the construction of religious buildings or in a building permit, registration of buildings and premises which are already being used for religious purposes. Recently, there are situations when some unregistered religious buildings of the Protestant churches are taken down by the courts because of bureaucratic procrastinations.

There are many cases where the local officials complicate an opportunity of social ministry for religious minorities. Often proposals from representatives of religious minorities on social partnership are rejected by local officials because these proposals belong to the "non-traditional" religious organizations. And this is despite the fact that, for example, the Protestant religious organizations traditionally have an active social position and are willing to make a contribution to the solving of Russian social problems. At the same time the Russian government as represented by the President of the Russian Federation has repeatedly appealed to the members of all religious groups calling for active social service.

The aforementioned actions of the Russian local officials infringing the rights and freedoms of religious minorities discredit the aspiration to respect the rights and freedoms of the believers from the federal government, which relying on the Constitution of the Russian Federation adheres to the citizen rights and freedoms regardless of their religious beliefs.

Another problem of religious freedom to be solved in the near future is to elucidate the activities of religious associations by means of the Russian mass media. Often, regional mass media place the misrepresented information about the activities of religious minorities. There are cases when the ministers of traditional religious organizations insult religious minorities in the mass media with the connivance of the media leaders. However, there is a lack of objective information about the activities of religious organizations belonging to religious minorities in the federal TV channels. The representatives of religious minorities do not have a possibility to enter the federal and regional TV channels to convey the objective

information about their activities because of the financial reasons. The establishment of public television can help in the solution of this problem. The mass media should take certain responsibility for creating a tolerant attitude to the different religious confessions in Russia.

Russian authorities join the solving of above-mentioned religious freedom problems, getting involved the representatives of various religious groups. Thus, the Advisory Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations at the Seat of the President of the Russian Federation was established and constantly works. The Commission for Affairs of Religious Associations was established under the Russian government; it consists of the government officials, representatives of ministries and departments. At the meeting of the governmental Commission the representatives of religious associations are invited. The Committee for non-governmental and religious organizations works in the State Duma. A number of bills have been approved in recent years intended for providing assistance and supporting religious organizations in their activities. The Commissions for inter-religious and inter-ethnic relation harmonization are established under the regional administrations, which also include the representatives of various religious groups. At the regional administrations the councils and committees for cooperation with religious associations are established and work. It should be mentioned that not only the representatives of traditional religions take part in the above-mentioned events, but also many representatives of religious minorities: Pentecostals, Adventists, Baptists, and Evangelicals.

There are many examples of interfaith cooperation between various Russian religious organizations. Interreligious Council of Russia works and includes the representatives of the four religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. Christian Interfaith Committee of the CIS and Baltic countries includes the representatives of the three Christian denominations: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. The Advisory Board of the Protestant churches' heads in Russia unites the leaders of Protestant Russian communities. The federal and regional authorities interact with these structures.

In conclusion, I would like to mention again that the issues of religious liberty in Russia like in other countries around the world require the consolidation of all public institutions. It is necessary to balance the interests in the field of political, social and religious relations. We appeal to the representatives of the OSCE on the issue of the religious liberty to take into account the opinion and to involve representatives of all religious groups, regardless of their quantity and traditions in this country, to establish different structures for inter-religious and church-state dialogue.