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HDIM.NGO/45/07
25 September 2007
ORIGINAL: English

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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting Warsaw, 25 September 2007

Working Session 2:

Combating intolerance and discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding

The Case of the Federal Republic of Germany:

The government's continuing failure in taking a balanced view towards religious minorities

Recommendations:

1. The German government through its concerned ministries, such as the Ministry of Family Affairs and the Ministry of Interior, should formulate a new policy towards religious minorities; instead of perceiving them as “destructive cults” and “enemies of the nation”, they should be perceived as what they are: minorities of a certain faith and creed.
2. The German government should base its knowledge and judgement about religious minorities on first hand interaction with the groups in question and on expert opinions by scientists on comparative religion, not on opinions put forth by church related “sect experts” or biased anti-cult groups, such as FECRIS and its member associations.
3. The German government should implement the demands of the interparliamentary Enquete Commission on “So-called Sects and Psychogroups” of 1998, which specifically asks government agencies to avoid using the label “sects” when dealing with religious minorities.
4. The German government should restructure and rename the Department “So-called Sects and Psychogroups”, which is still part of the Ministry of Family Affairs. The department needs to change its basic approach from the current practice of defaming and ostracizing religious minorities into dealing with its subjects in a respectable, good willed and mutually beneficent manner.

The OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting provides an unique opportunity to NGOs to voice their opinions, face to face with firmly established governments, which are not always ready to listen to the voice of their people. Western countries in particular like to present themselves as exemplary democracies, where all its citizens enjoy equal rights and freedom. And while this is true for maybe the great majority of people, certain minorities are still struggling to be granted their rights and respectability granted by the constitution.

This is the case in terms of how religious minorities are still being treated by German government offices. Here are a few examples:

- The Ministry of Interior has the tendency to dwell on the perceived threat by Islamic fundamentalists, thereby putting all Muslims equally under general suspicion; instead of engaging in a meaningful dialogue with moderate Islamic groupings, the Ministry instead discusses the question, whether the army should shoot down a passenger plane with suspected terrorists on board or not.

- The Ministry of Family Affairs still employs a department, called “So-called Sects and Psychogroups”. The overriding purpose of the department is to defame and ostracize religious minorities, who are not part of the two mainline churches, the Catholic church and the Lutheran Protestant church. The department staunchly refuses to deal with the religious groups in question in a direct and straight forward manner, but instead relies almost entirely on information coming from church related “sect experts” anti-cult groups. Even the opinions of academicians in the field of comparative religion are not taken seriously by the department. As such the government disregards the findings and recommendations of an interparliamentary Enquete Commission on “So-called Sects and Psychogroups” which in its final report, published as early as 1998, states:

a) The state has to respect the decision and confession of each individual in matters of faith in accordance with the neutrality and tolerance requested in article 4 of the Basic Law. (p.148-149)

b) Group structure, activities and goals, which were subject to the investigation according to its original intention, are primarily and basically not different from religions, religious movements, ideological groups and other groups of society. (p.149)

c) Concerning the blurry concept of a “sect”, which is filled with misunderstanding, the Enquete Commission would prefer, if the word “sect” was not used at all during public discussions on religions and ideological communities and psycho groups. The word “sect” should especially be avoided in statements made by governmental organisations, be it in educational booklets, verdicts or laws. (p.154)

While other minorities are recognized as such by the German government and taken care of and engaged in meaningful dialogue, religious minorities are not. Dr. Aaron Rhodes in his keynote address during the opening plenary session just yesterday correctly pointed out: “...religious minority groups appear to be generally perceived as threats on grounds that are difficult to comprehend, while the loyalty of some mainstream religious communities is bought through protecting their traditionally privileged status, their market share of believers.”