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German murderer of pregnant Muslim woman gets life sentence

RIA Novosti (12.11.2009) / HRWF (13.11.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Russian-born German has been handed a life sentence for murdering a pregnant Muslim woman in a courtroom, a case that sparked outrage in the Muslim world.

On July 1, Alex Wiens inflicted at least 16 stab wounds to a 31-year-old Egyptian woman, Marwa el-Sherbini, who was to testify against him in a defamation case. El-Sherbini, who was three months pregnant with her second child, bled to death in the courtroom.

Wiens, 28, was given a life sentence, which is equivalent to 15 years under German law, without the possibility of early parole.

The case enraged Egypt and other Muslim countries with numerous protests held in the country's capital, Cairo, and El-Sherbini's home city, Alexandria. The Egyptian woman was dubbed the "veil martyr" by the Muslim press, and Islamic believers have already pronounced a death sentence against her murderer.

A week after the murder, German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered her condolences to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, but gave no public comments on the case.

The hearings were held amid tight security with up to 200 armed police guarding the courtroom. Wiens disguised his identity on the way to court.

A spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Hossam Zaki, welcomed the sentence, saying that it "serves justice" and was "a warning to those motivated by hate."

Egypt's ambassador to Germany, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, said he was "satisfied" with the verdict and that "justice was done," according to Deutsche Welle.

Last year in October, Wiens harassed the woman in a playground, calling her a "terrorist" and "Islamist" because she wore a headscarf. El-Sherbini filed a defamation suit against him, and the court sentenced Wiens to a 780-euro (\$1,170) fine.

Wiens appealed the ruling, but the judge opted for a harsher sentence of several months in prison. When the woman repeated her testimony in court, the man attacked her with a knife. He also stabbed the woman's husband several times, who had rushed to help her. The couple's three-year-old son was also in the courtroom during the attack.

German state to begin training imams next year

M&C (15.09.2009) / HRWF (16.09.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A German state is to begin training its own Muslim clergy next year, offering a course at the University of Osnabrueck, an official said Monday.

The course will be the first ever for German-language imams and will be similar to theology-degree courses for Catholic priests, Lutheran ministers and Jewish rabbis at public universities.

Uwe Schuenemann, interior minister of Lower Saxony state, said the locally trained men would replace Turkish prayer leaders who usually only served three-year assignments at mosques in Germany and did not integrate.

Lower Saxony is funding the courses because local training for imams is vital to the integration of Muslim immigrants into German life, according to Schuenemann.

The courses are set to begin about October 2010. Schuenemann said various mosque associations has shown interest in employing the imams. Talks would begin next month with Islamic groups on the project.

Academics from three German universities, Osnabrueck, Braunschweig and Goettingen, are drawing up the syllabus.

German university takes step toward integrating Islamic education

By Bernd Volkert

RFE/ RL (27.07.2009) / HRWF (28.07.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The northern German state of Lower Saxony announced recently that it was establishing the country's first academic department of Islamic theology. The department, to be based at the University of Osnabrueck, will provide a place for theological research and will offer training for future imams.

The move reflects fresh efforts across Germany to address concerns about Islam that threaten to overshadow decades-old achievements in integrating Muslims into German society.

Those fears have mounted since the events of 9/11 and their aftermath stirred anxiety among many Germans over a perceived rise in radical Islam.

A perception has persisted that some immigrant-based population groups have already developed "parallel societies" that are inaccessible to the German mainstream but particularly susceptible to outside influence -- in this case, international Islamist groups.

Resulting demands for stronger efforts to integrate Germany's Muslim communities have grown louder and more frequent. Nowhere have they been more acute than in the debate about whether and how to integrate the Islamic religion into the German educational system.

Osnabrueck's new department of Islamic theology looks like one step, then, on what could be a very long road.

'German-speaking Islam'?

Germany is home to about 4 million Muslims, or about one in 20 people. Many are immigrants who've been in the country for decades and have watched the debate over integration rage the entire time.

A teacher of Islamic religion at the Johann-Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt upon Main since 2006, Oemer Oezsoy, says the notion of opening German academia to Islamic theology is an idea whose time has come.

"I tend to understand 'integration' as the normalization of the situation of Muslims who arrive here in Germany," says Oezsoy, earned his degree in Islamic Sciences in Turkey. "The Muslims are already here, but as long as they're not engaging in theology here, as long as they have to depend on importing professors from abroad, this is a sign that they haven't really arrived -- their theology hasn't arrived here."

Juergen Heumann, a professor of protestant religion and pedagogy at the University of Oldenburg, welcomes the move to establish an academic base for Islamic theology in Germany.

He says he hopes a "German-speaking Islam" adapted to the country's constitutional norms might emerge.

"I think the integration of Islamic theology in German academia, especially of those Muslims who want to integrate in the cultural spheres of Western Europe or Germany, is very good," Heumann says. "It could also lead to a debate within Muslim societies and communities of how much they want to -- and have to -- integrate."

Heumann adds, with special emphasis, that "I believe this will promote integration, because the debate has to take place in public, and not somewhere behind closed doors."

Osnabrueck and four other universities in western Germany already offer courses for people seeking to teach Islam at German schools, but usually only as a supplement to other studies.

Question of representation

There is still no obligation to offer classes on Islam at German schools, however.

Islamic programs have been instituted in some German states but are voluntary and meant to test the success of such initiatives.

That approach differs sharply from the way Christianity is taught at German schools. German states are constitutionally required to offer classes in Protestantism and

Catholicism in public schools. The churches have the right to approve both the teachers and the curriculum.

But attempts to introduce Islam to the coursework in German schools face legal and procedural hurdles. First among them is the practical question of who speaks for the community. As with Christian faiths, German authorities need a central body with the legitimacy to negotiate on curricula and the appointment of professors and teachers.

But German Muslim groups have generally appeared averse to the idea of such a centralized organization.

The impasse has left attempts to introduce Islamic religion classes to German schools at a standstill for decades.

Call for pragmatic solutions

Oezsoy argues for greater pragmatism on the parts of both Muslims and German authorities to ensure that Islam is eventually taught alongside Christian religions in German schools.

"This has to be the aim, in the end -- only then will Muslims feel that they have equal rights and are being treated as equals," Oezsoy says. "So that's the right thing to do. But until we will reach that point, preliminary solutions can be found, like the nonconfessional and neutral teaching of the contents of Islam."

Heumann agrees, although the protestant professor says he has slightly different ideas about the perfect model for dealing with religion in education.

"I am promoting an even farther-reaching idea concerning religious classes: an integrative subject, where all pupils learn about all religions," Heumann says, conceding that such an option is still a long way off. "As an intermediate step, we are in urgent need of [classes in Islamic religion at German schools]. Once again, I don't think we in this society can afford for children and youth of Muslim faith to enter adulthood without critical information about their religion -- toward which they should keep a sympathetic attitude, nevertheless."

Young Muslim children in Germany will have to wait some time for any realistic chance that they all might attend classes in Islam in German schools.

Aside from the political and legal problems that still have to be overcome, several thousand teachers of Islamic religion have to be provided -- with no educational infrastructure to meet such demand.

Egypt mourns 'headscarf martyr'

BBC (06.07.2009) / HRWF (07.07.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The body of a Muslim woman, killed in a German courtroom by a man convicted of insulting her religion, has been taken back to her native Egypt for burial.

Marwa Sherbini, 31, was stabbed 18 times by Axel W, who is now under arrest in Dresden for suspected murder.

Husband Elwi Okaz is also in a critical condition in hospital, after being injured as he tried to save his wife.

Ms Sherbini had sued her killer after he called her a "terrorist" because of her headscarf.

The case has attracted much attention in Egypt and the Muslim world.

German prosecutors have said the 28-year-old attacker, identified only as Axel W, was driven by a deep hatred of foreigners and Muslims.

'Martyr'

Medics were unable to save Ms Sherbini who was three months pregnant with her second child. Her three-year-old son was with the family in court when she was killed.

Axel W and Ms Sherbini and family were in court for his appeal against a fine of 750 euros (\$1,050) for insulting her in 2008, apparently because she was wearing the Muslim headscarf or Hijab.

Newspapers in Egypt have expressed outrage at the case, asking how it was allowed to happen and dubbing Ms Sherbini "the martyr of the Hijab".

Senior Egyptian officials and German diplomatic staff attended the funeral in Alexandria along with hundreds of mourners.

Media reports say Mr Okaz was injured both by the attacker and when a policeman opened fire in the courtroom.

Jehovah's Witnesses recognized as public law associations in 7 federal Länder in less than a month

HRWF (02.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In April-May 2009, after 18 years of legal battle, the *Jehovah's Witnesses of Germany* were granted the highest status of public law association – the same as the German "historical" churches – in 7 federal *Länder* : Hessen (27 April), Niedersachsen and Hamburg (5 May), Schleswig-Holstein and Bavaria (8 May), Sachsen and Saarland (14 May)

Jehovah's Witnesses have 172 congregations in Hessen, 186 in Niedersachsen, 74 in Schleswig-Holstein and 156 in Sachsen.

The higher status of public law association was first obtained in the *Land* of Berlin 2006 after 12 years of legal fighting.

Although this status will allow them to ask for religious classes in public schools and to introduce the church tax system that is specific to Germany, the spokesperson of the movement, Werner Rudtke, said in a press release of the German religious movement that they would not claim the financial benefits of their recently acquired status. "Jehovah's Witnesses will go on financing themselves on a voluntary basis as they have always done in Germany and in the rest of the world, and religious education of their children will take place at home and in the congregations," he said.

Applications for the status of public law association have been introduced in all the *Länder* (federated entities) as religious affairs in the German Federal State are regulated at that level.

There are now over 200,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany. From 1933 to 1945, they were heavily persecuted by the Nazi regime (See the 405 page book "Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses During the Nazi Regime 1933-1945". (*))

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Hamburg recognizes Jehovah's Witnesses as a public law association

Human Rights Without Frontiers (22.05.2009) — On 5 May 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses managed to get the status of public law association in the Land of Hamburg after 18 years of legal fighting. This religious movement was the 23rd one to obtain it in this German Land. Although this status will allow them to ask for religious classes in public schools and to introduce the church tax system that is specific to Germany, the spokesperson of the movement, Werner Rudtke, said in a press release of the German religious movement that they would not claim the financial benefits of their recently acquired status. "Jehovah's Witnesses will go on financing themselves on a voluntary basis as they do in the rest of the world and religious education of their children will take place at home and in the congregations," he said.

The same status was obtained in the Land of Berlin 2006 after 12 years of legal fighting.

Applications for the status of public law association have been introduced in all the Länder (federated entities) as religious affairs in the German Federal State are regulated at that level.

Despite the fact that the German Constitutional Court recognized during the application proceedings for the public law status initiated in the Land of Berlin that Jehovah's Witnesses are law-abiding citizens, respect the fundamental principles of the Constitution and the legislation regulating the relations between state and religions, the Land of Rheinland-Pfalz has launched a wide-scale investigation on the movement that has no precedent in the history of the relations between the state and the churches in Germany. All ministries, authorities, courts, schools, kindergartens... are involved in this enquiry.

There are now over 200,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany. From 1933 to 1945, they were heavily persecuted by the Nazi regime (See the 405 page book "Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses During the Nazi Regime 1933-1945".

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Berlin rejects religious lessons

BBC (26.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (28.04.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A referendum in Germany has failed to give children a choice between classes in secular ethics or religion.

The outcome maintains the status quo of compulsory lessons in secular ethics and voluntary religious studies.

Supporters of the proposal argued that religious lessons would better instill values that could prevent German-born Muslims becoming radicalised.

The low turnout, less than 30%, meant the referendum was invalidated, but most votes were against the proposal.

Change 'divisive'

The referendum was organised by the city's religious communities, including Muslims.

Among those who backed the proposal was Chancellor Angela Merkel, who publicly endorsed the referendum.

(Berlin to vote on Religion lessons: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8016990.stm>)

Opponents said that any changes to the curriculum would be divisive.

Ethics classes have been compulsory in Berlin schools since 2006. But in most of the rest of Germany pupils have a choice between religion and ethics.

Germany's highest court rejected a challenge to the Berlin arrangement in 2007.

Berlin introduced ethics classes after the "honour" killing of a Muslim woman by her husband, a shocking incident in a city that is often seen as a multicultural success story.

Before the change, children in the city could choose to take voluntary religious education classes, but these were poorly attended.

Headscarf bans violate rights

State restrictions on religious dress for teachers target Muslim women

Human Rights Watch (26.02.2009) / HRWF Int. (02.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - German state bans on religious symbols and clothing for teachers and other civil servants discriminate against Muslim women who wear the headscarf, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 67-page report, "Discrimination in the Name of Neutrality: Headscarf Bans for Teachers and Civil Servants in Germany," is based on extensive research over an eight-month period. It analyzes the human rights implications of the bans and their effect on the lives of Muslim women teachers, including those who have been employed for many years. It says that the bans have caused some women to give up their careers or to leave Germany, where they have lived all their lives.

"These laws in Germany clearly target the headscarf, forcing women who wear it to choose between their jobs and their religious beliefs," said Haleh Chahrokh, researcher in the Europe and Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch. "They discriminate on the grounds of both gender and religion and violate these women's human rights."

Half of Germany's 16 states (Länder) - Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Bremen, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Saarland - have laws prohibiting public school teachers (and other civil servants in several states) from wearing the headscarf at work. The laws were all introduced in the last five years, following a 2003 Constitutional Court ruling that restrictions on religious dress are only permissible if explicitly laid down in law. The other eight German states have no such restrictions.

Some of the laws allow some exemptions for Christian and "Western" cultural traditions. None of the laws explicitly target the headscarf, but parliamentary debates and official explanatory documents prior to their introduction make clear that the headscarf is the focus. Every court case about the restrictions (the most recent ruling was on January 26, 2009, on a case in Baden-Württemberg) has concerned the headscarf issue.

"The claim that these restrictions don't discriminate doesn't stand up," said Chahrokh, "In practice, the only people affected by them are Muslim women who wear the headscarf."

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly criticized governments such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran when they force women to wear religious clothing. But laws such as those in German states, which exclude women who wear the headscarf from public employment, run afoul of the same international standards, undercutting women's autonomy, their right to privacy, self expression and religious freedom in a similar way.

The research for the report included interviews with Muslim women in Germany affected by the ban. It documents the profound effect of the bans on women's lives. The laws in all eight states effectively prohibit women who wear the headscarf from working as

teachers. Teachers wearing the headscarf have been told to remove it and have been subject to disciplinary action if they refused.

If a teacher refuses to remove her headscarf and subsequently is unsuccessful in court proceedings, she runs the risk of losing her civil servant status and of being removed from her teaching position. Muslim trainee teachers cannot find employment as public school teachers after successful completion of their education unless they remove their headscarves.

State officials justify the restrictions on the basis that teachers have a duty to ensure that schools remain neutral on questions of religion and ideology. But there is no evidence that the teachers' conduct violated that duty. Instead, the bans are based on the notion that merely wearing the headscarf places neutrality at risk.

"People should be judged on the basis of their conduct, not views imputed to them by virtue of a religious symbol they wear," said Chahrokh. "If there are concrete concerns about individuals, they should be addressed through ordinary disciplinary procedures, on a case-by-case basis."

Some of the teachers affected told Human Rights Watch that they had offered to wear alternatives to the headscarf, such as large hats, or to tie the scarves in atypical styles, but that these offers were rejected. As a result of the bans, some of the women left their home states or Germany altogether, while others felt compelled to remove their headscarf to keep their jobs, after years of studies and investment in developing their skills. They complained of feeling alienated and excluded, even though many have lived in Germany all their lives.

Proponents of restrictions on the headscarf frequently argue that bans protect women from oppression and empower them. The women interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they had all freely chosen to wear the headscarf. Even for women who are pressed to wear a headscarf, but are able to become teachers, blocking access to their profession will not protect them from oppression. Some affected women pointed out that, far from empowering them, the bans had led to deterioration in their social position. In the words of one woman: "As long as we were cleaning in schools, nobody had a problem with the headscarf."

Human Rights Watch calls on state governments to revise and repeal legislation on prohibition of religious dress and symbols and ensure that their legislation and procedures comply with Germany's international human rights obligations. The German states should guarantee in particular that regulations do not discriminate on grounds of gender or religion and that freedom of religion and expression are fully protected.
