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Rules don't allow religious signs: France on turban

Press Trust of India (06.12.2010) - HRWF (07.12.2010) - www.hrwf.net - Amid a demand by Sikh community to allow students to wear turbans in schools, France on Monday maintained that its rules prohibit display of religious signs in schools.

"In our country we have that rule which prohibits religious signs in schools. I don't know how public school system is coping with that for the moment," visiting French Cultural Minister Frederic Mitterrand told reporters here.

Asked if his government would be more sensitive towards the Sikh community, Mitterrand said he respected the community but does not "have an official answer" on the issue.

The French government has imposed a complete ban on wearing of turbans and any other religious headgear by students to schools.

The Minister, who is part of a French delegation accompanying French President Nicolas Sarkozy, said he was not aware if the leaders of both the countries discussed the issue during their talks.

"However, on a personal point of view, I am highly respectful of the Sikh religion. I don't forget that many of them (Sikhs) were by our side during the world war and they were soldiers of the allies. Of course we have a debt towards them," the French minister said.

Minister of State for External Affairs Preneet Kaur said the Prime Minister had taken up the issue at the highest level earlier and "we are continuing to take it up".

"As far as Sikhs are concerned, it (the turban) is not purely a religious symbol. It's an identification... We hope that at some stage they will say that it is something that is an identity problem and we would like it solved," she told reporters here.

Punjab Deputy Chief Minister and SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal had on December 4 written a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh requesting his intervention in getting the ban on wearing turbans by Sikhs in French schools lifted.

The European Court declares admissible an application by French Association of Jehovah's Witnesses concerning alleged interference with its freedom of religion

Registrar of the Court (29.09.2010) - HRWF (10.11.2010) - www.hrwf.net - Registrar of the Court no. 707 29.09.2010 - In a decision delivered by a Chamber of seven judges in the case of **Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah v. France** (application no.

8916/05), the European Court of Human Rights has unanimously declared the application partly admissible.

Principal facts

The applicant, Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah (Association of Jehovah's Witnesses), is a French association registered in 1947 with its headquarters in Boulogne-Billancourt (France). Its purpose is, in particular, "to contribute to the maintenance and the practice of the Jehovah's Witnesses' religion". The Jehovah's Witnesses claim to have more than 17 million adherents throughout the world, including more than 250,000 in France. They describe themselves as a Christian religion, basing their beliefs entirely on the Bible. The movement is funded by "offerings". In a 1995 parliamentary report entitled "Sects in France", the Jehovah's Witnesses were classified as a sect.

The applicant association alleges that a number of steps were taken to marginalise it in the light of the report. In particular, it was the subject of a tax audit. On the basis of the information gathered during the audit, the association was issued with a formal notice to declare the donations it had received from 1993 to 1996. It refused to do so and asked to be granted the tax exemption applicable for donations and bequests made to liturgical associations, unions of liturgical associations and authorised congregations (Article 795, point (10), of the General Tax Code). Since the applicant association failed to produce the declaration requested by the tax authorities, an automatic taxation procedure was instituted on the basis of the information gathered by the authorities during the audit. In May 1998 a supplementary tax demand for the equivalent of approximately 45 million euros (EUR) was served on it (approximately EUR 23 million as the principal sum and EUR 22 million in penalties and interest for late payment). The association noted that the tax demand affected the "offerings" of more than 250,000 people over a period of four years (an average of EUR 4 per person per month between 1993 and 1996).

In January 1999 the applicant association filed an official objection with the tax authorities. The objection was dismissed in September 1999, on the ground that to qualify for the tax exemption sought, the association had to be recognised by the appropriate authorities (Ministry of the Interior or prefecture) as a religious movement or as having an exclusively liturgical purpose, which was not the case. The applicant association brought proceedings in the Nanterre tribunal de grande instance against the tax-office director who had dismissed its objection. On 4 July 2000 the court found against the association, holding in particular that it had no grounds for claiming that it was eligible for the exemptions sought. On 28 February 2002 the Versailles Court of Appeal upheld that judgment. On 5 October 2004 the Court of Cassation dismissed an appeal on points of law by the applicant association. According to the latest information submitted by the French Government, the sum claimed from the Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah amounted to more than EUR 57.5 million.

Complaints, procedure and composition of the Court

Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah submitted that the tax proceedings against it infringed its freedom of religion and amounted to discrimination against it. It relied on Article 9 (freedom of religion), taken alone and in conjunction with Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the Convention.

The application was lodged with the European Court of Human Rights on 24 February 2005 and was declared partly inadmissible on 17 June 2008. The European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses was granted leave to submit observations.

The decision was given on 21 September 2010 by a Chamber of seven judges, composed as follows:

Peer Lorenzen (Denmark), President,

Jean-Paul Costa (France),

Karel Jungwiert (Czech Republic),

Mark Villiger (Liechtenstein),

Isabelle Berro-Lefèvre (Monaco),

Mirjana Lazarova Trajkovska ("the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"),

Ganna Yudkivska (Ukraine), Judges,

and also Claudia Westerdiek, Section Registrar.

Decision of the Court

Alleged religious discrimination

The applicant association had not argued in the Court of Cassation that it had suffered discrimination of this kind. It had therefore not exhausted the domestic remedies available to it in respect of this complaint. In accordance with Article 35 (admissibility criteria), the Court thus declared the complaint inadmissible, as the French Government had requested it to do.

Alleged infringement of the right to freedom of religion

The applicant association had unsuccessfully complained of a violation of this nature throughout the domestic proceedings. It submitted that by levying the tax in question, on the basis of an unforeseeable interpretation of the relevant provisions of tax law, the French State had interfered with the act of worship itself. In the association's view, the State had in fact been seeking to suppress its activities, but for no legitimate reason, since the association had not breached public order. The applicant association further argued, among other things, that the measure was disproportionate, that it infringed the right of associations to function peacefully, free from arbitrary State intervention, and that it was likely to undermine the autonomy of religious communities.

The Government contended that the offerings affected by the tax were not an integral part of worship or sacred items. Although the measure in question had not previously been applied at national level, it was nevertheless prescribed by law. Gifts from hand to hand were subject to tax under the same conditions as other donations, at identical rates to those applied to inheritances. Furthermore, the size of the amounts being claimed would not jeopardise the existence of the Jehovah's Witnesses, since the proceedings related solely to their French national association and not to regional or international associations, which would continue to operate in any event.

The European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses emphasised the impact which the present case could have in other European countries.

The Court considered, in the light of the parties' submissions, that the complaint concerning the alleged infringement of the right to freedom of religion raised complex issues of fact and law which could not be resolved at this stage in the examination of the application, but required examination on the merits. Since the complaint could accordingly not be declared manifestly ill-founded, the Court declared it admissible. It is not yet known when the Court will deliver its judgment on the merits.

The decision is available only in French.

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Steady increase of desecrating acts in French cemeteries

Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians (10.10.2010) - HRWF (18.10.2010) - www.hrwf.net - A report of the Gendarmerie Nationale underlines the fact that most desecrations since 2005 have been aimed at catholic cemeteries and hallowed places.

In striking indifference, France falls prey of desecration every other day. According to a report by the general directory of the Gendarmerie Nationale, no less than 184 tomb degradations were registered last year alone, which are only 19 cases less than in 2008. Since 2005, hallowed places are desecrated every other day. "Perpetrated crimes in cemeteries are mostly degradations of steles, ornaments and inscriptions", underlines the report, which stresses that 95% of listed desecrations are "in their majority directed at Christian tombs and churches". In the country and suburbs, around 122 communal cemeteries and 34 catholic worship centres and 18 war memorials were targeted in 2009. ... Desecrators usually act on the 30 of April, which is in the mean time the birthday of Hitler and of the foundation of the Church of Satan in the United States. Many acts are also observed on 31 October, on which day are Halloween and the Satanist new-year, but also on solstices and equinoxes. ...

"Generally, investigations do not allow to determine the real motivations of desecrators", declared the gendarmes. Indeed, the elements of proof that are gathered sometimes cause confusion (for example, swastikas along with Satanist graffiti).... If acts are attributed to "worshippers of the devil", they are qualified as a "minority". Analysts of the Criminal Affair Office (Bureau des Affaires Criminelles, BAC) observe that "among all acts that were registered in 2009, most are assumed to be related to Satanism (destruction of crosses or turning crosses upside down)."

Read more in Le Figaro (French): www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2010/09/22/01016-20100922ARTFIG00705-une-profanation-tous-les-deux-jours-en-france.php

France's constitutional watchdog endorses veil ban

Pierre-Antoine Souchard

AP (07.10.2010) - HRWF (07.10.2010) - www.hrwf.net - France's constitutional watchdog on Thursday endorsed a divisive law forbidding face-covering Islamic veils anywhere in public, but expressed concern about applying it in places of worship such as a mosque.

The decision of the Constitutional Council removes a key hurdle for the law, overwhelmingly approved in both houses of parliament last month, despite concerns from some Muslims that it will further stigmatize France's No. 2 religion.

The law, the first of its kind in western Europe, forbids veils such as the niqab or burqa anywhere in public and imposes a euro150 fine (\$210) on anyone wearing one - and a

euro30,000 (\$41,700) fine on anyone who forces a woman to wear one. Only some 2,000 women in France are estimated to wear such veils, but proponents see the law as a symbolic defense of French values such as women's rights and secularism.

While the bill was still in discussion stages earlier this year, the council warned that a blanket ban on all veils in the streets of France might not pass constitutional muster.

But after reviewing the law, the council said in a ruling Thursday that "the law forbidding concealing the face in public conforms to the Constitution."

It expressed one reservation: "Nevertheless, the ban on hiding the face in public should not ... restrict the exercise of religious freedom in places of worship open to the public." It did not directly say that the law couldn't be applied in mosques, but suggested that doing so could be constitutionally objectionable.

Lawmakers from left and right asked the council to rule on its constitutionality in an attempt to head off any legal challenges over arguments that it tramples on religious and other freedoms.

The bill was born after President Nicolas Sarkozy said last year that the burqa is "not welcome" in France. However, it is worded carefully, and the words "women," "Muslim" and "veil" are not even mentioned in any of its seven articles.

Opponents have said they could take the law to the European Court of Human Rights.

Muslim leaders concur that Islam does not require a woman to hide her face. However, they have voiced concerns that a law forbidding them to do so will stigmatize the French Muslim population, which at an estimated 5 million is the largest in western Europe.

Religious Minorities stigmatized as "mutating viruses" and "pathology of belief"

CAPLC - HRWF (07.10.2010) - www.hrwf.net - Created over ten years ago to fight against discrimination of religious or belief minorities in France, the Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience which I am representing wants to express its strongest disapproval concerning the statement made on 26 November 2009 by the French Secretary of State for Justice, Jean-Marie Bockel, about minorities of religion or belief derogatorily labelled as "sectarian".

According to him the growing quest of personal fulfilment and the emergence of unusual religious syncretism are significant of the sectarian phenomenon which "can be analyzed as pathology of belief on a background of individuation and deregulation of belief."

This public statement made in 2009 at the first national conference of the Inter-Ministerial Mission of Fight and Vigilance against Sectarian Deviances (MIVILUDES) is still posted on the official site of the Ministry of Justice to this day. For the French authorities, it is necessary to repress minorities of belief they consider as deviant and to attempt to regulate beliefs.

The Secretary of State added that "sectarian deviances" are "comparable to mutating viruses which spread in often insidious ways the poison of manipulation of human behaviours and spirits". We understand that viruses as such should be eliminated.

In spite of the French government's assertions to the OSCE and the United Nations that MIVILUDES does not take in consideration the content of beliefs, the fact is that the main

criterion retained by MIVILUDES in its 2008 Report to characterize mental manipulation is that "one or more people start to believe in certain ideas which differ from the ideas generally accepted by society".

But States have no business in assessing the legitimacy of beliefs. France committed by ratifying the Helsinki Accords and the European Convention on Human Rights to protect the right to freedom of belief and to remain neutral towards all creeds.

Although France has been pointed out by the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom in 2005 for keeping a black list of "sects", MIVILUDES has now compiled a repository of records on around 600 minority movements established from denunciations, accusations and tattling. Targeted faiths have no access to these records although they have been made available to Justice officials and public authorities.

Our association regularly receives testimonies on the 1995 black list of sects which is still in use to justify discriminatory measures against the targeted groups. This practice is now aggravated with the repository of records of MIVILUDES resulting for minority movements in denials to open bank accounts or to use conference halls, and discrimination of their members in their professional and family life.

Under the impulse of Mr Fenech, judges, prosecutors, police officers and social workers receive sessions of "education" on the minority groups he put on files. A special anti-sect task force has been created to intervene during police operations targeting minority movements to make sure that prosecutions are initiated.

Independence of Justice is not guaranteed in France as long as minorities of religion or conviction are concerned.

Additionally, Mr Fenech has launched a new way of intervention: he organizes unannounced visits by MIVILUDES in the communities, using his official title to force his way into their premises and impose the presence of the media to stigmatize them through an avalanche of slanderous accusations in the media.

A letter of protest sent by members of the Ecumenical Monastery Le Moulin des Vallées in Brittany summarizes the problem: "Mr Prefect, we solicit your help to understand how Mr. Fenech can legally introduce himself in a monastery, under the cover of a Ministerial investigation, in order to actually help journalists make an unauthorized report?"

We solicit the help of OSCE representatives to intervene with the French authorities and put an end to this policy of intolerance and harassment of minorities of religion or conviction.

ECHR to examine attempt by France to tax Christian faith

\$79 million tax demand on Jehovah's Witnesses threatens freedom of religion

JW Official Media (06.10.2010) - HRWF (14.10.2010) - www.hrwf.net - On September 21, 2010, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled unanimously that the complaint filed by Jehovah's Witnesses in France is admissible regarding alleged interference with their freedom of religion.

The government of France had imposed a retroactive 60-percent tax on all religious offerings donated to Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah (also referred to as the Christian Association of Jehovah's Witnesses of France) over a period of four years from 1993 to 1996. The government initially demanded a total payment of about 45 million

euros. The amount demanded is now more than 57 million euros (more than \$79,000,000 USD), which far exceeds the assets of the association.

The ECHR took note of the fact that throughout the court proceedings within France, Jehovah's Witnesses had consistently maintained that the contested tax was a direct attack on their religious freedom. In fact, it had been imposed on them within the context of the France government's 'fight' against so-called 'sects.' Jehovah's Witnesses contend that since the retroactive 60-percent tax applied to all donations received over a period of four years such a tax was impossible to pay since the donations had already been used for the ongoing operating expenses of the association. Thus, as argued by Jehovah's Witnesses, the 60-percent retroactive tax was simply a fiscal weapon used with the purpose of closing down the headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in France simply because they appeared on the government's "black list."

The Court must now proceed to examine the merits of the case to determine whether or not the taxation scheme of the French government interfered with the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses in France.

A copy of the Court's press release on the September 21, 2010, admissibility decision can be found on its web site at http://www.echr.coe.int/echr/Homepage_EN.

Confirmation of Jean-Pierre Brard's condemnation by the Court of Cassation

French Assemblyman repeatedly sentenced on the grounds of religious discrimination and anti-religious hate speech in the last 10 years

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (21.09.2010) – www.hrwf.net - The Court of Cassation has confirmed the judgment of the court of appeal which had sentenced assemblyman Jean-Pierre Brard in January last to a fine of 500 EUR, the payment of 2000 EUR for damages and 2000 more EUR for the procedure costs.

On 18 December 2008, the 14th Chamber of the Correctional Court of Bobigny sentenced the former mayor of Montreuil and Communist-related assemblyman Jean-Pierre Brard to a fine of 1500 EUR on the grounds of "refusal of rights by a civil servant on grounds of religion" (A discriminatory act prohibited by Article 432-7 of the Penal Code) and 5000 EUR to the victim as financial compensation for the damages he had caused to her. During the 20 November 2009 court proceedings, Prosecutor Remi Chaise had stated that the former mayor had "let himself be carried away in extending the scope of his personal convictions beyond legal limits" and had disallowed a fellow citizen of the exercise of religious freedom.

In the name of laïcité (secularism), Jean-Pierre Brard had forbidden a cross-wearing elected official, Patricia Vayssière (National Republican Movement), to speak in a budget hearing at the City Council meeting of 8 November 2006. Referring to the cross she was wearing around her neck, Mr Brard said, "I ask Ms. Vayssière to eliminate all forms of provocative religious exhibitionism, which is a violation of secularism", thereafter he refused to allow her to speak into the microphone despite vehement protests.

It is not the first time that Mr. Brard adopts an intolerant behavior under cover of defense of laïcité.

On 6 September 2001, the Court of Appeal of Paris stated that Mr. Brard had made a defamatory statement towards Steiner schools at the TV News of France 2 on 17 June 1999 with regard to the 1999 parliamentary report on sects and money which he was chairing but the court held that he had done it in good faith and was therefore not guilty of public defamation.

On 3 and 10 October 2004, Jasmeen Corporation had planned to organize a fashion parade for Muslim women in the "Espace Royal" in Montreuil. The former mayor had then adopted a municipal decree to prohibit this parade. On 1 July 2005, the administrative court of Cergy-Pontoise cancelled it and Mr. Brard was sentenced to pay 750 EUR to the corporation.

On 1 July 2006, Mr. Brard adopted another municipal decree to forbid a public evangelism meeting which was to be held on the same day by an evangelical organization settled in France for 60 years. A few days before, they had distributed leaflets announcing the meeting, preaching the Gospel and teaching children to respect the authorities.

In 2007, Mr. Brard, who had also been the vice-president of the study group for cults at the National Assembly, was once more sued by the Jehovah's Witnesses for calling them "absolute delinquents." Mr. Brard has even attempted to invoke parliamentary immunity to avoid being held to judicial standards of evidence and proof in reference to denigrating attacks on minority religious movements.

On 10 June 2009, Mr Brard was sentenced to a fine of 4000 EUR on the grounds of defamation against Jehovah's Witnesses.

Paris criticized over move to burqa ban

The Parliament.com (15.09.2010) / HRWF (15.09.2010) – website: www.hrwf.net - A leading non-governmental organisation has condemned this week's decision of the French senate to approve a law banning any veils that cover the face.

This includes the burqa, the full-body covering worn by some Muslim women.

The ban - upheld in a vote on Tuesday - makes France the first European country to nationally impose such a measure.

The law was passed by a vote of 246 to one, with about 100 abstentions coming essentially from left-leaning politicians.

The legislation was overwhelmingly approved by the lower house of parliament in July and will go into effect next spring.

According to opinion polls, the French people back the ban by a margin of more than four to one.

Some 82 per cent of people polled approved of a ban, while 17 per cent disapproved.

But Willy Fautré, of the Human Rights Without Frontiers think-tank, condemned the decision, saying, "One of the most pervasive underlying assumptions in the discourse on European Muslim integration is that Muslim religiosity is incompatible with and a threat to European values.

"In France, president Sarkozy held that wearing a full veil is incompatible with France's national values.

"As the full veil problem primarily concerns female migrants and women living or staying temporarily in France, asylum or visas should only be granted in the French logic to those who declare that they share those values and that they will respect them.

"A detailed questionnaire and a statement to be signed might even be submitted to the applicants."

He added, "If the French government ever manages to give some concrete and measurable content to the French republican values and to legislate, it will give strong arguments to such hardliners as Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who will be too happy to defend the Iranian republican values and impose a strict dress code to all women, including European female tourists."

"Is that what the supporters of the defence of national values and identity really want?" he asked.

See the 20-page report of HRWF on the burqa issue in the EU at <http://www.hrwf.net>

In France, an Evangelical Gypsy group shakes up the immigration debate

Robert Marquand

Christian Science Monitor (03.09.2010) / HRWF (10.09.2010) – website: www.hrwf.net - Even as French police deported hundreds of Gypsies to Romania in late August, a devout set of 26,000 Gypsy Evangelicals gathered in the heart of France for song, testimony, and scripture.

France's high-profile deportations have put one of Europe's oldest and most vulnerable groups in a rare spotlight. They may also be a miscalculation for President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Though debate in Europe about immigration is heating up, reaction in France to this policy has been withering: The Roman Catholic church, the Socialist Party, and even many in Sarkozy's center-right party are publicly angered at a policy that appears to single out an ethnic minority as undesirable, in order to score political points.

The stereotype of the Gypsy doesn't work here

The Gypsy Evangelicals in Chaumont, France counter any stereotype. They park some 6,000 white trailers in neat rows on the grassy runway of a World War I air base. It is a "city" brought from "the north, the south, the east, and the west," as signs replete with biblical language affirm, anchored by a tent that holds 6,000 and atop of which flutter the flags of France, Belgium, the US, the EU, Germany, and the UK.

The gathering joins these Evangelicals, whose numbers and faith have swelled to some 145,000 of the 425,000 Gypsies in France. Their tight organization, work and family ethic, regard for civil law, and stress on education has made them the "go-to" Gypsy group for French authorities, and a point of pride in a larger Gypsy community that has long suffered a stigma of criminality, drugs, and brawls. Beyond that, they help stabilize and keep a vanishing Gypsy identity intact, analysts say, as economic and legal pressures in post-industrial Europe are atomizing a nomadic life.

For example, they developed a model for negotiating lands to settle on. Many Gypsies, facing local bureaucracy, occupy land, then negotiate. But, "the Bible tells us to be wise and respect the authorities," says Aladin Blivet, treasurer of this "Life and Light" gathering. "We call ahead, we do paperwork, we send a delegation, we do the organizing."

Michel Lambert, a Gypsy organizer who runs a Gypsy postal service in a Paris suburb says, "the Protestants are a good example for us." He continues, "they have shown how things can work."

"These Gypsies created an organization with spokesmen.... They speak with [the] authorities, something new in France," says Marie Bidet, a former Interior Ministry employee whose doctoral thesis is on Gypsy-state relations. "They are serious, respectable; they vote, they don't want to burn cars, they want everyone living in peace. That's opposite from the traditional image ... it can be underlined that they succeed in their approach."

There's a difference between French Gypsies and Roma

French Gypsies are known here as "travelers," whereas Gypsies targeted for deportation come mainly from Romania and Bulgaria, and are known as "Roma." Gypsy leaders and others critical of the policy, say the crackdowns on Roma tend to amalgamate them into a single negative public image. Last year France quietly deported more than 7,000 Gypsies. But this summer's roundup of more than 8,000 were part of a get-tough-on-crime media campaign by the French government.

At the Chaumont gathering, deportation talk takes second fiddle to faith-talk. It is rare in secular France to hear open discussion of spiritual belief. But Gypsies are frank about why they gather: "Our faith unites us. What God has put in our heart – that's why we are here. We are here to share experiences," says Tino, a small tank of a man who wears a suit and open pink shirt as he tends a barbecue. His comments were repeated often.

Most believers speak in rich detail about being "touched" – how they went from a "bad" life of unbelief or woe into a new life they attribute to an active Holy Spirit. They quote the Bible avidly, and speak of healings or "cures" they have seen. A few "churches on wheels" in the 1960s have grown to some 240 fixed churches today. "I have four uncles, and each is pastor of our church for two months," said a volunteer. "We are on the road the rest of the time."

"Most Gypsies have a hard life, stealing, family problems. The Gospel has changed the mentality of many Gypsies," says Rene Zanellato, a prominent prayer leader here who speaks six languages and led Gypsy missions in Russia. "The idea of 26,000 Gypsies coming together in peace and order used to be a dream. There was fighting and drugs ... it was inconceivable to get together without problems."

Much of "Light and Life" centers on family. The "caravans" sport satellite TV and computers. Gypsy women still cook stews of hens or hedgehogs, a Gypsy delicacy. "But we also like McDonald's," says a smiling matron. Indeed, the evangelical caravans regularly accept among them nonbelievers, Gypsies who are ambiguous about their belief, but travel along because they feel safe and there are programs to educate not only kids, but adults, according to Ms. Bidet.

'We are more French than Sarkozy'

French Gypsy leaders in Chaumont are "disappointed" in Sarkozy's policy, implemented by interior minister Brice Hortefeux. In July, Mr. Sarkozy cracked down on some 128

foreign camps – home to 15,000 Gypsies from Romania and Bulgaria – after a riot spurred by the shooting of a young French Gypsy, not a foreign born Roma.

Prayer leaders insist Sarkozy knows the difference. He's has visited their meetings, they say, but is playing politics. "We are more French than Sarkozy," says one, pointing to the president's Hungarian heritage.

A new European Union report says the wholesale shutdowns of the makeshift camps violates EU law. French officials argued strenuously at EU Commission meetings in Brussels recently that France is not out of compliance with EU law, and is not targeting an ethnic minority. Roma have been part of a serious increase in crime in Paris and elsewhere in France, they say.

Darkening atmosphere about immigrants in Europe

Still, the deportations come amid a darkening atmosphere in Europe about immigrants and minorities in general. This week a former Slovak soldier and nationalist shot and killed seven Gypsies who lived in his apartment building in a rampage that shocked that nation. Current debates and politics extend to Muslims, Islam, Arabs, and Africans as well who are changing the complexion of traditional Europe.

As a matter of faith, Gypsies traditionally identify with the main religion in the country they inhabit. Those in Turkey are Muslims. In India they are Hindu; Russia, Orthodox; France, Catholic. But after the war, a young pastor from a fisherman's family in Breton, Clément Le Cossec, healed "through Christ" the ill mother of a Gypsy who came to his church and a young Gypsy whose case was described as incurable. By 1952, Le Cossec was pushed by Gypsies to train them. He separated from the French Assemblies of God when a Gypsy-focused mission was frowned on. "He explained that Gypsies had a special need, were poor but had faith, but this wasn't understood," his son, Paul Le Cossec, told the Monitor. "So he started his own mission."

Le Cossec went on the road, living with Gypsies, learning their customs, language, and "way of life." He felt, he said in a 1996 interview shortly before his death, that Gypsies had a "childlike" faith, and that a full and unmitigated concept of the biblical Christ would transcend the collective image many Gypsies held of themselves: "Not for a minute was it a question of lecturing them with morals, telling them they should not drink, lie, steal, or soothsay anymore. I knew that by receiving the message of Christ, everything would change in their lives," he said.

By the mid-1990s, some 6,000 Gypsy pastors were working in Europe – part of an overall spread of this form of evangelicalism to a world Gypsy community that claims 2 million in 44 countries. The French town of Gien is home to a Gypsy Bible college. Marc Bordigoni, a Provence University anthropologist and author of "The Gypsies," says Le Cossec's approach paradoxically enabled Gypsies to keep their identity through a faith, Christianity, that asserts what he calls a universal character.

"The strength of Gypsy Protestantism lies in the fact that Le Cossec initiated, because he had to, an organization from within the community. Their faith is led by their own people."

Disturbances to protestant groups: charges against Jean-Pierre Brard dismissed

By Marie Lefebvre-Billiez

Réforme (29.07.2010) / HRWF (06.09.2010) – website: www.hrwf.net - Jean-Pierre Brard, a member of the National Assembly and former mayor of Montreuil, was dismissed of charges filed by the Protestant Federation of France (PFF) for a series of disturbing visits during hours of prayer.

In February 2005 the Communist mayor of Montreuil, in Seine-Saint-Denis, burst into several Evangelical churches during prayers to verify the conformity of their premises with local security regulations. According to the pastors concerned, as with one of their guests, Jean-Marc Dupeux, then chaplain of national prisons, the visit greatly disturbed the worshipping activities.

The Protestant Federation of France, together with one of the visited sites of worship, the "Assemblée du Rocher", filed a complaint for hindrance to the freedom of religion which is guaranteed by the law of 1905. After compiling all the documents related to the case, the investigating judge dismissed it in March 2009. This dismissal was confirmed in late July by the investigation court of the appellate court of Paris. Jean-Pierre Brard sees it as a "victory of laïcité". At the time of the incidents however, Jean Baubérot, president of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, member of the Stasi Commission on "Laïcité", reminded the public that there had not been any official disruption of worship ceremonies "since Mac-Mahon". Jean Baubérot was shocked and affirmed "to suffer with these people who were disturbed during a fundamental act of their life: calm and peaceful worship."

Hindrance to freedom of religion

By Marie Lefebvre-Billiez

Réforme (17.02.2005) – On Thursday 17 February, all pastors of Montreuil (Paris), were to meet and discuss the events which recently occurred in four African and Haitian Evangelical communities in the city. Indeed, on the morning of Sunday, February 6, the mayor Jean-Pierre Brard (communist) visited several places of worship during the church service to verify compliance with safety standards of buildings. Two Haitian communities had to leave on the spot, without finishing their ceremonies. Two others, including the Evangelical Church du Rocher, a member of the Protestant Federation of France (PFF) were able to continue their activities.

These events caused the wrath of the PFF as well as specialists of secularism, such as Jean Bauberot. Is freedom of worship being threatened in France? Faced with the persecution of the faithful of many religions, around the world, and at a time when the French celebrate the centenary of the law separating church and state, guaranteeing freedom of worship, the question could make you smile. Yet the visits by Jean-Pierre Brard during worshipping as well as various daily problems that Evangelical churches of foreign origin allegedly experience raise concerns.

According to Jean-Pierre Brard, his visits on February 6 are "trivial matters": "As we do regularly, and as is the duty of a mayor as part of his/her administrative police powers, we check that places open to the public have filed a statement and meet the conditions relating to security."

Two places checked on Sunday February 6 "have not filed the proper declarations and authorizations required prior to opening to the public; another one had been checked by the safety committee but did not follow the requirements; and finally another [le Rocher] could not present the report of the safety committee, but the pastor told me he had it. As this Church has been present in Montreuil for several years, I had no reason to doubt the word of the pastor.

Thus, his visit to Le Rocher led to "a very polite conversation, outside the place of worship, of about ten minutes with the pastor and with the prison chaplain general of the Protestant Federation of France, the Rev. Jean-Marc Dupeux. This discussion took place during worship, when the pastor, Felicien Mas Miangu, began his sermon. Jean-Marc Dupeux believes that "without his presence, there would have been police intervention and evacuation of the hall," a charge rejected by Jean-Pierre Brard.

He acknowledged, however, that after passing through another community that morning, he returned accompanied by three plainclothes policemen, whose presence, "silent and passive" was necessary to ensure that those present agreed to disperse.

"Incidents" that Jean-Arnold de Clermont, president of the PFF, described as "extremely serious", saying that freedom of worship in France "is today threatened from time to time". "We are generally satisfied with the principles of the 1905 Act; however it is still necessary to apply them correctly and take into account newly present religions in France: Islam, Eastern religions and Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches. In this regard, Jean-Arnold de Clermont recalls Article 32 of the 1905 law "punishes by 15 days to one month in prison," anyone who prevents, delays or interrupts a religious service by disturbances or disorders in the premises used for that purpose".

"Grotesque" says Jean-Pierre Brard. "Threatening me with Article 32 of the 1905 law is a witch hunt reminiscent of the Inquisition! Mr. Clermont tries to victimize himself by pretending that there is a kind of religious persecution against the Protestants, in order to obtain a revision of the 1905 Act, to which I am adamantly opposed, " he says, before continuing: "If tomorrow there is a fire, it's me, and me alone who is responsible. "

However, Jean Bauberot, president of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, a member of the Stasi Commission on "Laïcité", said that there had been no official disruption during worshipping ceremonies "since Mac-Mahon." "The pretext given does not work: safety checks take place around a church service." Jean Bauberot said he was "shocked" and affirmed "to suffer with these people who were disturbed during a fundamental act of their life: calm and peaceful worship."

For him, this act is as serious as if the mayor had interrupted surgery to verify the cleanliness of the premises. "It is even more disturbing that this is not an isolated event. We find ourselves in the same situation as in the nineteenth century, when some denominations were recognized, and others not. There were submissive Protestants, and not submissive Protestants, who, even then, were the Evangelicals. "

Religion formatted

Jean Bauberot attributes this situation to fear towards "anything that is not stamped 'formatted religion'". If nothing is done to stop "this mechanism" it could lead to physical attacks. He sees here the influence of the anti-sect groups for which it is generally difficult to accept the principle of religious freedom.

Luc Saint Louis, pastor of the "Centre missionnaire évangélique", which was visited by Jean-Pierre Brard on Sunday, February 6, recognizes that there are some risks of sectarian deviation within the Evangelical communities when pastors are not trained. Therefore, according to him, "the Union des Eglises Haitiennes de France, with the help of the Evangelical Federation of France, has established a training school for pastors. We too are fighting against sects in our own way." He said that the curriculum of this school lasts three years and is currently training forty pastors.

As for the intervention of the mayor of Montreuil in his community, he said "it shocked and traumatized" the people present, of Haitian descent, reminding them of the bad methods of the government in Haiti. Jean-Pierre Brard says on his side: "I do not think

the faithful were aware of anything, I stayed at the back and then the pastor and I went to a small office."

Other Evangelical communities, affiliated or not to the PFF, in Montreuil and elsewhere in the region of Paris, mention other "daily cases of harassment". The acquisition of a place of worship often seems problematic. Thus, the Church "Arche de Paix" in Saint-Denis, which brings together 1000 followers in three separate religious services every Sunday, would like to buy an old building of France Telecom, authorized to open its doors to the public. The 770 000 EUR needed have already been gathered. But according to the pastor, Moke Pengel, the mayor blocked the purchase because the zoning regulation allows only industrial activities there. "We are in the suburbs, we speak about crime. Have the officials of the town hall come to see our social work with young people? Why can the state not help us? And Moke Pengele pointed at the suffering experienced because of the skin colour of the faithful..."

In Montreuil, one of the communities that had to leave the place of worship on Sunday February 6 also wants to buy the building in which it has already invested the equivalent of 500,000 francs. According to their pastor, Joseph Pierre, the town hall had allegedly given its tacit approval, some of the money had allegedly already been paid to the owner, but then the mayor used his pre-emptive right, making the purchase impossible. The owner allegedly kept the money to pay for future rent payments (the equivalent of three years). According to Jean-Pierre Brard, the town hall was not aware of this planned purchase.

The aftermath of this affair is still uncertain. With respect to the disruption of religious services by the mayor, the communities involved do not want to file a complaint, but the PFF is expecting an apology. For this it contacted the prefecture of the Seine-Saint-Denis department known as the "9-3". Jean-Arnold de Clermont has also met on Monday, February 14 Marie-George Buffet, national secretary of the French Communist Party (FCP), who allegedly promised her backing. Jean Bauberot expects that "the FCP distance itself from Jean-Pierre Brard and that all secular associations express their sadness and solidarity".

Credit Agricole bank sued by Jehovah's Witnesses for discrimination

Journal de l'Ile de la Reunion (30.08.2010) / HRWF (31.08.2010) - website: www.hrwf.net - JIR has revealed that ten associations of Jehovah's Witnesses have accused Credit Agricole of "discrimination" and have filed a complaint last April.

The different associations from the four corners of the island received a letter by registered mail informing them that their bank accounts would be closed within 60 days without any explanation.

The ten letters were sent simultaneously, the paper explained, while the associations have not, according to their lawyer Mr Philippe Goni of the Paris Bar, ever had any incidents related to the management of their bank accounts.

According to a person within the associations who heard some corridor rumors, the bank would have taken this decision against the associations because it considered them "cult like", explained the newspaper of the island.

The associations are now plaintiffs before the court and have equally seized the HALDE (High Authority for the Fight against Discrimination and for Equality).

Jehovah's Witnesses are recognized by the state as a religious organization and thus have a juridical and fiscal statute.

It is not known if the closing of the accounts was ordered from the national or local headquarters but this case is at the moment unique in France.

Karine Maillot

Two Muslim women thrown out of pool for wearing 'burkinis'

By Henry Samuel

Telegraph (22.07.2010) - Two Muslim women were ordered to leave a swimming pool in a French holiday village on the southwest coast for wearing body-covering "burkinis". The women had plunged into the pool at le Port Leucate wearing full body swimsuits, including a head-covering hijab veil, but were immediately told to get out of the water. The incident occurred less than two weeks after French MPs voted to ban body and face-covering garments, including the full Islamic veil, from public places including the street. Under the new law, due to come into force early next year, women face a fine or community service for hiding their faces in public and those forcing women to wear the full veil risk prison.

President Nicolas Sarkozy has described the garment as "not welcome" in the staunchly secular French republic.

In this case, the women at the Rives des Corbieres holiday camp were told to leave as they had breached the camp's rules allowing only conventional bikinis or one-piece swimsuits "for hygiene reasons".

Police received conflicting accounts of what happened next.

The pool's lifeguard filed a complaint saying the husband of one of the women threatened him with a bowling ball.

The husband filed a complaint claiming security personnel beat him up.

Marie-Paule Bardeche, a regional government official said: "This is above all an issue stemming from the holiday centre's internal regulations, in place for hygiene and sanitary reasons.

"Access to the swimming pool is reserved for ordinary swimsuit wearers. Even long shorts are forbidden." Last year a Muslim woman was banned from wearing a "burkini" at a public pool in a Paris suburb, also for hygiene reasons.

She later tried and failed to sue the council for discrimination (...)

France votes on the burqa

French lawmakers aren't alone in agitating for a ban. But there's more to Europe's anti-burqa sentiment than meets the eye

Sara Silvestri

The Guardian (13.07.2010) - HRWF (16.07.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Today members of the French parliament will finally cast their votes on the infamous law banning the voile intégral – the burqa, sitar or khimar – that has been making the headlines for the past year. In the meantime, the anti-burqa campaign has reached Belgium, Spain and Italy, and last week British MP Phillip Hollobone also expressed support for similar measures in this country.

Is all this an indication that feelings have changed across Europe, five years after 7/7? That Europeans have become more "Islamophobic"? Probably not. It's rather that things have become particularly tangled and Islam has become an easy card to play. As a recent editorial in *Le Monde Diplomatique* suggested, the French government is busy sorting out its finances and reforming pensions. The burqa debate is a convenient way to distract the public from unwelcome economic cuts.

It is also curious to note that, whereas Belgian MPs have been unanimous in demanding that their country should also ban the voile intégral for the past four years or so, they have been unable to agree on how to form a stable government. Ironically, the anti-burqa bill was approved by the lower chamber of the Belgian parliament on the same day as the latest in a series of government crises; as a consequence the law-making process stalled, and the bill never went to the senate for discussion. Although the Belgian situation came to our attention in Britain unexpectedly, tensions about the veil and Islam have been going on for almost a decade there, especially in the Francophone part of the country, which tends to be influenced by the stricter French approach to laïcité.

Although French MPs, left and right alike, have repeatedly insisted on their support for the law, the context to their decision is one of great controversy. Not only are French Muslims frustrated and furious but the Conseil d'État gave official advice, in May, not to pursue a total ban on the burqa in public spaces, and deemed it legally "unfounded". A week ago the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe also issued a unanimous resolution condemning a general law, although it stated that legal restrictions may be justified "for security purposes, or where the public or professional functions of individuals require their religious neutrality, or that their face can be seen". It also recognised that "no woman should be compelled to wear religious apparel by her community or family" and that European governments should educate Muslim women on their rights and freedoms.

These mixed feelings about how to respond to the full veil are symptomatic of a not-fully-explicable uneasiness with Islam and the growing religious plurality of Europe. Behind this is probably an inability to deal with bigger issues such as the consequences of globalisation, migration, the financial crisis, and a crisis of national identities. Places in which the veil was not an issue until recently have now been drawn into the debate. With my research team I recently completed fieldwork with Muslim women in Spain and Italy. We clearly detected fear and paranoia among our respondents. Until recently, when questioned about the situation of Islam in Italy I would answer that there were many problems, primarily to do with immigration law, but that no, the veil was definitely not an issue, if anything because Italians and Spaniards were used to seeing and interacting with nuns with their veils everywhere. Unfortunately the situation has now reversed. The "non-issue" of the veil has been imported and become one that polarises people.

Spanish local authorities recently put forward legislation (which has nevertheless attracted the support of national politicians including from the left) against veiling; but there had been concerns for some time. Most of our interviewees in Zaragoza mentioned cases of women forced to take off their headscarves in order to be able to accept jobs. In Turin, many well-educated and articulate Muslim women of Moroccan origin complained of how they would be treated with disrespect, as if they could not understand, read or

write, when they went to public offices for paperwork pertaining citizenship or their permission to stay. And a young Italian convert told us how frustrated she felt when, the moment she started wearing the hijab, she noted that people suddenly switched to the tu ("you" singular) form in conversation with her and insisted she could not possibly be Italian, whereas before she would be treated with the more formal lei ("you" plural) form.

Many Muslims have become very anxious about these developments and Middle Eastern governments and media outlets often emphasise the apparent anti-Islamic attitudes of Europe. I am not sure that the situation has deteriorated all that much, however. Muslims in Britain complain about the negative depiction of Islam in the public domain but Muslims in France wish their country was as free as the UK. Muslims in Italy are tired of being treated as alien immigrants, but at least there have been no draconian counter-terrorism measures or stop and search programmes such as those in the UK. The grass is always greener on the other side.

As we know, very few Muslim women wear the burqa or the niqab; many Muslims are in fact opposed to these covering practices; and certain security issues brought up in support of the burqa ban are not totally unfounded (Yassin Omar, the 21/7 bomber allegedly fled London dressed in a burqa; several suicide bombers in Iraq – including a female Belgian convert – were covered; Italy has had a law banning covering your face since Red Brigades and the "years of lead"). The problem with the laws currently being discussed across Europe has a lot to do with the tone used and with the contradictory approach adopted in our countries in matters pertaining to freedom and diversity.

Talking to Muslims in antagonistic and aggressive terms, in particular when they are citizens – as in Belgium, France or the UK – or would-be citizens – as in Spain or Italy – does not sound like an ideal way of promoting the notion of a cohesive society with shared values working for the common good. Most politicking talk in Europe revolves around integrating and educating Muslims. Maybe what we need most urgently is a bit of collective reflection on what we understand by diversity and the need to respect the individual.

French parliament approves ban on face veils

Angela Doland

AP (13.07.2010) - HRWF (15.07.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - France's lower house of parliament overwhelmingly approved a ban on burqa-like Islamic veils Tuesday, a move that is popular among French voters despite serious concerns from Muslim groups and human rights advocates.

There were 336 votes for the bill and just one against it at the National Assembly. Most members of the main opposition group, the Socialist Party, refused to participate in the vote - though they support a ban, they have differences with President Nicolas Sarkozy's conservatives over some aspects of it.

The ban on face-covering veils will go in September to the Senate, where it also is likely to pass. Its biggest hurdle will likely come after that, when France's constitutional watchdog scrutinizes it. Some legal scholars say there is a chance it could be deemed unconstitutional.

The main body representing French Muslims says face-covering veils are not required by Islam and not suitable in France, but it worries that the law will stigmatize Muslims in general.

France has Europe's largest Muslim population, estimated to be about 5 million of the country's 64 million people. While ordinary headscarves are common, only about 1,900 women in France are believed to wear face-covering veils. Champions of the bill say they oppress women.

With the proposed ban, the government also is seeking to insist that integration is the only path for immigrant minorities. France has had difficulty integrating generations of immigrants and their children, as witnessed by weeks of rioting by youths, many of them minorities, in troubled neighborhoods in 2005.

At the National Assembly, few dissenters have spoken out about civil liberties or fears of fanning anti-Islam sentiment.

The niqab and burqa are generally seen here as a gateway to extremism and an attack on women's rights and secularism, a central value of modern-day France.

The full veil "is the banner of a sectarian ideology" and threatens "human dignity," the head of French women's rights group Ni Putes Ni Soumises, Sihem Habchi, wrote in an essay in Tuesday's Liberation daily.

Critics say the proposed ban is a cynical ploy by conservative French President Nicolas Sarkozy's government to attract far-right voters.

French parliament debates ban on burqa-style veils

Angela Doland (AP, July 6, 2010)

AP (06.07.2010) - HRWF (08.07.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - France's hotly debated bill to ban burqa-style Islamic veils in public is going before parliament, with President Nicolas Sarkozy's government casting the measure as a way to promote equality between the sexes and protect oppressed women.

The bill being debated Tuesday is widely expected to become law, despite the concerns of many French Muslims, who fear it will stigmatize them. Many law scholars also argue it would violate the constitution.

While ordinary Muslim headscarves are common in France, face-covering veils are a rarity - the Interior Ministry says only 1,900 women in France wear them.

Yet the planned law would be a turning point for Islam in a country with a Muslim population of at least 5 million people, the largest in western Europe.

France is determined to protect the country's deeply rooted secular values, and the conservative government is encouraging a moderate, state-sanctioned Islam that respects the secular state. Last week Prime Minister Francois Fillon inaugurated a mosque in the Paris suburbs.

Discussion on face-covering veils starts later Tuesday at the National Assembly, or lower house, where lawmakers are expected to vote on the bill July 13. The bill goes to the Senate in September. Some leftist opposition lawmakers also support it.

Authorities in several European countries have been debating similar bans. Belgium's lower house has enacted a ban on the face-covering veil, though it must be ratified by the upper chamber.

In France, the bill says France's founding tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity are at stake.

The legislation would forbid face-covering Muslim veils such as the niqab or burqa in all public places in France, even in the street. It calls for euro150 (\$185) fines or citizenship classes for women who run afoul of the law, and in some cases both.

Part of the bill is aimed at husbands and fathers who impose such veils on female family members. Under the most current version of the text, anyone convicted of forcing a woman to wear such a veil risks a year of prison and a euro30,000 fine - with both those penalties doubled if the victim is a minor.

Amnesty International has urged French lawmakers to reject the bill, and a French anti-racism group, MRAP, which opposes such dress, has said a law would be "useless and dangerous." France's highest administrative body, the Council of State, warned in March that a total ban risks being found unconstitutional.

France banned common Muslim headscarves and other obvious religious symbols from classrooms in 2004.

The director of the weekly magazine "Le Point" sentenced for defaming Jehovah's Witnesses

HRWF (06.07.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - On 24 June 2010, the Court of Appeals of Versailles sentenced Franz-Olivier Giesbert, director of the well-known weekly magazine "Le Point", to a fine of 1500 EUR and twice 2000 EUR on the grounds of defamation towards the "Christian Federation of Jehovah's Witnesses of France" both as financial compensation for damages and for the costs of the judicial proceedings.

On 24 February 2008, "Le Point" published an interview of Jacques Myard, member of the National Assembly and mayor of Maisons Laffitte, who was quoted as saying: "We must take into consideration the sectarian deviations which infringe the law. The criteria are known: locking in of children, failure to help people in danger, improper solicitation of an inheritance. In this regard, Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses are clearly guilty of sectarian deviations. Jehovah's Witnesses lock in children; Scientology harasses people who want to leave the movement...these reasons are sufficient to suspect them of being cults."

On 24 November 2009, the Correctional Court of Nanterre sentenced both Jacques Myard and Franz-Olivier Giesbert to a fine of 2000 EUR and 500 EUR as damages to Jehovah's Witnesses. On appeal, Myard said he had been interviewed on his mobile telephone and had expressed his ideas in good faith about what he considered psychological confinement and not physical confinement as the magazine had interpreted it. Moreover, he was never asked to check the controversial text of his interview.

The Ministry of Justice to revise its position about Jehovah's Witnesses chaplains in prison

HRWF (06.07.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - On 21 June 2010, the Administrative Court of Paris issued five decisions supporting the repeated claims of Jehovah's Witnesses to have their own chaplains in prison. The court decisions ask the penitentiary services to reexamine their request.

In 2008, Alfred B., a JW religious minister, applied for the position of prison chaplain but the interregional director of the penitentiary services failed to answer his request. The administrative court now enjoins him to reexamine his demand within 3 months, otherwise, he will be fined 100 EUR per day of delay.

In another case, a detainee had asked to receive the visit of a JW chaplain. The court considered that he had been deprived of his right to practice his religion in prison and sentenced the state to pay him 3000 EUR in damages. The ministry of justice has decided to go on appeal, considering that "there is no need for Jehovah's Witnesses to have a specific chaplain" and that such spiritual assistance could take place in the visiting room during the normal visiting times.

In February 2010, HALDE (High Authority Fighting Discrimination) estimated that denying a chaplain to Jehovah's Witnesses was a case of discrimination based on religion. According to the French criminal code, "every detainee has the right to fulfill the needs of his religious, moral or spiritual life in prison". In order to substantiate their refusal, the penitentiary authorities refer to numerous circular letters dealing with the recognition and remuneration of chaplains. Some entrench themselves behind a "limited list of authorized religions" defined by the central office for religions at the ministry of the interior and on which Jehovah's Witnesses are not mentioned. Circular letters in 1994 fix at 200 the number of prisoners belonging to the same religion as a criterion to appoint an auxiliary chaplain (volunteer) in big prisons where there is already a chaplain and at 150 in smaller penitentiary institutions. However, the European jurisprudence has weakened this position. Article 9 of the European Convention provides that public powers must respect all religious convictions, including those of Jehovah's Witnesses (See European Court decision Kokkinakis v. Greece on 25 May 1993). A public authority can only deny a prisoner the right to be visited by a chaplain of his own religion if it is necessary, legitimate and proportionate. In this case, the number of believers is a non-criterion, according to HALDE.

Paris police ban pork street party in Muslim area

Pierre-Yves Roger

AP (15.06.2010) - HRWF (17.06.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - French police have banned a street party whose organizers planned to serve alcoholic cocktails and pork sausages in a heavily Muslim neighborhood of Paris, authorities said in a statement Tuesday.

Police said the party, called "Sausage and Booze," could have been viewed as a provocation in the Goutte-d'Or neighborhood of northern Paris, where many Muslims pray on the streets because there are not enough mosques. Alcohol and pork are forbidden by Islam and the party had been slated for just after Friday's main Muslim weekly prayers.

Organizers said they were holding the party to protest Islam's encroachment on traditional French values in the neighborhood. Muslim groups had announced a counterparty serving halal, or religiously approved, food.

Police banned both events

"Because of the organization, location, day and timing chosen, as well as the counterparty plans, this event ... creates grave risks of public trouble," the police statement said. Police also said they met at length with organizers on Tuesday before announcing the ban.

French rights group SOS Racisme praised the ban on the party, which they called it a "flagrant call for hatred."

The woman who organized the party on Facebook and gives her name as Sylvie Francois denies any ties to the extreme right. She told the free daily Metro newspaper on Tuesday that she had launched the party as a way to "express exasperation."

She complained that the "Islamization" of her working-class neighborhood was "more and more ostentatious," and complained that Muslims now block several streets during Friday prayers.

"It offends my concept of the republic's secularism, I feel increasingly excluded in the neighborhood," Francois said.

The Paris mayor said the party had been taken over by extreme-right groups seeking confrontation with Muslims.

The mayor's office noted that the Algerian team plays England at the World Cup Friday, which could create conditions for more violence at the Paris party because many French Muslims are of Algerian descent, and many youths take to the streets during Algerian soccer matches.

"Everything seems planned to create trouble, scandal or even violence," Mayor Bertrand Delanoë said in a statement.

France has Western Europe's largest Muslim population. Several Facebook groups sprouted late Tuesday to announce they planned "Sausage and Booze" cocktails in other French towns and in Belgium after the Paris protest was banned.

Urban Affairs Minister Fadela Amara - who is of Algerian descent - said that she doesn't ordinarily believe in banning street parties. "I'm for people gathering, drinking and having a laugh," she told RTL radio. But she said it was right to ban this party because it would have been "extremely dangerous" given its ties to the far right, "and all that implies about the hatred behind it."

Freedom of assembly denied to the Raelians

HRWF (18/05/2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - On Friday 21 May, the mayor of the Avesnes, Alain Poyart, prohibited a conference on UFOs to be organized by the Raelians at the townhall when he was told they were on the parliamentary list of "sects". In 2009, the regional paper "L'Observateur de l'Avesnois" had published a number of testimonies of witnesses of UFOs.

Once more, the list of of sects is used in total illegality and impunity to deny freedom of assembly.

French parliament condemns full Islamic face veil

BBC (12.05.2010) - HRWF (18/05/2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - The French parliament has voted to condemn the full Islamic face veil, calling it "an affront to the nation's values of dignity and equality".

The non-binding resolution was passed unanimously, although 30 communist deputies walked out in protest.

Legislation to ban the full-face veil in public is expected later this year.

The proposal has provoked intense debate about religious freedom in a secular society, and the position of Muslims in France.

The resolution puts France on course to become the second European country after Belgium to declare the wearing of such veils illegal in public places.

Oppressive to women?

President Nicolas Sarkozy ordered parliament to debate a ban last month. He has described veils that conceal the face as oppressive to women and not welcome in France.

But opponents say a ban could alienate and stigmatise France's large Muslim minority, and the country's highest administrative body - the State Council - has suggested it might be unconstitutional.

The council said in March that any such law could be a violation of the French constitution as well as the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights.

But it added that rules requiring faces to be uncovered in public places could be justified for security reasons and to combat fraud.

In January, a French parliamentary committee recommended a partial ban on such garments that could be imposed in hospitals, schools, government offices and on public transport.

There are several types of headscarves and veils for Muslim women - those that cover the face being the niqab and the burka. In France, the niqab is the version most commonly worn.

The interior ministry says only 1,900 women wear full-face veils in France, out of a Muslim population of more than five million.

French lawmakers focus on husbands of Muslim women who wear veil

Adam Sage

The Times (01.05.2010) - HRWF (04/05/2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Any man who forces his wife to wear a full Muslim veil will be given a sentence of up to one year in jail and a maximum fine of €15,000 (£13,000), under French legislation expected to come into force in the summer.

The Bill also envisages a €150 fine for women who choose to wear the face veil in public. "No one may wear in public places clothes that are aimed at hiding the face," says the text leaked to Le Figaro, the French daily. The report added that legislators had included the possibility for women to avoid a fine by attending a citizenship course.

President Sarkozy of France stalled for ten months before approving a ban, as debate raged among his ministers over the necessity to legislate over a garment worn by fewer than 2,000 women in France. The State Council, an advisory body on legal issues, warned that the ban could be ruled to be in breach of the French constitutional right to freedom.

Jurists have also said that the move could be struck down by the European Court of Human Rights as an attack on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Mr Sarkozy says, however, that he is prepared to run the risk in the name of what supporters say is a struggle between human dignity and religious intolerance.

The President's critics say the real motivation for the Bill is his desire to win back voters from the ultra-right National Front.

The Belgian parliament became the first in Europe to endorse a ban on the head-to-toe burka and the niqab face veil on Thursday. The law, which envisages smaller fines of up to €25 for women wearing veils, is also expected to come into force this summer.

Some profit from wives despite French polygamy ban

Elaine Ganley

AP (01.05.2010) - HRWF (04/05/2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - The burqa, or face-covering veil, is getting all the attention in the debate over Muslim immigrants in France. But another controversial tradition among some immigrants is less noticed and far more widespread: Polygamy.

The issue resurfaced last week after a woman received a traffic citation in the western city of Nantes for driving with a veil over her face. Officials then accused her husband of having at least three other wives, and said he may be profiting from them financially while the state pays the bill.

Polygamy is one of several issues, like forced marriage or genital mutilation, that France and other European nations face, as immigrants arrive with customs that conflict with the law of the land. But experts say polygamy in France can also be linked to fraud, where husbands hijack a generous social welfare system to line their pockets with state funds from each of their wives.

"They practice polygamy just for that," said Jean-Marie Ballo, founder of an association that helps women escape from polygamous situations, Nouveaux Pas, or New Steps. "I'd go so far as to say that polygamists here (in France) are breeding for cash."

Ballo said he's even aware of cases where a legal wife's papers are used for hospital care for a second - a health risk as medical records intermingle.

It's hard to count how many polygamous families live in France because of the secrecy of the practice. But the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights in a 2006 report made a minimal estimate of 16,000 to 20,000 polygamous families in France, or some 180,000 people, including children. That compares to fewer than 2,000 women who are thought to wear burqa-style garments.

For decades, polygamy was legal in France for immigrants arriving from any of about 50 countries where it is legally recognized. Historically, taking numerous wives was either a social and economic necessity in poor countries with high death rates, or a sign of external wealth or male domination.

France banned polygamy in 1993. At the same time, it launched a process of "decohabitation" to help multiple wives trapped in small apartments with numerous children to move into their own homes. Experts say that system has been largely successful.

But abuses thrive. Especially vulnerable are women who arrived in France after 1993 - often here illegally and, therefore, with limited means to extricate themselves.

The state "minimally resolved the problem of polygamy but didn't provide the means to resolve it completely," said Catherine Quantier of the association Rajfire, which helps women in distress negotiate French red tape to gain legal status or state-funded housing. It's hard to interview women who live in polygamy because associations say the current sensitive climate has aggravated their daily fears of being caught or their sense of shame. But the human rights report recounts a story that shows how multiple wives and children can lose their own identities.

A woman from Mali, where multiple wives are legal, arrived in France in 1981 at age 14 as wife No. 2 - using the documents of wife No. 1, whom the husband sent back home.

The woman, identified as S.Y., had three children under her new identity but bolted when wife No. 3 arrived. She could not reconstitute her real identity for herself and her children.

When the report was written, S.Y. had lost her job, was living in a room provided by an association and could not access her bank account. Officially, she no longer existed, the report said.

Chantal Brunel, a lawmaker from the governing conservative UMP party, called last weekend for a region-by-region examination of the family subsidies program to stop corruption by men profiting from state aid to illegal wives. Brunel, who has written a book about violence against women, said she has polygamous families in her district east of Paris "and since 2004-2005 I have asked that the state stop closing its eyes."

"To have children cannot become like having a salary," she said.

Other countries in Europe also struggle with polygamy. Fines and prison sentences, in some cases up to seven years, are the norm for those convicted of polygamy in Europe. An exception is Norway. In France, marriage to more than one person is punishable by a year in prison and a euro45,000 (almost \$60,000) fine.

However, the law is being challenged in Ireland. And in Cyprus, with a 5-year prison term, the court can take into account arguments that the accused's culture or religion permits polygamy.

Carina Hagg, a Swedish lawmaker for the opposition Social Democrats, warns against mixing notions of polygamy and culture.

"You have to be careful not to make it an issue about ethnicity," she said. "Fundamentally it's about women's rights."

Those who deal with polygamy also note that in Europe, numerous children can be found living in small apartments with two sets of fighting mothers. They take turns using the kitchen, the bathroom and sharing sleeping space.

"Polygamy is not at all adapted to the context of life in the West," said Ballo. "There are conflicts, catastrophic hygienic conditions. Kids do poorly in school as there is nowhere to study."

Ballo, whose Malian father and grandfather were both polygamous, said he helped "decohabit" 12 households with 26 wives and 145 children in Les Ulis, south of Paris, where his group is based.

The human rights commission report notes that "there is, of course, no question of generalizing and considering all polygamous men as executioners."

Ballo is more cynical: "There are always people in life who defend hell."

MIVILUDES' report not reliable

"Sects" not shown to exert influence over young people, according to response to parliamentary question

Press release from the Centre of Information and the council of New Spirituality (17.04.2010) - HRWF (20/04/2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - There is no threat of cult influence over young people, according to the Board of Youth, Popular Education and Society (DJEPVA). This confirms the results of an investigation of different ministries conducted as part of a 2006 Parliamentary Commission inquiring into the supposed harmful influence of so-called "sect" movements that have been denounced by the Commission.

Inquiries were also conducted within departmental councils, regional councils and academies and it was found that there had been only one report of possible mistreatment by a "sect", though this mistreatment was unspecified and the report was not followed up. Not all of the questionnaires sent to the councils were returned, illustrating the lack of relevance of the issue and also the lack of interest local authorities have in such investigations.

In response to question number 50823 posed by Mr. Michel Zumkeller (UMP), who wished "to know the measures taken to fight the influence of sects in the area of their jurisdiction", the DJEPVA indicated on page 2803 of a public response in the Official Journal on the 9th of March 2010 that in addition to its membership of an "operational executive committee of the MIVILUDES" and its contribution to an "annual report of the activities of the previous year" that "for the year 2009, no report of sect deviation was forwarded to the DJEPVA".

The member's question shows that anti-sect groups continue to lobby politicians to maintain social panic that they have created with regard to so-called sects, in order to legitimize their public subsidies without which they could not survive.

Parliamentary Question #1

"Mr. Michel Zumkeller questions the High Commissioner for Active Solidarity against Poverty, High Commissioner for Youth, on the annual report on sects published by MIVILUDES (Inter-ministerial Mission for Vigilance against Sect Deviation). This report describes the methods employed by the sects to establish themselves in society. He

wishes to know the measures taken to combat the influence of sects in areas under their jurisdiction."

Transcript of the Response #2

Since 1997, the department responsible for Youth has followed a policy of risk prevention with regards to the influence of sects. As such, the Board of Youth, Popular Education and Society (DJEPVA) participates actively in MIVILUDES missions. It is also a member of an operational executive committee of MIVILUDES, contributes to the annual report of activities and monitors the influence of sects on children in foster care, or those in the care of social welfare services. It works on this subject in collaboration with other administrations and victim advocacy groups. Under the national plan for training, sect risk education is organized each year by agents of the central and decentralized services for Youth. At the local level, this department coordinates a "prevention" network responsible for reporting all sect risks. In 2009, no report of sect risk was sent to the DJEPVA. "

In other words, either the MIVILUDES has missed its target, or it is doing this on purpose, in which case it is reasonable to seriously question the motives behind this witch hunt, which increases its range each year. And for who's benefit?

Source: Press release from the Centre of Information and the council of New Spirituality. (CICNS) du 17 April 2010.

Case against Scientology definitively dismissed for lack of evidence

AFP/ Le Figaro (06.04.2010) / HRWF (14.04.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - The Cassation Court has turned down an appeal lodged by the antisect association UNADFI (National Association of the Family and Individual Defence Associations) confirming hereby the dismissal of the case in favor of several members of the Church of Scientology in a swindling case.

In October 2007, after 18 years of judicial proceedings, an investigation judge in Paris, Jean-Christophe Hullin, had dismissed the case in favor of all the prosecuted members of the Church of Scientology on the grounds that the judicial investigation had not revealed that any of them had committed the said violations. The judicial investigation opened in 1989 was concerning the following alleged acts: "swindling, extortion of money and illegal practice of medicine."

The plaintiff who started the procedure, Juan Esteban Cordero, a young pianist whose parents were wealthy had given more than 1 million French francs (150,000 EUR) to the Church of Scientology. Twenty people, including numerous managers and the former president of the Church Jean-Paul Chapellet, had been prosecuted.

Three civil parties had appealed the dismissal decision but two of them, two persons, had withdrawn after coming to an agreement with the Church of Scientology. UNADFI was the only one to confirm its appeal. In March 2009, the appeal court had confirmed the dismissal and turned down UNADFI's appeal.

Translation French-English by HRWF.

The strange silence of MIVILUDES and antisect groups about paedophilia in the Catholic Church

The European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics urges Barroso to address the issue

HRWF (31.03.2010) - Are MIVILUDES and antisect groups applying double standards or instrumentalizing their respective mandates to cover up a hidden agenda: the fight against specific religious groups and not others. This is the question that can be legitimately posed when we see their silence about the massive cases of paedophilia by Catholic priests around the world while in the past they had been prompt to denounce (alleged) acts of paedophilia by members of minority religious groups and to use isolated cases to discredit whole movements (like the Raelians).

Barroso urged by a group of members of the European Parliament to address child abuse at annual meeting with religious leaders

"The European Commission must come out of its ivory tower and address the issue of child abuse in the Catholic church and other religions. At previous editions of Barroso's meeting with church leaders, they always carefully avoided any thorny issues. This time the Commission cannot turn a blind eye", says Sophie in 't Veld, Chair of the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP), a cross party group, in a press release issued on 30 March 2010.

The EPPSP urges Barroso to raise the issue of child abuse in the Catholic church at his annual meeting with religious leaders.

"It would undermine the credibility of the European Commission if it would fail to address this issue at its meeting with religious leaders", says Mrs Senyszyn (S&D, Poland), Vice Chair of the EPPSP.

"Child abuse occurs in all sections of society, but abuse by church leaders and the moral pressure exercised on the victims to keep them from breaking the silence, is especially reprehensive", says Jean Marie Cavada (EPP, France), Vice Chair of the Platform.

Although most other religions do not have comparable hierarchical structures like the Roman Catholic church, the mixture of conservative morals, taboos on sexuality, and religious authority often make it very hard for victims to speak out. EPPSP Vice Chair Franziska Brantner (Greens, Germany) adds: "The European Commission has recently issued its proposals for the protection of children against sexual abuse. This meeting is a good opportunity to show the Commission wants to tackle child abuse at all levels, and that it does not shy away from controversy."

Human Rights Without Frontiers' appeal

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges MIVILUDES, UNADFI and CCMM to clarify their position about paedophilia, especially when it is massively practised by ministers of a specific religious group. Is it a sectarian deviation (dérive sectaire) or not according to them?

Freedom of assembly denied to the Graal Movement by a mayor

One more case of misuse of the parliamentary report on cults and discrimination in total impunity

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges France's Minister of Justice and Minister of the Interior to send a circular letter to the institutions under their authority forbidding the use of the parliamentary black list of so-called cults to deny the full enjoyment of their human rights to such groups and their members and providing administrative sanctions in case of violation of this injunction.

HRWF (29.03.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - The mayor of Boulogne-sur-Mer, Frédéric Cuvellier, has forbidden a conference on the subject of reincarnation, due to be held on 20 March in the city.

The conference was to be organised by a group called "le Mouvement du Graal" (Graal Movement), that has existed since 1929. The mayor said the movement was classified as a cult in the 1995 French parliamentary report which has been disparaged abroad but also in France. Daniel Bourdon, the organizer of the event, discredited the report, saying it "associates all spiritual movements with sects". The anti-cult movement ADFI of Nord-Pas-de-Calais is supporting the mayor's ban.

Mayor Frediric Cuvillier is taking a legal risk by prohibiting the conference, as he can only do so in the interest of safety, public peace or public good.

Despite several court decisions and a statement of former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin saying a parliamentary report has no legal value, a number of non-state actors and mayors persist in banning meetings of small religious, esoteric and spiritual groups on the basis of the parliamentary black list of so-called 172 cults.

Denial of access to spiritual assistance by Jehovah's Witnesses in prison is discriminatory

The misuse of the parliamentary report on cults once more denounced

HRWF (29.03.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - In its decision nr 2010-43 of 22 February 2010, HALDE (The High Authority Fighting against Discrimination and for Equality) has concluded that the denial of spiritual assistance to Jehovah's Witnesses in prison by one of their religious ministers is a case of religious discrimination.

Concerning the accreditation of religious ministers of Jehovah's Witnesses as chaplains, HALDE (The High Authority Fighting against Discrimination and for Equality) has recommended to the minister of Justice to make possible religious practices in penitentiary conditions on the basis of objective criteria and to make sure they are implemented in detention centers without any other restrictions than those necessitated by security and order in the prison.

This decision follows the refusal by the director of the penitentiary center of Châteauroux to allow an imprisoned Jehovah's Witness to be visited by a religious minister of his faith on the grounds that his religious denomination is on the black list of cults attached to the French parliamentary report on cults. The prison director's decision was dismissed by the administrative court of appeal of Bordeaux on 20 October 2009. This is one more case of

misuse of the black list of so-called cults endorsed by the French parliamentary commission on cults in 1995.

HALDE's position is based on two cases dealt with by the European Court on Human Rights: the court decision Kokkinakis v. Greece of 25 May 1993 including Jehovah's Witnesses among the religious faiths to be respected and the case Poltoratski v. Ukraine of 29 Avril 2003, in which a detainee was deprived of his right to participate in the weekly religious service in prison and to receive the visit of an Orthodox priest.

In the case brought to its attention, HALDE said that « the ban does not seem to be justified by a possible threat to public order, as the association of Jehovah's Witnesses had been granted the status of "association cultuelle" (religious association) by an administrative judge, or by another legitimate reason involving public security, protection of social order, health, public morality or the rights and freedoms of other people ».

In conclusion, HALDE stated that such refusals are « discrimination based on the beliefs of the concerned people, which is prohibited by article 14 in combination with article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights ».

See full text of HALDE's decision (in French) at <http://www.halde.fr/IMG/alexandrie/5191.PDF>

Veil/police: ban requested

AFP (04.03.2010) - HRWF (09.03.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net
- The discipline council of the police department of Paris has today proposed a two year suspension of service, of which eighteen months on a suspended sentence, against a female municipal police officer of Paris who was wearing an Islamic veil during her police duties.

The Chief of police must now decide on the recommended sentence. No deadline has been set for the decision. If the advised sentence is upheld it will equal a six month suspension without salary.

Nora B. has already been suspended since November 2009 by the Paris Chief of police after having been admonished by her superiors several times. Posted in the tenth arrondissement of Paris and charged with regulating motor traffic in the capital, she was wearing a simple veil (not a full veil) while on duty. She always refused to remove it.

She was to appear in front of the discipline council on the 4th of February, but has asked for a postponement due to family problems.

Refusal of citizenship over full Islamic veil issue

BBC (03.02.2010) - HRWF (04.02.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net
- The full-face covering has inflamed passions in France

The French government has refused to grant citizenship to a foreign national on the grounds that he forced his wife to wear the full Islamic veil.

The man, whose current nationality was not given, needed citizenship to settle in the country with his French wife.

But Immigration Minister Eric Besson said this was being refused because he was depriving his wife of the liberty to come and go with her face uncovered.

Last week, a parliamentary committee proposed a partial ban on full veils.

It also recommended that anyone showing visible signs of "radical religious practice" be refused residence permits and citizenship.

'Integration'

In a statement, Mr Besson said he had signed a decree on Tuesday rejecting a man's citizenship application after it emerged that he had ordered his wife to cover herself with a head-to-toe veil.

"It became apparent during the regulation investigation and the prior interview that this person was compelling his wife to wear the all-covering veil, depriving her of the freedom to come and go with her face uncovered, and rejected the principles of secularism and equality between men and women," he said.

Later, the minister stressed that French law required anyone seeking naturalisation to demonstrate their desire for integration.

Mr Besson's decree has now been sent to Prime Minister Francois Fillon for approval.

The interior ministry says only 1,900 women wear full veils in France, home to Europe's biggest Muslim minority.

In 2008, a French court denied citizenship to a Moroccan woman on the grounds that her "radical" practice of Islam was incompatible with French values.

French report wants limits on Muslim face veil

Elaine Ganley

AP (26.01.2010) - HRWF (29.01.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - A parliamentary panel that wants Muslim women to stop veiling their faces recommended Tuesday that France ban such garb in public facilities, including hospitals and mass transit, and a leading panel member said he foresees such an interdiction by the end of 2010.

The nearly 200-page report contains a panoply of measures intended to dissuade women from wearing all-enveloping veils in France. It also recommends refusing residence cards and citizenship to anyone with visible signs of a "radical religious practice."

However, there is no call to outlaw such garments -- worn by a tiny minority of Muslims - in private areas and in the street. A full ban was the major issue that divided the 32-member, multiparty panel which ultimately heeded warnings that a full ban risked being deemed unconstitutional and could even cause trouble in a country where Islam is the second-largest religion.

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The report, which culminates six months of hearings, was formally presented to the president of the National Assembly, the lower house, Bernard Accoyer, and made public.

Conservative lawmaker Eric Raoult, the panel's No. 2 member, said later that he foresaw a limited ban in the public sector "before the end of the year."

"We need maybe six months or a little more to explain what we want," he told The Associated Press, adding that "by the end of 2010" there could be such an interdiction.

Accoyer was more vague but told a news conference that "we can certainly find solutions in a brief time."

Universities, hospitals, public transport and post offices would be among areas included in a limited ban on the all-encompassing veil.

As envisaged by the panel, such a ban would require that people show their faces when entering the facility and "keep the face uncovered throughout their presence," the report says.

Failure to do so would result "in a refusal to deliver the service demanded." That means, for instance, that a woman seeking state funds commonly accorded to mothers would walk away empty-handed.

A parliamentary resolution condemning such garb, with no legal weight and the easiest measure to pass, would be likely to precede concrete initiatives.

The veil is widely viewed in France as a gateway to extremism, an insult to gender equality and an offense to France's secular foundation. A 2004 French law bans Muslim headscarves from primary and secondary school classrooms.

The language in the report was carefully chosen in an effort to avoid offending France's estimated 5 million Muslims -- the largest such population in western Europe -- and accusations of discrimination. Muslim leaders have already complained that the debate over the full veil coupled with an ongoing debate on French national identity has left some Muslims feeling their religion is becoming a government target.

The panel went to work, taking testimony from more than 200 experts and others, after President Nicolas Sarkozy said in June that veils that hide the face are "not welcome" on French territory.

Such veils are thought to be worn by only several thousand Muslim women who, most often, pin a "niqab" across their faces, hiding all but the eyes. Worn with a long, dark robe, such clothing is customarily associated with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

The report puts an emphasis on educating women who wear the robes in France about the rules of the Republic.

Any action on the report would not come before March regional elections.

The French report can be consulted at <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/rap-info/i2262.asp>

Who ordered a police crackdown on a peaceful spiritual group in Saône and Loire?

HRWF (21.01.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - On 7 January at 9 am, about 20 law enforcement officers rushed into the Domaine de Chardenoux, a spiritual centre located in Bruailles (Saône and Loire), and searched the whole compound

until 6 pm without giving any explanation about their action. As the staff reacted calmly, one of the officers said to the head of the centre "I am sorry, Madam, I have to carry out my job in such circumstances."

Three police vehicles were stationed in the parking lot outside the castle. All the rooms were searched, 16 computers and all the files were taken away. Each staff member was under the surveillance of three police officers and was interrogated: "Do you have to wear a uniform? Do you have to do gymnastics? Are the meals vegetarian? Are they good? Where are the interns from?"

The policemen were surprised to see that in the library, there were books on all sorts of topics and traditions. They were also amazed to discover that Alain and Evelyne Chevillat were using two different meditation rooms. "My husband and I are not following the same spiritual way," she told them.

The Domaine de Chardenoux hosts the group Terre du Ciel (Earth of Heaven) which was created in 1990 by Alain and Evelyne Chevillat when they published the first issue of a magazine bearing the same name. Very soon, they organized meetings, seminars, training sessions, trips and in 1991, they had their first summer university.

In the past year, the association had already been submitted to two tax inspections, a visit of the labor inspector and two URSAFF controls. This time, it was obvious that the group was being targeted as a sect/cult.

We only see such policies in former communist countries such as Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan or Azerbaijan.

Who was behind that crackdown? Who were the instigators of this military like operation? Almost two weeks after the facts, these questions remain unanswered but no doubt MIVILUDES played a major role in this issue.

French law could see fines for burqas

Andrew Rettman

EU Observer (08.01.2010) / HRWF (12.01.2010) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - The author of a new anti-burqa law in France has told the press he will propose €750 fines for women wearing the head-to-toe covering.

Jean-Francois Cope, the leader of France's ruling centre-right UMP party, gave advance notice of the bill in an interview with Le Figaro magazine out on Thursday (7 January).

He said the legislation "would prohibit the covering of the face in public places and on the streets, with the exception of special cultural events or carnivals" meaning that "wearing a burqa would qualify for a fine, probably of the fourth class, that is to say €750."

Any person forcing a woman to wear the garment would face a "worse fine."

Mr Cope defended the proposals on grounds of national security and women's rights. "We can measure the modernity of a society by the way it treats and respects women," he told Le Figaro.

The bill is to be formally introduced in the next 15 days but will not be debated by the house until after regional elections in March. If it goes through, implementation will be phased in gradually.

The French interior ministry estimates that just 1,900 women in France wear a burqa in a country home to some 5 million Muslims.

Mr Cope's law has already come in for criticism from the left.

"The burqa is a prison for women and has no place in the French Republic. But an ad-hoc law would not have the anticipated effect," Socialist Party spokesman Benoit Hamon said on Wednesday.

Some figures on the right have also come out against the scheme, with Xavier Bertrand, the secretary general of the UMP, telling French radio on Thursday that he favours a non-binding resolution condemning the garment instead.

President Nicolas Sarkozy last June said the burqa is "not welcome" in France but has not spoken about the law as such.

France in 2004 already banned the wearing of "conspicuous" religious symbols, including Muslim headscarves, by pupils in state schools and by public sector workers.
