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Perception of discrimination based on religion & belief : France and Belgium the worst pupils in a survey of the European Commission

Excerpt

HRWF (27.11.2012) - **"Discrimination on grounds of religion or beliefs is more commonly perceived as rare or non-existent than widespread:** 56% of Europeans think it is rare or non-existent (5% non-existent, 51% rare) and 39% that it is widespread. Five per cent "don't know".

However, **as in 2009, there are very wide differences between countries.** Discrimination based on religion or beliefs is seen as most widespread in France (66%), followed by Belgium (60%), Sweden (58%), Denmark (54%), the Netherlands (51%) and the UK (50%). The survey shows that belonging to a religious minority is an important factor here, with 54% of these Europeans indicating that discrimination on the grounds of religion/beliefs is widespread in their country.

At the other extreme of the scale, less than 15% of respondents in the Czech Republic and Latvia (both 10%), Slovakia (12%), Ireland and Bulgaria (both 13%) and Lithuania and Estonia (both 14%) say that discrimination on the basis of religion/belief is widespread in their countries. Again, a comparison of the 2012 results with those obtained in 2009 shows that **views have not evolved in the same direction throughout Europe.** In some countries, perceptions are more positive (more people now say discrimination is non-existent or rare), whereas in others the opposite trend is noted (fewer people now hold this opinion).

Focusing firstly on the countries where the trend is positive, double-digit improvements can be found in Slovenia and Greece (both +13 percentage points), and in Malta and Austria (both +12). In five further countries improvements of at least 5 points are recorded: the Netherlands (+8), Bulgaria (+6), and Estonia, Romania and Finland (all +5).

The most negative development has been recorded in France. Here only 28% now say that discrimination on the grounds of religion or beliefs is non-existent or rare (-9). There have also been large falls in Cyprus (-6) and Belgium (-5).

The socio-demographic and cultural factors that influence perceptions of discrimination on the grounds of religion/beliefs include:

- o Belonging to a minority (self-defined);
- o Having personally experienced or witnessed discrimination;
- o Having a diverse social circle;
- o Being young;
- o Being to the left of the spectrum politically."

See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_393_en.pdf , especially pages 49-52

Appeal to the Constitutional Court likely against Belgian new "Anti-Sect" Law

HRWF (09.08.2012) - On November 26, 2011, the Belgian Parliament voted a Law adding articles to the Penal Code criminalizing "Abuse of Weakness". Obviously, every citizen agrees that a person in a situation of weakness because of his age, physical or mental handicap or a permanent or temporary precarious situation needs protection. However this new Law went a step further by being purposely vague and omitting clear definitions of applicable circumstances. As was pointed out during the Parliamentary debates, this opens the way to prosecute even salesmanship, charisma, convincing management, religious practices and more.

The lead author of the Law, Deputy André Frédéric, left no doubt that the real intention was to focus on religious and ideological minorities, going after what he called "dangerous sects and sectarian practices"

It went through an elaborate delivery: in the last decade, previous proposals with the same or similar content, were either severely questioned by the State Council or stalled before they could be voted on because of elections.

This time, the proponents, realizing that their latest attempt might equally fail, reverted to plan B: they "buried" their controversial articles in an amended proposal that included more than 30 provisions that no right-minded person would object to. Subsequently, they invoked a vague reference to a government agreement to force getting the necessary votes. Even then, the proposal went back and forth twice between the House and the Senate, and avoided another referral to the State Council because of a blatantly inexact statement by Senator Mahoux, who declared that "similar" proposals had already been reviewed by the State Council, without mentioning that the Council actually objected to the wording used in the past. He called for an interruption of the Senate Justice Commission meeting to confer with Senators of the majority. They decided that the majority would vote it, alluding to provisions in the Government Declaration on Public Security (in fact there was no such specific provision)

The new Law was published in the ""Official Gazette" on January 23, 2012.

To underscore their particular interest, the lead author, together with another Deputy and an ex journalist who was present during the hearings about the Law (he presented himself as representing the Civil Society), immediately created an association to act as civil party to represent alleged victims of "sectarian organizations" targeted by the Law.

They seemed more than anxious to start their "witch hunt".

In the meantime, reactions from University scholars, lawyers and representatives of ideological and religious associations began to surface.

An appeal to the Constitutional Court to void the Law seems therefore more and more likely.

It would not be surprising, since the Law managed to potentially violate at least 4 articles of the Belgian Constitution:

Art. 11: Enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognized for Belgians must be provided without discrimination. To this end, laws and federate laws guarantee among others the rights and freedoms of ideological and philosophical minorities.

Art. 12: The freedom of the individual is guaranteed. No one can be prosecuted except in the cases provided for by the law, and in the form prescribed by the law.

Art. 19: Freedom of worship, its public practice and freedom to demonstrate one's opinions on all matters are guaranteed.

Art. 22: Everyone has the right to the respect of his private and family life

The Law equally disrespects noble principles anchored in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) such as the right to liberty, right to a fair trial, right to respect for private life, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression, prohibition of discrimination.

In other words, both the Constitution and ECHR rightfully protect citizens' rights of freedom in ideological matters, freedom of expression, as well as the exercise of their beliefs and their privacy. Any potential restrictions would need laws with prescriptions in clear, understandable and precise terms. The consequences of non-obedience should be predictable.

The new Law fails on all those issues.

Exorcism trial: All guilty of torture!

All six were convicted of involuntary manslaughter for the torture they inflicted on Latifa Hachmi which caused her death on August 5, 2004

BELGA (07.06.2012) - Jurors in the court of assizes of Belgium found four of the defendants, Xavier Meert, Mourad Mazouj the husband of the victim, Jamila Zian, and Fatima Zekhnini, guilty of aggravating circumstances for having caused the death of the victim.

Latifa Hachmi submitted to sessions of Roquia, a Muslim rite of "unbewitching," mainly in her home, Waelhem Street, in Schaerbeek, between the end of June and the beginning of August in 2004. Two exorcists, Abdelkrim Aznagui (60) and Xavier Meert (34) conducted the ritual. The victim's husband, Mourad Mazouj (34) participated as did three female "healers", Jamila Zian (44), Fatima Zekhnini (41) and Hayate Saif Nasr (30).

All six were convicted of involuntary manslaughter for the torture they inflicted on Latifa Hachmi which caused her death on August 5, 2004. The victim was almost drowned in a bath of hot water and was also severely beaten with a rod.

The last two defendants, Abdelkrim Aznagui and Hayate Saïf Nasr, were also found guilty of torture but were acquitted of aggravating circumstances for the death of Latifa Hachmi.

Translation French-English by HRWF Int'l

Unrest in Brussels following a police check of a woman in a niqab

Le Soir (31.05.2012) - Clashes between two female police officers and a woman wearing a niqab took place during an inspection. The woman suffered a slight concussion and the two police agents were injured. A group of people attempted unsuccessfully to enter the police station.

The inspection and arrest of a woman wearing a niqab led Thursday evening to disturbances in the Brussels commune of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, in front of the police station on rue du Facteur (Facteur Street). This report has been confirmed by commissioner Johan Berckmans, the police spokesperson in the Brussels-West zone. By about 9:30 PM, relative calm had returned to the neighborhood.

According to the police spokesperson, the inspection took place Thursday in the early afternoon at Jette. "Two plainclothes officers spotted the woman sitting at a tram stop and asked to see her identity papers and to take off her headscarf. When she refused to obey, she was taken to the police station. On the way, she tried to head butt one of the female police officers. At the police station she refused to cooperate."

A group of people attempted to occupy the police station.

Commissioner Berckmans reported that a skirmish followed the arrest during which the woman wearing the niqab as well as the two police women were wounded: "Finally, the headscarf of the woman was removed and she was transported to the hospital to be treated for a slight concussion. The public prosecutor of Brussels was alerted. He decided to release her and conduct a hearing later."

During the course of the afternoon, text messages circulated calling for a mass meeting in front of the police station. A group of persons tried to occupy the building, but were unsuccessful in their attempt. The mayor of Molenbeek, Phiippe Moureaux, and the chief of police of West Brussels were forced to come down in person to reason with the crowd. By about 9:30 PM, only a few small groups of youth remained in the streets of the town.

The legal proceedings for deadly exorcism continues

They preferred death to life

By J. La.

La Libre Belgique (30.05.2012) - Unacceptable actions. And no matter the beliefs of those who inflicted the treatments which cost Latifa Hachmi her life, the fact remains that she died due to beatings and near drowning on August 5, 2004 after multiple sessions of exorcism. Six defendants, who took part in those sessions, are now being tried in the court of assizes. Ms. Michèle Hirsch, lawyer for two of the two brothers of Latifa Hachmi, speaking yesterday before the court of assizes of Brussels was in rare form.

This trial, she noted, affects the entire society: "Such systematic, prolonged abuses are in all reality physical and mental torture. These actions are unacceptable in our country, regardless of the beliefs of those who committed them." According to the lawyer, Latifa Hachmi's death was not an accident: torture caused the death of Latifa. She could not recover from the severe shock treatments she received.

First, there are the headphones pressed against her ears and the blindfold on her eyes, a treatment which, if prolonged, causes the body to move uncontrollably, making one vulnerable to suggestion. Then there is the water torture: immersed in a bathtub, with water running down her face, the victim goes into extreme panic. Finally, there are the beatings: a hundred blows in less than seven days. Ms. Hirsch graphically described the evidence, "On her arms and legs there was no place left to hit her. Her limbs were marked with constellations of bruises. Latifa's body is by far the best proof of crime in this case."

In the face of such evidence, the crime cannot be disputed. Given the nature of the treatment, Latifa Hachmi could only have cried out begging her tormenters to stop the tortuous exorcism. But, Ms. Hirsch emphatically emphasized that none of the accused reported any screaming: "That's impossible. They lied. They still lie."

The most prominent of the accused is Abdelkrim Aznagui, "a man of great charisma and immense powers of persuasion." It is he who, in June of 2004, recommended the treatment that consisted of headphones which played constant recitations of Koranic verses, immersions in water meant to frighten the demons, oral readings of the Koran as she was forced to drink large quantities of water and then vomit it up, and fasting and praying. "We are told that Latifa had agreed to treatments. I agree with this statement. But she did not agree to be tortured." After the sessions of exorcism in June, Abdelkrim Aznagui left for vacation in Morocco. But, for Ms. Hirsch, this does not exonerate him from guilt for the events that would follow. He threatened Latifa's husband, who is also one of the accused, and his parents that, if the treatments were stopped, Latifa would be placed under psychiatric care, given injections, and be handicapped for life. He said that he would supervise future treatments instead.

In July 2004, the treatments recommenced. That is when Xavier Meert, "trusted by Aznagui," began to take part in the exorcisms, assisted by "three Muslim sisters," who are also defendants in the case. Latifa's mental and physical state continued to deteriorate. The severity of the treatments grew more and more harsh. Latifa was tied up. The beatings increased.

Unable to move, Latifa Hachmi fought for her survival until August 4, 2004 when, after yet another immersion in water followed by a beating in the afternoon, she lost consciousness. None of the accused defendants sought the medical help that might have revived her. Her husband finally sought help the next day.

Why did they not seek help? It is the most haunting question of the trial. For Ms. Michèle Hirsch there is only one explanation possible: "They were afraid," especially because of the numerous bruises on Latifa's body that they would have to try and explain. "They preferred that Latifa die rather than live. On August 4, at 5:00 PM, the decision was made that it would be better that she die, that she not live, so that she could not speak." Once they had made sure the proof had disappeared, they would then call for help after it was too late.

The chief prosecutor will begin his examination today.

Latifa Hachmi, a victim of deviant practices

La Dernière Heure (25.05.2012) - Xavier Luffin and Radouan Attitya, experts on Islam, testified to the court concerning the ritual of Roquia.

Six persons are accused, by the court of assizes of Brussels, of causing the death of Latifa Hachmi, a young woman aged 23 at the time, by torture in 2004 during Islamic sessions of exorcism.

Friday, two scholars of Islam, called as witnesses, assured the court that immersions in hot water and rods for beatings with the names of Allah inscribed on them are not legitimate practices of the Roquia ritual. Latifa Hachmi participated in sessions of Roquia, a Muslim rite of "unbewitching," at her home, Waelhem Street, in Schaerbeek.

Two exorcists, Abdelkrim Aznagui (60) and Xavier Meert (34) conducted the ritual. The victim's husband, Mourad Mazouj (34) participated as did three female "healers", Jamila Zian (44), Fatima Zekhnini (41) and Hayate Saif Nasr (30).

All six must answer charges of having tortured Latifa Hachmi to the point that she died on August 5, 2004. Medical examiners have ruled that the death was due to semi-drowning as well as beatings.

On Friday, the Islamic scholars Xavier Luffin and Radouan Attiya testified to the court concerning the ritual of Roquia. They both stated that "Djinn," [demons] certainly did exist in the Muslim worldview.

They also explained that the rites of Roquia could be considered as a sort of religious medicine consisting of reading prayers and "drinking prayers" meaning the drinking of consecrated holy water.

But according to these two Islamic specialists, there is nothing in Roquia that allows for immersing in water or physical contact such as beatings with a rod inscribed with the 99 names of Allah, as reported by the accused.

The two witnesses did not hesitate to characterize these practices as deviant.

On Friday, one of the defendants Fatima Zekhnini declared that she had things she wanted to reveal. She said that she had attended the sessions in which Latifa Hachmi was immersed in water. She added that her co-defendant Jamila Zian had convinced Latifa Hachmi during a trip to the Ardennes with their spouses that she was not well and that she should submit herself to the Roquia ritual.

Police raid the headquarters of the Muslim Executive of Belgium

By Ristel Edimo

Yabiladi.com (*) (11.05.2012) - The Muslim Executive of Belgium is known for its interminable internal conflicts. They are nothing new. But this news story will certainly attract the attention of the Belgian news media. The police raids that took place last Wednesday occurred at the organization's headquarters after a complaint by its former vice president, Isabelle Praile, who was recently ousted from the representative institutions of the Executive. The police discovered facts that permitted it to investigate the EMB. Here are the details.

On Wednesday May 10, the Department of Special Affairs of the Federal Judicial Police in Brussels, called DR7, led a raid at the headquarters of the Muslim Executive of Belgium (EMB), the representative body of Muslims in Belgium, according to LeVif-L'Express, a Belgian news magazine. Isabelle Praile, who was ousted from the representative institutions of the Executive, has, with sufficient reason, launched a civil suit against X. Investigators seized files relating to the ouster that may contain fake and false documents.

A quick look at the Executive's website reveals that, after the January 13 General Assembly meeting of the EMB, Isabelle Praile was effectively no longer part of the Executive's directors. What are the notable violations of Praile's expulsion? Ms. Praile denounced it for "illegal maneuvers." She explained to Yabaldi, a Moroccan news website, "Precise regulations were not followed. There are supporting documents, but according to the laws of investigation I can't say more about it."

According to Ms. Praile, her expulsion was caused by a difference of opinion over the religion of Islam in her country. Within the EMB, certain individuals would like to give the management of the religion to "foreigners", while others, including herself and two others also expelled from the organization, want Belgians to manage the religion of Islam in Belgium. The issue is about "the future of the religion", declared a disappointed Ms. Praile.

A problem with a past

According to the vice-president of the EMB, this internal battle has been an ongoing problem for years. Furthermore, various means have been instituted in an attempt to reinforce the current approach. Ms. Praile protests, saying, "It is ideological. They have put in place a procedure that is completely illegal because we have different opinions." Indignantly she asks, "Where is the freedom of expression in that?"

She acknowledged that while it is true that the origins of Islam in Belgium "begin with the massive influx of Turks and Moroccans during the 1960s, over time things have changed and today Islam is not just tied to immigration." She asserts, "They [the current leaders of the EMB] want to base the religion on foreign institutions, such as the Federation of Turkish Mosques, as well as others. However, there are imams that do not speak Flemish or French. They have no understanding of Belgian culture."

"We want a Belgian Islam!"

"We want a Belgian Islam," claims Ms. Praile. She suggests that, "We must have an Islam which represents the diversity of Muslims in Belgium." She also recommends that,

"we must limit foreign influences and put an end to these tensions from outside sources which disturb the proper management of the Islamic religion in Belgium."

For its part, the Executive has not yet responded. Its president, Semsettin Ugurlu, is at the present unreachable. It must be said that the EMB has often had many internal conflicts and they are often tied to the question of how to administer the Islamic religion in Belgium.

Belgian authorities have taken no actions. According to Le Vif, the Belgian minister of Justice, AnnemieTurtelboom, has justified her inaction concerning the files on the representation of the Islamic religion by the fact that there is already an investigation being directed by Michel Claise, the Judge of Inquiry. Contacted this morning by Yabiladi, Mr. Claise indicated that he would not make comments on the subject. It will be necessary, therefore, to wait for the results of the investigation.

(*) Translation French-English by *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

Muslim Executive of Belgium: Unacceptable blockage

By Christian Laporte

LaLibre Belgique (*) (10.05.2012) - If there is one case concerning the recognized religions of Belgium which has made no progress, it is certainly that of the Muslim Executive of Belgium. It has not moved at all since the government of current affairs [a government of limited powers] of Yves Leterme.

However, since then, Annemie Turtelboom (Open VLD, the Flemish Liberal Party) became the Minister of Justice and thus the supervisor of the religions with full autonomy.

But the division between the supporters of an Islam of Near Eastern influence and therefore under the orders of certain embassies and those who support an Islam that looks more Belgian has not ceased to increase and thus members of parliament regularly step forward to attempt to get the talks moving.

The latest to date, Bert Anciaux of the Socialist Party, has observed that the Muslim Executive only operates on the basis of royal decrees which allow it to collect only very limited income.

"The worst thing is that the EMB has been forced to lay off personnel and it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it could even find itself out on the street by reason of unpaid rent."

The Minister of Justice has avoided the issue by invoking the constitutional prescription of freedom of religion. "The right to create a stable structure belongs to the religions themselves," she responded but not without adding, "the composition and projects of renewal of the Muslim Executive are the object of contention. My predecessor had already been confronted with both a minority view and a majority position."

It is worth remembering that at a general assembly held on January 13, three members of the minority movement (Ndir: Pro-Islam Belgium) were expelled and decided to take the case to court.

There is therefore no reason to interfere while a criminal investigation is taking place but for Bert Anciaux, these facts are all in the past and it would therefore be appropriate for the state to finally end its silence and take measures which would permit it to get out of the current imbroglio. The minister did not exclude that possibility but added that "everything will depend on the content of the initiative and whether it does not constitute a violation of the legal investigation."

Is the absence of progress due to a lack of political courage?

(*) Translation French-English by *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

One year conviction for the Sharia4Belgium spokesperson

Fouad Belkacem regularly broadcast videos on the internet in which he encouraged his listeners to enlist in the fight against non-Muslims.

Belga (04.05.2012) - On 4 May, the Criminal Court of Antwerp convicted Fouad Belkacem (age 30), the spokesperson of the radical Islamist movement Sharia4Belgium, to two years in prison, one of them suspended, and a fine of 550 euros for inciting hatred against non-Muslims and for the harassment of Frank Vanhecke, widower of Marie-Rose Morel and former president of Vlaams Belang (*). For several years, Fouad Belkacem has regularly broadcast videos on the internet in which he has encouraged his listeners to enlist in the fight against non-Muslims. His language has been highly inflammatory. The court charged the defendant with hate speech. Belkacem has denied urging his listeners to commit acts of violence.

In addition to the charge of inciting his listeners to hatred, the defendant was also convicted of harassing Frank Vanhecke. In a video broadcast one day after the death of Marie-Rose Morel, Belkacem insulted the deceased woman, spewing forth a series of curses against her.

Fouad Belkacem had already been convicted in absentia in February for all of the accusations listed above but had appealed his conviction.

(*) HRWF Footnote: Extreme right party in the Flemish part of Belgium.

New court proceedings begin seven years later for fatal exorcism case

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (16.04.2012) – www.hrwf.net - On August 6, 2004, Latifa Hachmi, then 23 years old, died during an exorcism that looked more torture than religious ceremony. After she had given up hope of being able to have children, Latifa and her husband decided to see an exorcist from a non-profit organization named "La Plume." The exorcist told them that the cause of her problem was possession by the devil and that she needed to be purified. Two months of treatment ended with her drowning in a bathtub.

According to the family, Latifa, who died following repeated sessions of exorcism, suffered numerous tortures (as defined by new articles 417a and 417b of the penal code which provides for a punishment of 20 to 30 years). At the first trial, guru Abdelkim Aznagui was acquitted and the sentences of his accomplices were suspended.

After fighting for eight years, the oldest brother of Latifa, Fouad Hachmi, an artist well-known in Brussels, finally succeeded in having the criminal court declared incompetent so that the facts of the case will now be retried in the Court of Assizes. It is a first for Belgium. The new proceedings will begin next May.

The Facts

Married, Latifa was distraught because she was not able to have children. The couple could have consulted a doctor: instead they went to see "La Plume", a non-profit organization located on Waelhem Street in Schaerbeek led by Aznagui. Aznagui is 55-years old and drives tow trucks. According to him, Latifa could not have children because she was possessed by the devil. The only way to drive the devil out was to drink water, while verses from the Quran were recited, and then vomit it out. The evil spirits would leave in the vomiting.

The sessions of purification, as they were called, lasted from June to August in 2004. When Latifa died on August 6, Dr. Bonbled found multiple bruises on the face and scalp, evidence of strangulation and asphyxiation on the neck, a cerebral oedema, a pulmonary oedema, 43 bruises on the legs, and as many bruises on the arms of Latifa who had protected herself by laying in a fetal position.

The last roquia (exorcism) lasted 36 hours. Since the beginning of June, Latifa, who was being starved, ate only yogurt.

The exorcism also included brain washing treatments. For 24 straight hours, including during her sleep, headphones, stuck to her ears, repeated over and over the same verses. A ritual stick used to hit Latifa, probably the handle of a brush covered with "holy inscriptions," has not been recovered. The exorcists chased the devil away by hitting Latifa "in places on the body where he appeared." Another procedure consisted of pulling the devil out by hand from the "back of the vagina" or by pushing fingers deeply into her throat "descending toward the heart" and pulling him out through the mouth.

In the end, Latifa, was plunged into the water of a bathtub. When she struggled to be free, a convert, a certain Xavier Meert, subdued the young woman by binding her wrists and knees and by holding her head under water. At least once, Latifa, fighting back, pulled Meert's beard; Meert slapped her in the face.

Latifa's husband also slapped her in the face. She lost consciousness. No one called 100 (the number to call for medical emergencies). Mazouj, Latifa's husband, wanted to revive his wife by pushing on her stomach. Three glasses of water spurted out of her mouth. Latifa had died.

The doctor detected multiple bruises to her face and scalp, as well as evidence on the neck of asphyxiation and strangulation, and 43 bruises on the legs and as many on the arms.

Justice

Fouad's reports that he has on many occasions, acting in behalf of his family, denounced the inertia of government officials, as well as the indifference of both the Islamic Center and of the Muslim Executive of Belgium for not fighting to eradicate the shadowy practices ever present in the community.

The Center for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organizations (CIAOSN), a national institution charged with warning the country when a religious group presents a danger, especially in order to maintain public order and health, has remained silent and has not sounded the alarm against this sectarian deviation in the heart of Belgian Islam.

In 2011, the General Prosecutor's Office in Brussels asked for the retrial before the Court of Assize, of the six accused individuals for acts of "torture, in this case a deliberate inhuman treatment which produced a severe pain or very serious or cruel physical suffering or threats, causing death, without the intention of to kill." This is a first in Belgium. It is the successful outcome of supplemental instruction conferred on the investigating judge, Hervé Louveaux, on May 14 2009, by the Appeals Court of Brussels.

It is a 180 degree reversal for the justice system in Brussels which had earlier decided that the case belonged under the jurisdiction of the criminal court, accompanied by charges that were much lighter than "torture" (failure to help a person in danger, etc.). It is a victory for the family of the victim, the plaintiffs, represented by Mr. Jean-Paul Tieleman. The prosecutor is asking that the six accused be tried by the Assizes on the basis of articles 417a and 417b. They could face up to 30 years of prison. The six in question that will face trial are the presumed exorcist Abdelkrim Aznagui, 58 years old; Xavier Meert, 43 years old; Mourad Mazouj, 33 years old, husband of the victim; and three women from Brussels: Hayate, 29 years old, Fatima, 40 years old, and Jamila, 43 years old.

The Sharia4Belgium Case: Conviction for incitement of hate, discrimination, and violence

HRWF (25.03.2012) - On February 10, the Criminal Court of Antwerp convicted the spokesman for Sharia4Belgium of, among other things, inciting hatred, discrimination, and violence against non-Muslims. The spokesman for Sharia4Belgium was found guilty on all counts and received a sentence of two years in prison as well as a fine of 550 euros.

The Center for Equality for Opportunities and the Fight Against Racism has received 609 reports of hateful acts by this group. Based on the Antidiscrimination Law, the Center had lodged several complaints during the last two years and had finally brought civil action against Sharia4Belgium.

Article 22 of the Antidiscrimination Law allows for punishment for all speech which incites others to hatred, discrimination, or violence against an individual or a group belonging to protected categories. By all speech, the law means all verbal and nonverbal communications which stimulate, stir up, encourage, emphasize, provoke, push, or call for certain actions. The author of such speech does not, accordingly, aim simply to spread ideas or information but intends and hopes that those who hear him adopt for themselves discriminatory behavior of hate or violence—even if his words have no effect.

"According to our legal analysis, the comments made by this group concerning 'non-Muslims' clearly constitute an incitement to hatred as defined by the law. They clearly violate the legal limits of freedom of expression and can no longer be tolerated in a democratic society", explained Edouard Delruelle, assistant director of the Center. "The Antidiscrimination Law admittedly does not constitute an absolute rampart against all occurrences of rejection and radicalization, whatever form they may take and from wherever they may originate. This is, in fact, not its primary goal, but the law does provide new direction and may act as a future deterrent. We are thus satisfied with this

ruling and will continue, within the bounds of our legal commission, to act firmly against all acts that incite hatred, discrimination, or violence."

Belgium's Muslims in shock after deadly mosque arson

AFP / Times of Oman (13.03.2012) - Belgium's Muslim community was in shock Tuesday after a man set fire to a Shiite mosque in Brussels, leaving the imam dead in an act some linked to tensions between Shiites and Sunnis.

As investigators sought to determine whether late Monday's arson attack was an isolated incident or a deliberate assault on the Shiite community, Interior Minister Joelle Milquet suggested inter-religious strife may be to blame.

"This person went in (the mosque) hurling statements linked to the Syrian conflict. It appears to be a problem between Sunnis and Shiites," Milquet said, adding that investigators still had to confirm the motive.

"Belgium will not tolerate this type of act and the importing of this type of conflict on its territory," she said, adding that the government would take "all necessary measures" in coming days to prevent attacks.

Centuries-old tensions between Islam's Sunni and Shiite movements have fuelled violence in several Muslim countries, from Iraq to Yemen and Pakistan.

The area around the Brussels mosque, one of four Shiite centres of worship in the city's overwhelming majority Sunni Muslim community, has a large immigrant Muslim population.

The suspect told police he was a Muslim born in 1978, but authorities were not immediately able to confirm his identity because he lacked ID papers.

Azzedine Laghmich, an official at the mosque, said the attacker was "a Salafist," who sprayed petrol inside the mosque before setting it alight and shouting Sunni slogans on his way out -- cries related to the conflict in Syria.

"All the eyewitness accounts said so," Laghmich added.

Isabelle Praile, another senior official in Belgium's organised Muslim community, said the mosque "had already been placed under police protection several years ago," citing threats from members of the ultra-conservative Salafist movement.

More than 100 men gathered near the Rida mosque after the fire, shouting Shiite slogans behind a police tape as some prayed and others hugged or cried over the death of imam Abdallah Dadou, a 46-year-old father of four.

The imam died of smoke inhalation and a second person was slightly injured after the man, who wielded a knife and an axe, set fire to the place with fuel.

"I brought my eight-year-old son here with me so that he can see blind hate, what it can do," said Ismael Ben Mohammad, 40.

The mayor of the city's Anderlecht ward, Gaetan Van Goidsenhoven, appealed for calm at an overnight press conference, saying it was "not only necessary to live side-by-side, but also to allow justice and the police to do their work."

The imam was described by worshipper Abdel Adouzeyneb, a 39-year-old real estate agent, as "a person who was loved by everybody -- he was open, well integrated, smiling and happy."

Prosecutor Jean-Marc Meilleur said the arson suspect was detained by police after people inside locked him inside the mosque.

"At the moment, there is only one suspect," Meilleur said early Tuesday, adding that it was too soon to know whether it was a one-man attack or a wider plot.

The last time an imam was targeted in Brussels was in 1989 when Saudi-born Abdullah Muhammad al-Ahdal was shot dead.

He served as imam in the Grand Mosque of Brussels and was killed on March of that year by an armed man inside the mosque.

His killing was claimed by a small pro-Iranian group in Lebanon who accused him of being too moderate and of having rejected the death fatwa slapped on writer Salman Rushdie.
