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Man behind anti-Islam video gets prison term

The New York Times (07.11.2012) - A federal judge on Wednesday sentenced the man behind "Innocence of Muslims," the anti-Islam YouTube video that ignited bloody protests in the Muslim world, to one year in prison for violating parole.

The man, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, who is also known as Mark Basseley Youssef, a name he legally adopted in 2002, appeared in Federal District Court here and pleaded guilty to four charges of violating a probation sentence imposed on him in 2010 after a bank fraud conviction. Each of his guilty pleas, worked out with prosecutors in advance, was related to his maintenance of the two identities.

In turn, the government agreed to drop four more probation violation charges, all of which pertained to Mr. Nakoula's work on the "Innocence of Muslims." Prosecutors had maintained that Mr. Nakoula lied to the police about the extent of his involvement in the project.

In accordance with the sentencing request by Robert Dugdale, the assistant United States attorney who prosecuted the case, Judge Christina A. Snyder ruled that Mr. Nakoula would serve one year in prison followed by four years of probation. She rejected a request for home confinement in lieu of prison from Mr. Nakoula's lawyer, Steve Seiden, telling Mr. Nakoula that he had already "struck a deal far more favorable than he might have otherwise suffered."

Although Mr. Dugdale did not pursue the probation violation charges that were directly related to "Innocence of Muslims," he spoke about Mr. Nakoula's film project — and the deceitful manner in which he carried it out — as part of his sentencing argument.

Mr. Dugdale said Mr. Nakoula had used the alias Sam Bacile, among others, to make the movie and had tricked the cast into thinking it was making a sword-and-sandal epic about a murderous tribal leader named George. Later, using crude dubbing techniques, Mr. Nakoula secretly turned that character into the Prophet Muhammad, Mr. Dugdale said. "That's a substantial fraud," Mr. Dugdale said.

It was the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad as a bloodthirsty thug that sparked violence from Egypt to Pakistan in September. Cast members, at least one of whom is now suing Mr. Nakoula, have received death threats and are having trouble finding work as a result of his dubbing, Mr. Dugdale said.

"His deception actually caused real harm to people," he said.

Reporters were barred from the courtroom but were allowed to watch the proceedings on three video monitors from a separate court facility. Seen on the video monitors, Mr. Nakoula, wearing his white protective custody prison smock, sat slouched between Mr. Seiden and an Arabic interpreter.

Judge Snyder noted at the start of the hearing that Mr. Nakoula had recently sent her a letter in Arabic but that she had not read it because she had been looking for the "appropriate procedure to fund a translator." Asked if he would like to speak about the contents of the letter in court, Mr. Nakoula declined.

Mr. Nakoula was arrested in September and was ordered held without bail. Out of concern for his safety, he has been kept in protective custody at the Metropolitan Detention Center here. A string of Muslim religious leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan have offered bounties for the killing of the film's maker.

OIC seeks unified global response to video

Gulf news (19.09.2012) - The issue of the anti-Islam film will be taken UP by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) foreign ministers in New York City next week, the secretary general has said.

"The efforts exerted in the last few days by the OIC have resulted in giving the disgusting blasphemous film the top priority on the agenda of the annual meeting of the OIC foreign ministers in New York next week," Ekme Al Deen Ihsanoglu said at a press conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabic daily Al Riyadh reported on Wednesday.

The ministers' meeting will discuss all options to reach an action plan to address the escalating incitement actions against Muslims, particularly Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), Ihsanoglu reportedly said.

The OIC, an alliance of 57 countries, will use its political weight to put an end to heinous acts that not only harm Muslims' religious feelings, but also threaten peace, security and stability in the region and in the world, he said. The OIC has condemned the film in the strongest terms, he added.

Ihsanoglu said that it was obvious that the violence was generated by the strong feelings and religious wounds felt in the Muslim world.

The events that hit Benghazi, Cairo, Khartoum and other cities have revealed the ominous consequences of the abuse of freedom of expression, a fact that the OIC has often warned about, he was quoted as saying by the Saudi daily.

However, Ihsanoglu called for self-restraint and condemned the killing of Chris Stevens, the US ambassador to Libya, and three US diplomats in the Benghazi consulate.

Resorting to violence results in the loss of lives and it should not be tolerated, the OIC chief said.

He added that he had, since the broadcast of the video, launched widespread diplomatic moves and made high-level contacts to secure an international unified response.

Letters were sent to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Arab League Secretary General Nabeel Al Arabi and European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton to explore ways to ensure there would be no repeat of acts of incitement that trigger violence.

California's Coptic Christians condemn anti-Islam film

Voice of America (17.09.2012) - California Coptic Christians say they are shocked that an Egyptian Coptic immigrant appears to be the producer of an inflammatory film that has sparked violent protests across the Muslim world. They say the film violates the tenets of their faith.

On Sunday, festival day at a Coptic church that is home to Christian immigrants from Egypt, Bishop Serapion performed baptisms.

But on the feast day of the one congregation's patron saints, thoughts turned to the homeland, which last week erupted in protests that have spread across the Muslim world.

Tuesday, a violent assault in Libya claimed the lives of four American diplomats, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens, a respected figure.

The protests were sparked by a film that ridicules the Prophet Muhammad. It was privately produced, but demonstrators blame the U.S. government for it. The California man thought to be behind the film, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, says he is a Coptic Christian. He has served prison time for bank fraud and authorities questioned him on Saturday about possible violations of his parole. The movie, widely seen by Muslims as offensive, is not illegal under the free speech provisions of the U.S. Constitution.

Los Angeles Coptic Orthodox Bishop Serapion and other leaders of his church condemn the film.

"Because we believe that is against our Christian faith, which we are against insulting the feelings of people," he explained.

The film is widely rejected within the Coptic community, says church member Maher Said.

"We don't say bad things about any religion," insisted Said.

He says he is worried that some Muslims have unjustly blamed all Coptic Christians in the West for the film.

These church members say they do not know alleged filmmaker Nakoula, but that the U.S. Coptic community has nothing to do with the movie, and that whoever produced it does not represent their faith, which demands respect for all religions.

American killed, embassy attacked amid fury over 'anti-Islam' film

Radio Australia (12.09.2012) - Anti-US fury erupts in Libya and Egypt, with an American killed and diplomatic buildings attacked amid anger over an 'anti-Muslim' film.

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton confirmed a state department officer had been killed after gunmen firing rocket-propelled grenades attacked the consulate, setting it on fire.

A spokesman for Libya's Supreme Security Committee told the Reuters news agency that "a number" of Americans had been injured in the attack.

Reuters also reported that witnesses had seen looters ransacking the building and setting off homemade bombs, after security forces who had been trying to hold the gunmen at bay were forced to withdraw.

"We are heartbroken by this terrible loss," Ms Clinton said in a statement, adding that Washington was working with countries around the world to protect its missions after the dual attacks.

She added that the US deplored anything that denigrated the religious beliefs of others but that it was no excuse for violence.

The attack in Libya came after an American flag, which had been flying at half-mast to mark the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, was torn to shreds by protesters who scaled the wall of the US embassy in Cairo.

Reports suggest both incidents were sparked by anger over a film which was produced by expatriate members of Egypt's Christian minority resident in the US.

Reports said the Cairo protesters, numbering nearly 3,000, were mostly hardline Islamist supporters of the Salafist movement.

A dozen men scaled the embassy walls and one of them tore down the US flag, replacing it with a black one inscribed with the Muslim profession of faith: "There is no God but God and Mohammed is the prophet of God."

Demonstrators also daubed part of that slogan - "There is no God but God" - on the walls of the embassy compound.

"What I heard was that it was replaced with a ... plain, black flag, But I may not be correct in that," said state department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland, adding that there had not been any reports of injuries.

"It sounds like, and I don't have full details, that this came up pretty quickly, [a] relatively modest group of people, but caught both us and the Egyptian security outside the embassy by surprise."

Hardening views

However, Ms Nuland dismissed the idea that feelings against the US among Egyptians were hardening, especially after a visit by Ms Clinton in July was met by some demonstrations.

"I would urge you not to draw too many conclusions as we have also had some very positive developments in our relationship with Egypt," Ms Nuland said.

"Obviously one of the things about the new Egypt is that protest is possible. Obviously we all want to see peaceful protest which is not what happened outside the US mission, so we're trying to restore calm now.

"But I think the bigger picture is one of the United States supporting Egypt's democratic transition and the Egyptian government very much welcoming and working with us on the support that we have to offer."

Egyptian police intervened without resorting to force and persuaded the trespassers to come down.

Women wearing the niqab, the full-face veil worn by hardline Islamists, joined the rally chanting: "Sons of the Cross, anything but our beloved Mohammed."

Egyptian activist Wael Ghoneim wrote on his Facebook page that "attacking the US embassy on September 11 and raising flags linked to Al Qaeda will not be understood by the American public as a protest over the film about the prophet.

"Instead, it will be received as a celebration of the crime that took place on September 11," he said.

Anniversary marked

The attacks came as Americans marked the anniversary of the September 11 attacks in which nearly 3,000 people were killed when hijacked airliners slammed into the Pentagon and New York's World Trade Centre and another was brought down in Pennsylvania.

The US embassy in Cairo issued a statement condemning "the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims, as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions."

On Sunday, Egyptian Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa denounced "the actions undertaken by some extremist Copts who made a film offensive to the prophet."

He said that the offence "affects millions of Muslims around the world" and that the making of such a film could not be justified on the basis of freedom of expression.

"The attack on religious sanctities does not fall under this freedom," he said.

Muslims consider depiction of the prophet sacrilegious.

Arab League deputy secretary general Ahmed Ben Hellli also condemned the film, saying it "contained insults against the prophet Mohammed" and "was denounced by Christians and Muslims" across the Arab world.

Mr Ben Helli said that "respecting sanctities and religious symbols is a basic principle acknowledged by the United Nations."

The Egyptian government stressed that every step would be taken to ensure the security of diplomatic missions.

The foreign ministry said it would take "all necessary security measures to protect all embassies, diplomatic missions and their staff."

Former teachers, Jehovah's Witnesses file discrimination lawsuit against school district

Naples Daily News (30.08.2012) - Two former teachers are suing the Lee County School District saying their school's principal discriminated against them and declined to re-hire them after learning they are Jehovah's Witnesses.

Kristine and Gerardo Rosales both were hired as teachers at Orange River Elementary in Fort Myers in 2008, according to a lawsuit filed Aug. 20 in U.S. District Court in Fort Myers. The lawsuit says Principal Holly Bell learned of the couple's religious beliefs when they asked for a day off in August 2010 to attend a Jehovah's Witness convention.

Prior to that, the couple had a close relationship with Bell and received positive reviews, according to the lawsuit.

In December 2010, Bell held a faculty meeting where she demanded the entire faculty participate in a mandatory Christmas activity, emphasizing "I don't care what religion you are," according to the suit.

After the meeting, the Rosaleses wrote Bell an email explaining their religion doesn't permit celebrating Christmas. The email went unanswered, according to the lawsuit, and the Rosaleses didn't attend the Christmas event.

At that point, the lawsuit says Bell purposely failed to "engage in any meaningful communication or interaction" with the Rosaleses.

"They're not complaining about anyone else celebrating any holiday," said Paul Reid, the couple's attorney. "They totally respect the ability to celebrate different holidays. All they're saying is they could not personally do it because of their religion."

As non-tenured teachers, the Rosaleses work on year-to-year contracts. Neither was rehired.

The lawsuit says Bell failed to abide by the terms of the Rosaleses' contracts and the teachers union's collective bargaining agreement for evaluating teachers, a calculated move to deny Kristine Rosales tenure. She didn't rehire Gerardo Rosales under a "reduction in force" action, that the lawsuit says was non-existent.

The school district does not comment on pending litigation, spokesman Joe Donzelli said. Bell is still the principal at the school, he said.

"Public schools should not be holding religious events, much less compulsory ones, much less ones in which faculty are forced to attend," said Richard Bilbao, a spokesman for the ACLU of Florida, after reviewing the suit.

This is the first discrimination case involving Jehovah's Witnesses the Lee County School District has faced. The Rosaleses first filed the complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which has brought dozens of discrimination suits involving Jehovah's Witnesses.

In 2010, the EEOC sued Belk Department Stores for firing a North Carolina Jehovah's Witness after she wouldn't don a Santa hat and red apron while wrapping presents. The suit said the store should have found a way to accommodate her religious beliefs.

Another case resulted in a \$1.3 million court judgment against AT&T after an employee was fired and another suspended after they skipped work to attend a convention for Jehovah's Witnesses. They weren't granted the time-off.

The Rosaleses are seeking back-pay, interest and possible reinstatement as well as compensation for other losses. They also want the school district to adopt a policy designed to address requests from employees who require religious accommodations.

U.S. International religious freedom report for 2011: Executive summary

End of July, the U.S. Department of State published its annual report about freedom of religion or belief in the world.

Human Rights Without Frontiers was mentioned in the report on Belgium and on Japan with the issue of "Abduction and deprivation of freedom for the purposed of forced religious de-conversion".

This report is available on Amazon.com

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Japan+Abduction+and+Deprivation+of+Freedom

U.S. Department of State (31.07.2012) - Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

To think, believe, or doubt. To speak or pray; to gather or stand apart. Such are the movements of the mind and heart, infinitives that take us beyond the finite. Freedom of religion, like all freedoms of thought and expression, are inherent. Our beliefs help define who we are and serve as a foundation for what we contribute to our societies. However, as the 2011 International Religious Freedom Report documents, too many people live under governments that abuse or restrict freedom of religion. People awaken, work, suffer, celebrate, raise children, and mourn unable to follow the dictates of their faith or conscience. Yet, under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, governments have committed to respect freedom of religion. As President Barack Obama said, they ought to "bear witness and speak out" when violations of religious freedom occur.

With these reports, we bear witness and speak out. We speak against authoritarian governments that repressed forms of expression, including religious freedom. Governments restricted religious freedom in a variety of ways, including registration laws that favored state-sanctioned groups, blasphemy laws, and treatment of religious groups as security threats. The report focuses special attention on key trends such as the impact of political and demographic transitions on religious minorities, who tended to suffer the most in 2011; the effects of conflict on religious freedom; and the rising tide of anti-Semitism. Impacted groups, to name just a few, included Baha'is and Sufis in Iran; Christians in Egypt; Ahmadis in Indonesia and Pakistan; Muslims in a range of countries, including in Europe; Tibetan Buddhists, Christians, and Uighur Muslims in China; and Jews in many parts of the world.

Religious minorities in political and demographic transitions

In 2011, the world watched as people in North Africa and the Middle East stood up for dignity, opportunity, and civil and political liberty. In countries in political transition, such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, people took the first steps of what will likely be a challenging path toward democracy. In times of transition, the situation of religious minorities in these societies comes to the forefront. Some members of society who have long been oppressed seek greater freedom and respect for their rights while others fear change. Those differing aspirations can exacerbate existing tensions.

The interim government of Egypt began to take measures toward greater inclusiveness, such as passing an anti-discrimination law; arresting and prosecuting alleged instigators of sectarian rioting; and allowing dozens of churches previously closed to reopen. Nevertheless, sectarian tensions and violence increased during the year, along with an overall increase in violence and criminality. This report documents both the Egyptian government's failure to curb rising violence against Coptic Christians and its involvement in violent attacks. For example, on October 9, 2011, the Egyptian security forces attacked demonstrators in front of the Egyptian radio and television building in the Maspero area of Cairo. Twenty-five people were killed and 350 injured, most of whom were Coptic Christians. To date, government officials have not been held accountable for their actions, and there were indications in early 2012 of mounting Coptic emigration.

Following the overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi in October 2011, the new government in Libya chose not to enforce some old laws that restricted religious freedom, ceased actively regulating all aspects of religious life, and enshrined the free practice of religion in an interim constitution, which also outlawed discrimination based on religion or sect. Early in 2012, the Libyan Supreme Court overturned a law that criminalized insults against Islam, the state, and religious symbols. Qadhafi-era laws prohibiting certain affronts to Islam, however, remained on the books even though there were no attempts to enforce them.

Transitions were not limited to the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. In Burma, a Country of Particular Concern, the government took steps toward overcoming a longstanding legacy of intense religious oppression. The government eased some restrictions on church construction and generally permitted adherents of religious groups registered with the government to worship as they chose. However, the government continued to impose restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently limited religious freedom. It also continued to monitor the meetings and activities of all organizations, including religious organizations, and required religious groups to seek permission from authorities before holding any large public events. Some of the Buddhist monks arrested in 2007 were released during the year and have not faced harassment since their release, but others were released with conditions attached or remained in prison serving long sentences. The government also refused to recognize the Muslim

Rohingya ethnic minority as citizens and imposed restrictions on their movement and marriage.

Countries in Europe are becoming more ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse. These demographic changes are sometimes accompanied by growing xenophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and intolerance toward people considered "the other." The report documents a rising number of European countries, including Belgium and France, whose laws restricting dress adversely affected Muslims and others. In a separate context, Hungary's parliament passed a law that regulates registration of religious organizations and requires a political vote in parliament to secure recognition. The law went into effect on January 1, 2012, reducing the number of recognized religious groups from over 300 to fewer than 32.

Effects of conflict on religious freedom

In 2011, governments responded to conflict and to groups they considered to be "violent extremists" in ways that restricted religious freedom and contributed to societal intolerance in countries as diverse as Bahrain, Russia, Iraq, and Nigeria. Authorities often failed to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and criminal or terrorist activities.

In Bahrain, the Sunni minority enjoyed favored status. During the state of emergency from March 15 to June 1, the government arrested and detained protestors, the vast majority of whom were members of the Shia community. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry received reports that 53 religious structures were demolished, largely during the ongoing unrest. The Commission recommended that the government rebuild some of the demolished structures.

In Russia, violent extremism in the North Caucasus region led to negative popular attitudes in many other regions toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups. The government continued to use the "Law on Combating Extremist Activity" to justify raids on religious organizations, detain and prosecute their members, and restrict the freedom to worship of minority group members, particularly targeting Muslim followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi's works, Jehovah's Witnesses, Falun Gong, and Scientologists. Additionally, a number of small radical-nationalist newspapers printed anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic articles that were readily available throughout the country. Russia labeled 19 Muslim groups as terrorist organizations and banned them. Such bans made it easier for officials to detain some individual Muslims arbitrarily for alleged connections to these groups.

In Iraq, attacks by violent extremist groups and sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia in some parts of the country had a negative impact on the ability of all citizens to practice their religion. A combination of sectarian hiring practices, corruption, targeted attacks, and the uneven application of the law contributed to the departure of significant numbers of non-Muslims from the country, including Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeen-Mandaeans. Notably, and in response to these challenges, the government reinforced its commitment to religious freedom by increasing security at places of worship and forming investigative committees to follow up on violent incidents.

In Nigeria, attacks by elements of the violent extremist sect Boko Haram claimed the lives of both Christians and Muslims. The government did not effectively quell rising hostility or investigate and prosecute those responsible for violence. There also were reports of abuses of religious freedom by certain state governments and local political actors who stoked communal and sectarian violence with impunity.

Expanded use and abuse of blasphemy laws

In 2011, governments increasingly used blasphemy, apostasy, and defamation of religion laws to restrict religious liberty, constrain the rights of religious minorities, and limit freedom of expression. In Pakistan, individuals accused of blasphemy or who publicly criticized the blasphemy laws and called for their reform continued to be killed, including Governor Punjab Salman Taseer and Minister of Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian in the cabinet. Aasia Bibi, a Christian, remained in prison, awaiting an appeal of her 2010 death sentence, the first such sentence for blasphemy handed down against a woman. The verdict in the case touched off a debate within the country about the blasphemy laws, with extremists calling for her execution and more moderate voices calling for her pardon or an appeal of the guilty verdict.

In Saudi Arabia, blasphemy against the Wahabi interpretation of Sunni Islam is punishable by death, but the more common penalty is a long prison sentence. In mid-November 2011, Mansor Almaribe, an Australian Shia of Iraqi descent, was arrested and convicted in the country of blasphemy and for "insulting the companions of the Prophet." He was sentenced to 500 lashes and a year in prison. His sentence was reduced to 75 lashes and no jail time. Almaribe was allowed to return to Australia after he received the lashes.

Indonesia detained and imprisoned individuals under its blasphemy law. For example, Antonius Richmond Bawengan, a Christian, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for blasphemy on February 8 for distributing books deemed "offensive to Islam." Discrimination and violence against Ahmadis also continued: Ahmadis who violate a government-imposed ban on proselytizing can be imprisoned for blasphemy; more than 26 regional governments enacted additional restrictions on the group; and the government failed to stop the murder of three and beating of five Ahmadis in Cikeusik, Banten province by a mob of 1,500 individuals. Video footage of the attack posted to the Internet shows members of the mob beating victims to death while police officers failed to intervene.

A rising tide of anti-Semitism

This report also documents a global increase in anti-Semitism, manifested in Holocaust denial, glorification, and relativism; conflating opposition to certain policies of Israel with blatant anti-Semitism; growing nationalistic movements that target "the other;" and traditional forms of anti-Semitism, such as conspiracy theories, acts of desecration and assault, "blood libel," and cartoons demonizing Jews. In Venezuela, the official media published numerous anti-Semitic statements. In Egypt, anti-Israel sentiment in the media was widespread and sometimes included anti-Semitic rhetoric and Holocaust denial or glorification. Web sites promoting Holocaust denial operated with Iran's consent. In France, the report documents desecration of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries. Hungary saw the rise in popularity of an openly anti-Semitic party, the Jobbik party. Jewish property was defaced in Ukraine, including a synagogue and several Holocaust monuments. In both Ukraine and the Netherlands, soccer matches were marred by anti-Semitic slogans.

Chronic violators of religious freedom

A range of countries remained chronic and systemic violators of religious freedom. This report documents the ongoing state of religious repression in China, North Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, and other countries with authoritarian governments. In Iran, Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani remained jailed and faced possible execution simply for practicing his faith. The Iranian government also continued to imprison seven leaders of the Baha'i community: Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Vahid Tizfahm, and Mahvash Sabet. Like other freedoms, religious freedom simply does not exist in North Korea.

Executive summaries of select countries

This section summarizes overall conditions in some countries where violations, improvements, or positive developments in religious freedom were noteworthy; additional information can be found in the country reports. States that Secretary Clinton designated as Countries of Particular Concern in August 2011 are denoted with an asterisk.

Afghanistan: The constitution states that "Followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law," but also states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." The government's failure to protect minority religious groups and individuals limited religious freedom. For example, while the constitution expressly protects free exercise of faith for non-Muslims, in situations where the constitution and penal code are silent, including apostasy and blasphemy, courts relied on interpretations of Islamic law, some of which conflict with the country's international commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

China*: There was a marked deterioration during 2011 in the government's respect for and protection of religious freedom in China. In the Tibetan Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas, this included increased restrictions on religious practice, especially in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries. Official interference in the practice of these religious traditions exacerbated grievances and contributed to at least 12 self-immolations by Tibetans in 2011. The repression tightened in the lead-up to and during politically and religiously sensitive anniversaries and events, such as the third anniversary of the protests and riots in Tibetan areas that began on March 10, 2008; the observance of "Serf Emancipation Day" on March 28; the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party on July 1; the Dalai Lama's birthday on July 6; and the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet on July 19.

China only allows groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Protestant) to register with the government and legally hold worship services. Other religious groups, such as Protestant groups unaffiliated with the official patriotic religious association or Catholics professing loyalty to the Vatican, are not permitted to register as legal entities. Proselytizing in public or unregistered places of worship is not permitted. Some religious and spiritual groups are outlawed. Tibetan Buddhists in China are not free to venerate the Dalai Lama and encounter severe government interference in religious practice. The government continued to severely repress Muslims living in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and other parts of China. Crackdowns on Christian house churches, such as the Shouwang church in Beijing, continued. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members are required to be atheists and are generally discouraged from participating in religious activities.

Cuba: The government's respect for religious freedom improved, although significant restrictions remained in place and the Cuban Communist Party, through its Office of Religious Affairs, continued to wield regulatory control over most aspects of religious life. Most religious groups reported increased ability to cultivate new members, hold religious activities, and conduct charitable and community service projects, while at the same time reporting fewer restrictions on religious expression, importation of religious materials, and travel. However, the government's repression of peaceful human rights activists included preventing some of them from attending religious services. For example, members of the Ladies in White (Damas de Blanco) group were routinely prevented from attending church, a practice that was particularly pronounced in the eastern provinces of Holguin and Santiago. Adisnidia Cruz, mother of political prisoners Marcos and Antonio

Lima-Cruz, was prevented from leaving her house in Holguin on Sundays to attend mass on dozens of occasions. In other instances the government harassed human rights activists immediately after religious services. On September 8, for instance, members of the Damas de Blanco were arrested after attending mass in Santiago to celebrate the day of Cuba's patron saint.

Eritrea*: The situation deteriorated as the government continued to harass and detain members of registered and unregistered religious groups, some of whom reportedly died in detention as a result of torture and lack of medical treatment. The government retained significant control over the four registered religious groups. Many places of worship closed because of government intimidation and mass conscription of religious workers and parishioners. At year's end, many estimated that the population of religious prisoners remained at 2,000 to 3,000. This estimate did not include the approximately 3,000 religious workers that were compelled to national service against their will, nor the members of the Catholic Church who engaged in protests, all of whom reportedly were released subsequently. It was unknown how many of the approximately 100 individuals detained during the year were released on the condition of recanting their faith or paying a fine.

Iran*: Religious freedom in Iran deteriorated further from an already egregious situation. Government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on religious beliefs continued during the year. Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani remained jailed and faced possible execution for practicing his faith, and sentences of the seven Baha'i leaders were re-extended to the original 20 years after having been reduced to 10 years in 2010. The government arrested the seven in 2009 for "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic." The government created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as for Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, Jews, Sunni, and Zoroastrians. Shia adherents who did not share the government's official religious views also faced harassment and intimidation.

North Korea*: Religious freedom does not exist in any form in North Korea. The government continued to repress unauthorized religious groups, and dealt harshly with those who engaged in religious activities it deemed unacceptable. Reports by refugees, defectors, missionaries, and nongovernmental organizations indicated that religious persons who engaged in proselytizing in the country and those who were in contact with foreigners or missionaries were arrested and subjected to harsh penalties. Refugees and defectors stated that they witnessed or heard of arrests and possible executions of underground Christian church members in prior years. Due to the country's inaccessibility and the inability of foreigners to gain timely information, the continuation of arrests and executions during the year remained difficult to quantify.

Pakistan: The situation deteriorated as some government practices limited freedom of religion, particularly for members of religious minority groups. Freedom of speech is constitutionally "subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam." Abuses continued under the blasphemy law and other discriminatory laws, such as "the anti-Ahmadi laws"; the government did not take adequate measures to prevent these incidents or reform the laws to prevent abuse. Since the government rarely investigated or prosecuted the perpetrators of extremist attacks on religious minorities and members of the Muslim majority promoting tolerance, the number of attacks increased and the climate of impunity continued. There were instances in which law enforcement personnel reportedly abused persons belonging to religious minorities in custody. The government took some steps to improve religious freedom and promote tolerance, such as the creation of a Ministry of National Harmony after devolution of the Ministry of Minorities. Following the assassination of Minister of Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, the president appointed his brother, Paul Bhatti, as his special advisor for minority affairs.

Russia: The government generally respected religious freedom, but some minority denominations continued to experience difficulties. The most significant constraints on religious freedom during the year included the use of extremism charges to target minority religions and some broad restrictions on the freedoms of expression and association, in addition to efforts related to denial of registration as a religious organization, preventing access to places of worship, denial of visas for religious visitors, and detention of members of religious organizations. While there is no state religion, the Russian Orthodox Church and selected other "traditional" religious communities received preferential consideration.

Saudi Arabia* does not recognize freedom of religion and prohibits the public practice of any religion other than Islam. The government subjected Muslims who did not adhere to the government's interpretation of Islam to political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination. Some non-Muslims faced harassment, detention, and death. The Saudi government revised some school textbooks, but Arabic and religion textbooks still contained overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians as well as intolerant references by allusion against Shia and Sufi Muslims and other religious groups.

Sudan*: The interim constitution and other laws and policies provide for some religious freedom; however, apostasy, conversion from Islam, blasphemy, and some interfaith marriages are prohibited. In addition, observers asserted that Salafists were growing as a proportion of the total Muslim population and that this growth was creating new sources of conflict with Christians and non-Salafist Muslims.

Syria: As the government's unconscionable attacks against its people escalated, civilians in the Sunni majority endured the greatest violence. The regime also targeted and destroyed churches and mosques across the country during this period of protest which began in response to regime abuses. The regime contextualized the protests within a sectarian framework, maintaining that the protesters were associated with "extreme Islamist factions." At times, popular perception among the protesters conflated the regime's brutality and killing of over 5,000 civilians with alleged Alawite violence against Sunni Muslims. This led to an increase of tension, violence, and killing between largely Alawite and Sunni communities. Some Christians, Druze, and opposition members also suffered at the hands of the regime. As the violence grew, members of minority religious communities were increasingly vulnerable.

Turkmenistan: The government's respect for religious freedom remained low, despite provisions for religious freedom in the constitution and in some laws and policies. Discriminatory government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued. Authorities often failed to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and criminal or terrorist activities. Several religious groups remained unable to register and the government restricted even registered groups' ability to obtain places to worship and to print, distribute, or import religious materials. Although there were fewer reports of raids and arbitrary detentions involving Jehovah's Witnesses, the government continued to arrest, charge, and imprison Jehovah's Witnesses who were conscientious objectors to military service.

Uzbekistan* requires religious groups to register and prohibits some activities, such as proselytizing, as well as publishing, importing, and distributing religious materials without a license. Most minority religious groups had difficulty meeting the government's strict registration requirements. In some cases, members faced heavy fines and even jail terms for violations of the state's religion laws. The government restricted religious activities that it proclaimed to be in conflict with national security and generally dealt harshly with Muslims who practice and discuss Islam outside of government-sanctioned mosques. Uzbek law prohibits religious groups from forming political parties and social movements, as well as the private teaching of religious principles.

Vietnam restricted religious freedom in a number of ways. Christians, in particular, faced challenges. The government held religious prisoners, including lay preachers Ksor Y Du and Kpa Y Ko. Hundreds of churches continued to await registration by local authorities in the Northwest Highlands, and the government has not allowed publication of the Bible in the modern H'mong language, despite pledging to do so. Authorities harassed some groups and individuals. In March authorities of An Giang, Dong Thap, Vinh Long, and Can Tho ordered surveillance of unsanctioned Hoa Hao monks, and police blocked roads and harassed or threatened followers. Police beat one follower severely. Protestant Khmers reported harassment, intimidation, and, in some cases, property damage and beatings by Khmer Krom Buddhists in certain districts of Tra Vinh Province.

Conclusion

Even as this report documents abuses of religious freedom, the events of 2011 show that change is possible and suggests that countries whose constitution, laws, policies, and practices protect religious freedom and human rights will be the most vibrant and stable. This report documents places where intolerance does not have the last word. Turkey issued a decree facilitating the return of property confiscated from religious community foundations in the past. In Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which represents 95 percent of religious congregations in the country, discussed with the government legal protections for religious freedom, visas for foreign religious workers, and procedures for religious organizations to obtain legal status in Ukraine. In France, members of a Jewish - Muslim friendship association traveled around the country to educate youth about Islam and Judaism.

The United States was active around the world promoting religious freedom, and challenging threats to such freedom. For example, senior U.S. officials, including President Barack Obama, raised deep U.S. concerns about increased religious violence and discrimination against Copts with senior Egyptian officials, including concerns about the government's failure to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence. The United States also sponsored programs in Egypt to promote religious tolerance and freedom.

To promote religious freedom in Burma*, U.S. embassy representatives offered support to local nongovernmental organizations and religious leaders, including through small grants and training programs. The U.S. government has a wide array of sanctions in place against the country for its violations of human rights; steps to ease those sanctions depend on the government undertaking significant reform.

U.S. officials from the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. embassy and consulates in Iraq met regularly with representatives of all of Iraq's religious and ethnic communities, including its minority communities. A U.S. government-funded program sponsored successful interfaith dialogues in areas with religious tensions, such as Kirkuk. The assistant chief of mission for assistance transition led the embassy's efforts to reach out to ethnic and religious minority communities.

The U.S. government's efforts to promote religious freedom are intertwined with our efforts to promote freedom of expression. Blasphemy laws silence voices in the name of "protecting religion." They are anathema to religious freedom since the deeply held beliefs of one religious group may be interpreted as blasphemous by another group. The United States strongly opposed the Organization of the Islamic Conference's (OIC) 12-year campaign at the United Nations to ban so-called "defamation" of religion. At the March 2011 session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the OIC, the United States, the European Union, and all other members joined consensus on Resolution 16/18 "Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief." In the fall, the UN General Assembly passed a similar resolution by consensus. This resolution

helped the HRC move past the divisive and problematic debates about intolerance and expression to an action-oriented approach that is protective of human rights.

In December, the United States hosted the first expert-level implementation meeting. Experts from 27 countries discussed effective government strategies to engage members of religious minorities, train officials on religious and cultural awareness, and enforce laws that prevent discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.

The United States is also giving voice to others. At an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe conference, Hannah Rosenthal, our Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, and Farah Anwar Pandith, our Special Representative to Muslim Communities, traded speeches to launch the 2011 Hours Against Hate campaign. Special Envoy Rosenthal spoke out against Muslim-hatred and Special Representative Pandith spoke out against anti-Semitism. They ended their remarks with this simple line, "Jews cannot fight anti-Semitism alone. Muslims cannot fight "Islamophobia" alone... Hate is hate, but we can overcome it together."

This campaign called upon young people to volunteer their time to assist persons from other communities -- a Jew for a Muslim charity, a man for a women's shelter, a Muslim for a Jewish clinic, a Christian for a Baha'i food pantry. The campaign generated so much interest and so many hours of volunteer time that it has been endorsed by the London Olympic and Paralympic Games Organizing Committee as one of its tolerance campaigns for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, now called 2012 Hours Against Hate.

President Obama said at a celebration of Coptic Christmas in January 2012, "as history repeatedly reminds us, freedom of religion, the protection of people of all faiths, and the ability to worship as you choose are critical to a peaceful, inclusive, and thriving society." These reports document where people live, think, pray, and speak freely and where, in contrast, governments limit those freedoms, abusing the rights of their people, violating international agreements, and diminishing the reputations of their own countries.

Head of DOJ civil rights division declines to state whether he will protect speech critical of religion

The Lawfare Project (01.08.2012) - One of the greatest liberties granted to the people of the United States is freedom of speech. Because of the protections guaranteed by the First Amendment one can criticize religion and religious beliefs, no matter how unpopular or offensive. Indeed blasphemy is not a crime in this country, and for good reason. But last week Thomas Perez, Assistant Attorney General of the Department of Justice (DOJ) Civil Rights Division, came dangerously close to tolerating the abrogation of our First Amendment liberties.

On July 26, Representative Trent Franks (R-AZ) asked Perez before the House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution, "Will you tell us here today that this Administration's Department of Justice will never entertain or advance a proposal that criminalizes speech against any religion?"

Shockingly, Perez refused to answer whether he would uphold the fundamental protections of the First Amendment. After several requests to answer a basic and straightforward question on First Amendment law, Perez still refused to make a statement. A video of Perez's refusals is available on [YouTube](#).

Franks' question was prompted by a meeting last October at George Washington University between top Justice Department officials and anti-free speech Islamist advocates. Among the attendees were representatives of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) and Mohamed Magid, President of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). The latter organization is a Muslim Brotherhood front and an unindicted co-conspirator in a Hamas funding trial in 2008. The meeting's advocates lobbied for cutbacks in U.S. anti-terror funding, limits on the powers of terrorism investigators, and changes in agent training manuals. **Most significantly, they urged for a legal declaration that criticism of Islam in the U.S. be considered racial discrimination**, potentially under the Title VI anti-discrimination laws.

Neither Perez nor the other DOJ officials present objected to the call to redefine our most precious of rights in violation of First Amendment principles. Instead, Perez stated that he "sat [t]here the entire time, taking notes [having] some very concrete thoughts...in the aftermath of this."

The Islamist lobby was led by Sahar Aziz, an Egyptian-born, American lawyer and Fellow at the aforementioned Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a Muslim advocacy group based in Michigan. **Aziz urged for a legal redefinition of freedom of speech that would equate speech critical of Islam with racism**, which she hoped would then "take [federal] money away from local police departments and fusion centers who are spying on all of us." According to Aziz, the word "Muslim" has "become racialized..." and she "[does not] accept this formalistic cop-out that this is all about religion." Unfortunately for her argument, the First Amendment protects free speech, and especially speech critical of religion. Without debating whether discrimination against Muslims occurs on racial or religious grounds, Aziz's suggestions constitute an overbroad assumption that all speech critical of Islam or Islamist rhetoric must be, by definition, discriminatory and racist.

This most recent incident is merely one element of an orchestrated campaign to enforce Sharia (Islamic law) blasphemy codes in the West. Over the past eleven years, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a 57-member group of Muslim states and the second largest inter-governmental organization after the U.N., has maneuvered within the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), to gain "international legitimacy of their domestic criminal prosecutions of anti-religious speech." Such an Islamist lawfare strategy - the use of the law as a weapon of war to silence speech deemed blasphemous to Islam - is complimented by frivolous lawsuits designed to punish and chill the exercise of free speech on issues of national security, such as Islamist terrorism and its sources of support.

Aziz's comments, and the DOJ's apathetic response, follows the passage of UNHRC Resolution 16/18, **strongly pushed by the OIC and supported by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the latest in a series of all out attacks on the exercise of free speech in liberal democracies.** Resolution 16/18 labels those who investigate and speak critically about Islamist terrorism as "extremist" and reiterates "concern" with the negative projection of religion. This past December, the United States hosted an international conference with the objective of establishing standards for implementing Resolution 16/18. This has resulted in, among other things, the redaction of the words Islam and jihad from Department of Defense counter terror training manuals and the Ft. Hood report that classified the terrorist attack on a U.S. military base by an American soldier, Major Nidal Hassan, as "workplace violence." The report also, tellingly, omitted all reference to Major Hassan's ties to Islamist terrorists and his essay arguing for the painful liquidation of non-Muslims.

Lawfare Project Director and human rights attorney, Brooke Goldstein, commented, ***"It is worrisome, nay, unacceptable, for the U.S. Secretary of State and the Department of Justice to seemingly entertain the re-definition of a fundamental***

American freedom enshrined in the Constitution, the inalienable human right to freedom of speech. The cornerstone of any liberal democracy is the right to speak critically of religion and to dialogue openly about imminent threats to our national security, such as militant Islam. It is more than apparent that Islamist entities such as the OIC, ISNA, and ISPU have clear goals that directly contradict American concepts of human rights. We must be swift to condemn our government's failure to denounce those goals; the compromising of U.S. national security and the prioritization of Islamic speech codes over the First Amendment rights that make America unique."

Debate reignites over religion at Air Force Academy

By Chris Lisee

The Washington Post (16.07.2012) - The long-smoldering debate at the U.S. Air Force Academy over the role of religion in cadets' lives has reignited, just as a new class arrives on campus for basic training.

Accusations of improper proselytizing on the Colorado Springs, Colo., campus have been challenged by those who argue that AFA guidelines curtail religious expression.

The two sides recently clashed over a letter from 66 House Republicans urging Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to investigate the USAF's growing "hostility toward religious freedom" under guidelines set last September by USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz.

In response to allegations of proselytizing, Schwarz mandated that only chaplains could endorse religious programs.

But the congressional letter argues that the new policy goes too far.

"While we agree that leaders should not use their positions to impose their religious beliefs or extend preferential treatment to those who share their beliefs, the decisions that have been made in reliance upon this policy go beyond what is required by the U.S. Constitution," the letter reads.

The Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty, a conservative Christian organization representing evangelical chaplains, applauded the letter.

"There's nothing wrong with a commander attending, even publicizing and encouraging ... a good and positive event for the morale and the welfare of military personnel," said executive director and retired Col. Ron Crews, a former chaplain with 28 years of military experience.

"There's nothing wrong with a commander saying, 'This is an event that I support and I am going to.' You're encouraged to go, but you are not ordered to go," he said.

But David Mullin, a former AFA economics professor, said military culture muddies the distinction between encouragement and orders, so only chaplains should speak on religious matters.

"When a military commander says 'you are encouraged to attend,' whether it is to military officers or civilians, that is an effective order," Mullin said. This constitutes improper proselytism, he added.

A self-described evangelical, Mullin is one of the few to openly criticize what he calls an unhealthy religious climate in the AFA. He is represented in court by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a legal watchdog.

Mullin was one of five academy professors who sued unsuccessfully in January 2011 to stop a school prayer luncheon that would feature as keynote speaker a veteran who calls himself a "U.S. Marine for Christ."

He alleges his dog was poisoned after he protested about the school's religious climate later that year.

Mullin suggests part of the problem stems from the AFA's Colorado Springs location. The city hosts many evangelical parachurch organizations, such as James Dobson's Focus on the Family, as well as New Life Church, an evangelical church founded by its former pastor Ted Haggard.

He added that some of these groups have access to the academy, including cards that get them into dorms.

"You have very strong encouragement — basically carte blanche access to cadets by the leadership of the academy by these groups," Mullin said. "It is corruption, and there is substantial religious discrimination as part of this corruption," he said.

The AFA has long struggled with setting boundaries for religious expression.

In 2004 a team of Yale Divinity School students and professors found "challenges to pluralism" at the academy. A memo expressed "concern that the overwhelmingly evangelical tone of general Protestant worship encouraged religious divisions rather than fostering understanding among basic cadets."

An internal AFA investigative panel in 2005 found religious "insensitivity," but not "overt religious discrimination."

Still, the Air Force that year issued guidelines that banned some public prayers and discouraged public discussion of religious belief by commanders and enlisted personnel. A 2006 revision relaxed the guidelines somewhat by allowing personal religious discussions that are not coercive.

A 2010 survey found 41 percent of non-Christian cadets faced unwanted proselytizing, even as the religious majority felt that their freedom of speech was being infringed upon.

This is bad for cadets and bad for the country, says Mikey Weinstein, a 1977 academy graduate and founder of MRFF.

The congressional letter, he said, is part of a larger cultural battle to hold personal Christian rights over civil rights. "It's just another example of the level of stupidity and unbridled fundamentalist Christian cancer," he said.

MRFF has 362 clients at the AFA, triple those at the Army and Navy academies, according to Weinstein. He claims 35 families from the incoming class have already contacted him, though no suits have been filed.

Crews said Weinstein's message is misguided, and that the Constitution protects the right to evangelize in ways that are not belligerent or coercive.

"As I understand, Mikey Weinstein's interpretation of the First Amendment is that we have freedom from religion instead of freedom of religion." Crews said. "Just because someone puts on the uniform does not mean that they give up their God-given, constitutionally protected religious liberties."

Is refusal of blood transfusion on religious grounds a dangerous practice?

HRWF (17.07.2012) - The refusal of blood transfusion on religious grounds is often reproached to Jehovah's Witnesses. Adults have the right to accept or to refuse a medical treatment for any reason, religious or not. In the case of children, surgeons can ignore the opinion of the parents in certain circumstances when a child's life is in danger. In many countries, Jehovah's Witnesses have established cooperative relationships with hospitals and surgeons that use alternative medical practices to blood transfusion.

The last president of MIVILUDES in France (Inter-Ministerial Mission Monitoring and Fighting against Sectarian Drifts), Georges Fenech, who is now a member of the French National Assembly, repeatedly warned against this religious movement saying that this practice "could almost be said to disturb public order and public health."

A recent medical study investigating whether refusing blood transfusion after heart surgery causes injury to patients does not confirm Mr Fenech's allegations of lower efficiency of alternative methods. In contrast, Mr Fenech has never provided any medical study supporting his views, and he has never identified an actual case in which the child of one of Jehovah's Witnesses died because of refusal of blood transfusion. The recent study is only one of a growing body of research showing similar or superior outcomes for patients treated without the use of autologous blood transfusions. See hereafter the article published by CBC News on 3 July 2012.

Jehovah's Witness heart patients do well without blood transfusions

CBC News (03,07.2012) - Jehovah's Witnesses, whose religious beliefs prohibit them from having blood transfusions, had fewer complications and shorter hospital stays than other heart patients who had transfusions for surgery over a 28-year period at Cleveland Clinic, a new study concludes.

In fact, Jehovah's Witnesses spent less time in hospital and in intensive care, on average, and weren't as likely to need a further operation as a result of bleeding problems compared to other patients, according to the study released Monday in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

"Current extreme blood management strategies do not appear to place patients at heightened risk for reduced long-term survival," says the study, which was led by Dr. Gregory Pattakos.

During heart surgery, patients are sometimes given a transfusion of red blood cells to prevent anemia. For Jehovah's Witnesses, the strategy may focus on giving them certain vitamins and iron so their red blood cell counts don't get too low during a procedure.

Slightly fewer Witnesses died in hospital

For the Cleveland Clinic research, 87,775 cardiac surgery patients were identified as having had heart surgery between 1983 and 2011. Of those, 322 were Jehovah's Witnesses. Of the non-Jehovah's Witnesses, 48,986 (56 per cent) received blood transfusions and 38,467 (44 per cent) did not.

The researchers compared the 322 Jehovah's Witnesses to an equal number of patients "who were similar in most ways," but who did receive transfusions. Most of the patients had bypass surgeries.

'An important limitation of the study is that Witnesses who undergo cardiac surgery are likely a healthier subgroup of Witnesses because those who are believed by their surgeons to require blood transfusion to survive cardiac surgery presumably never go to the operating room.'-Dr. Victor A. Ferraris, University of Kentucky Chandler Medical Center.

The researchers found a "similar" number of patients - 10 Jehovah's Witnesses and 14 in the comparison group - died in hospital. One Jehovah's Witness had a heart attack (myocardial infarction) during a procedure, compared to nine people who had blood transfusions.

The study also found that among the fewer complications, the Jehovah's Witnesses patients, compared to the non-Witnesses, had fewer incidences of:

- Myocardial infarction (0.31 per cent versus 2.8 per cent).
- Additional operations for bleeding (3.7 per cent versus 7.1 per cent).
- Prolonged ventilation (six per cent versus 16 per cent).

'Conservative' use of transfusions may be beneficial

The researchers didn't give reasons for the different patient outcomes.

But in a commentary accompanying the study, Dr. Victor A. Ferraris of the University of Kentucky Chandler Medical Center in Lexington said: "An important limitation of the study is that Witnesses who undergo cardiac surgery are likely a healthier subgroup of Witnesses because those who are believed by their surgeons to require blood transfusion to survive cardiac surgery presumably never go to the operating room."

However, Ferraris added, the finding that Jehovah's Witnesses who didn't receive transfusions did as well as or better than patients who received transfusions "raises questions about whether more patients might benefit from surgical strategies that minimize transfusion of blood products."

He also said the Cleveland Clinic findings add to previous research that suggests "more conservative use of blood transfusions" would be in the best interests of all patients.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/story/2012/07/03/jehovahs-witness-transfusions.html>

Social media ablaze after Arizona pastor arrested for home Bible study

By Michael Salman

The Examiner (11.07.2012) - On July 11, 2012, Fox and Friends asked whether the punishment for a Pastor who was arrested for holding a Bible study in his home fit the crime. Response has been vast and the story of Michael Salman, who faces a jail sentence of 60 days following a Phoenix, Arizona arrest for hosting the home Bible group, has rampantly spread through Facebook and Twitter.

According to Fox News on Facebook, the story has been shared over 8,000 times and comments are intense. Judging by the response to the story, the majority is outraged and several referred to the actions of Phoenix Police Officers as insane. Others feel it is a deliberate attack on religious freedom.

Salman's wife, Suzanne, spoke to Fox News Insider on Wednesday morning and stated, "It defies logic, honestly. I don't understand ... that something so small got so large like this. People do it all over the United States all the time."

City officials state that Salman violated city code ordinances when he allowed approximately 20 people to enter his home to study the Bible. In addition to a 60-day jail sentence, Salman received a fine of \$12,180 and three years probation. The city states that his Bible study was the equivalent of a church that they weren't zoned for.

A statement released by Vicki Hill, Prosecutor for Phoenix City states, "It came down to zoning and proper permitting. Anytime you are holding a gathering of people continuously as he does, we have concerns about people being able to exit the facility properly in case there is a fire, and that's really all this comes down to."

Others disagree

Multiple comments on Facebook point out that many people have parties with more than 20 people in attendance. They also state that home Bible studies are protected under the First Amendment right to freedom of assembly.

Catholic Church says child abuse cases rose in 2011

By Andrew Stern

Reuters (10.04.2012) - The number of credible allegations of sexual abuse of minors committed by Roman Catholic priests or deacons in the United States rose 15 percent last year, and the church spent \$144 million to deal with the ongoing scandal, according to a church-sponsored audit released on Tuesday.

A total of 489 people reported credible allegations of abuse by priests or deacons in 2011, the bulk of them involving adults victimized when they were children decades ago by now-deceased clerics, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said in a report on its ninth annual audit of the issue.

Twenty-one of the victims were younger than 19 and victimized more recently. Attorneys for victims say there are likely tens of thousands more victims who have never come forward since the scandal erupted in Boston in 2002.

"We renew our promise to strive to the fullest to end the societal scourge of child sexual abuse," Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the conference, said in an introductory letter to the report.

Critics of the church's handling of the sex abuse crisis scoffed at the audit, saying it minimized the extent of the abuse and the culpability of the church hierarchy.

The yearly audit for the bishops identified credible allegations against 406 priests or deacons. In 2010, there were 428 credible allegations against 345 offenders. More than one-third of the alleged perpetrators had never been charged before.

The figures for victims and offenders were twice as high earlier in the decade, then dropped off beginning in 2008.

Twelve accused clerics remained active in ministry pending the outcome of investigations. Eleven percent of new allegations were deemed false.

Altogether, U.S. dioceses and religious institutes spent \$144 million on abuse settlement-related costs, which included \$50 million for settlements, \$37 million in attorneys' fees, \$6 million on therapy for victims and \$10 million on support for offenders. About a quarter of the settlement amount was covered by church insurance policies.

The church spent another \$33 million on child protection efforts last year. Nearly all church employees have undergone training on the issue, the bishops' audit said, and a majority of children in parishes have been instructed how identify when they are being "groomed" for abuse and what to do.

"The church must continue to be vigilant. The church must do all she can never to let abuse happen again. And we must all continue to work with full resolve toward the healing and reconciliation of the victims/survivors," Dolan said.

The yearly audit was conducted for the first time by StoneBridge Business Partners, which visited one-third of the 195 dioceses. Data was also provided by the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

Critics such as the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) and BishopAccountability.org have said the church cannot police itself, and that the crime of church higher-ups hiding and transferring offending priests is a persistent problem.

SNAP's outreach director Barbara Dorris called the audits "nearly meaningless." BishopAccountability.org president Terence McKiernan called it a "serious disservice to the public by pretending that all is well."

A trial is under way for a member of the church hierarchy in Philadelphia, Monsignor William Lynn, who is accused of transferring offending priests to unsuspecting parishes.

Lynn, 61, is the highest-ranking member of the U.S. church to go on trial in an abuse-related case, though Kansas City, Missouri, Bishop Robert Finn is to go on trial in September on a charge he failed to report to authorities about a priest found with pornographic pictures of young girls.

"Those horrific cases prove that, when it comes to kids' safety, little in church hierarchy has changed," Dorris said.

McKiernan of BishopAccountability.org said the number of priests credibly accused of molesting children since 1950 has now increased to more than 6,100.

Altogether, U.S. dioceses have spent \$2.1 billion on settlement-related costs for the abuse scandal between 2004 through last year, according to the report. Eight dioceses, a Jesuit province, and the Irish Christian Brotherhood, a Catholic brotherhood that runs schools and orphanages, have declared bankruptcy since 2004, claiming overwhelming debts from the costs of the scandal.
