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Bahrain should stop persecution of Shi'a Muslims and return its citizenship to their spiritual leader

UNOG (24.04.2014)

http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/%28httpPages%29/18AA969BF70BC694C1257CC40050BCD3?OpenDocument - The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, today urged the Government of Bahrain to stop the harassment and persecution of the most senior religious leader of the Bahraini Shi'a Muslim community, who was reportedly forced to leave his country following threats from state security agents to arrest him and his son.

"I have received information from reliable sources that on 23 April Hussain Mirza Abdelbaqi Najati was forced to leave his own country for Lebanon after being exposed to enormous pressure and harassment by the authorities," the human rights expert said.

Following Bahrain's Ministry of Interior own statement, issued on its website on 23 April, it appears that the decision revoking Mr. Najati's Bahraini citizenship and the orders to expel him from the country may have been made due to his position as a senior and influential religious authority among Shi'a believers, who make up the majority of the population.

"I have expressed to the Government of Bahrain my grave concerns at what appears to be an act of religiously motivated discrimination which would seem to impose unjustified restrictions on Mr. Najati's fundamental human rights, including his right to practice and profess peacefully his religious beliefs," Mr. Bielefeldt stressed, warning that the case may have far-reaching implications for Shi's Muslim community in the country.

"Targeting the most senior and influential Shi'a religious figure in Bahrain may amount to intimidating and thus discriminating against the entire Shi'a Muslim community in the country because of its religious beliefs," the Special Rapporteur stressed.

Mr. Najati is one of 31 individuals whose Bahraini citizenship was revoked on 7 November 2012 by the decision of the Ministry of Interior, a decision that rendered him stateless.

In this regard the United Nations expert urged the Government to reverse its decision, which appears to be arbitrary, and to facilitate Mr. Najati's return from Lebanon.

"International law, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, prohibits arbitrary deprivation of nationality, including on religious grounds," the expert noted.

"Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms."

"I understand that Mr. Najati has consistently refrained from engaging into politics, and has maintained his position and activities strictly in the realm of his religion," the Special Rapporteur said. "He is not known to have advocated violence or its use, or to have

committed acts that would undermine national security or public order, nor has he been charged or sentenced for committing such acts.”

Heiner Bielefeldt assumed his mandate on 1 August 2010. As Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, he is independent from any government, and acts in his individual capacity. Mr. Bielefeldt is Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Politics at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. From 2003 to 2009, he was Director of Germany's National Human Rights Institution. The Special Rapporteur's research interests include various interdisciplinary facets of human rights theory and practice, with a focus on freedom of religion or belief. Learn more, log on to:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/FreedomReligionIndex.aspx>

Check the Special Rapporteur's report on tackling manifestations of collective religious hatred: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Pages/ListReports.aspx>

Check the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ReligionOrBelief.aspx>

A new cathedral for Northern Arabia

Aid to the Church in Need (19.03.2014) - Bishop Camillo Ballin, an Italian-born Comboni missionary, heads the Roman Catholic Vicariate of Northern Arabia. He is overseeing the first-ever building of a new cathedral in Bahrain, on land given to the Church by Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah.

The cathedral, named Our Lady of Arabia, will serve an estimated 2.5 million Catholics, the great majority of them foreign guest workers, in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The new structure will be a focal point for the territory's 10 parishes and more than 100 underground communities.

Particularly in Saudi Arabia, the public practice of Christianity on the Arab Peninsula is severely restricted, mostly limited to the grounds of foreign embassies and private homes. Priests are generally not allowed to appear in public dressed in clerical garb; conversions of Muslims to Christianity are strictly forbidden, and Christians are banned from marrying Muslim women.

The building of the new cathedral signals a breakthrough in Church-state relations and is also testimony to what the prelate describes as “the constantly increasing number of Catholics in the region.” Currently only five formally designated churches serve the 880,000 square miles that make up the Vicariate.

Bishop Ballin spoke with international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need March 17, 2014, the final day of his two-week trip to the US to raise awareness of the cathedral project.

Do you consider your Vicariate to be mission territory?

“Mission territory” implies evangelizing animists, converting them to Christianity. We are not among animists but among Muslims and Hindus. The Christians comprise some 10 percent of the population, and obviously the great majority is not Christian. But we cannot evangelize as it is understood in other countries of the world. We can only witness to the bounty and love of God through our daily life. The best place for this kind of witness is the school.

What is the composition of the Catholic community?

They come from many countries. The majority are from India and the Philippines. Others come from some of the Arab countries, from Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka, Pakistan, Korea, Europe, etc. Especially many workers from Asia come completely alone. Many were not able to bring their families with them.

As a result there are problems of too much solitude, of isolation, and of homesickness. On the other hand, solitude pushes them to find consolation and peace in the Lord, so we have a relatively high percentage of Mass attendance, which stands at between 30 percent and 35 percent. But we must ask ourselves why the others don't come to the church! Part of the reason is that work schedules make things difficult.

How many priests and religious work with you?

We have 50 Priests and two permanent deacons. Except for six or seven pastors, all priests are religious, mostly Capuchins, because the pastoral care of the Gulf has been entrusted to them by the Holy See.

How visible and active is your church in the local community?

Our Church is very visible, even though the new churches don't have a cross on the outside. Thousands and thousands of people coming to the church cannot be invisible. We don't have social engagements; our presence is more based on the personal witness of a good Christian life.

What is your biggest challenge as a bishop? What are the Church's biggest needs?

We have many nationalities; and there are faithful belonging to almost all of the various eastern and oriental Catholic rites. It is not easy to make of all these different communities a single Catholic Church. There is a risk of having too many churches near each other, without truly being that one Catholic Church, even as, of course, we respect all the rites. For example, churches in Kuwait typically celebrate the liturgy according to five different rites and in 13 languages. It is a logistical challenge to accommodate all the various communities within a single building.

The difficulties of being a Christian in the Middle East have been making a lot of headlines. What are the circumstances in your Vicariate?

No government in the Gulf has a policy of forced conversion from Christianity to Islam. There are, however, some zealous individuals. Of course, it is forbidden to convert from Islam to Christianity. But the situation in the Gulf is radically different from the challenges faced by Christians in some countries of the Middle East. In the Gulf there are no local Christians, except very few in Kuwait and Bahrain; and all Christians have to leave when they reach age 60, except those able to open their own business, under the sponsorship of a local person.

In other countries of the Middle East, Christians are locals, like the other inhabitants. Christians in the Gulf are not citizens of the country where they are working; they are migrants. Even their children have to leave the Gulf when it's time for them to go to college.

Do you think the Church is persecuted, harassed or hindered in its work in the Gulf region?

No, absolutely not. Only in some countries we are in extreme need of more space. If something dramatic would happen during our services, we could have hundreds of dead.

Many Christians think there should be reciprocity between Christianity and Islam. The reasoning goes, as tolerance is shown for Muslims in Western countries, the Catholic Church should insist on equal rights for Christians in Muslim countries. Do you agree?

We have to ask authorities to grant us more space for our believers. However, we should not forget that our purpose is only to do good for all people, regardless any compensation from them.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met in the Vatican with Pope Benedict XVI in 2007, which was considered a tremendous breakthrough. What are the prospects for eventual diplomatic relations between the Kingdom and the Holy See?

I don't have particular information about this. This concerns the nuncio and the Holy See. I know that Saudi Arabia would like to have diplomatic relations with the Vatican, but many points have to be clarified before this can happen.

Do Catholics, Christians in general, have an influence on the political, social and cultural life in the Gulf region?

Our faithful are migrants and most of them have very low-level jobs. However, they contribute very much to the good of the country through their daily work. If these migrants leave the Gulf, the Gulf countries would be the worse for it.

Does the Church provide education and social services for non-Christians?

Our schools are open to all. In fact, the majority of our students are non-Christians. Social services are provided by many doctors and the many thousands of nurses (males and female) who work in region's hospitals. Of course, they do not work directly for the Church, but their presence in the society is very important.

Your website says that the Church is "trusted by governments." What does this mean concretely?

Our Church is officially recognized by the various governments. We are not a private group or a hidden sect. We are a Church whose presence is recognized by the governments and I always tell the country's leadership that they have nothing to fear from the Catholic Church, which always will respect their countries' faith, culture and traditions.

Foreign workers are under a great deal of pressure in many Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, where many illegal immigrants are being expelled. Has the Church been able to ease their circumstances?

The Church cannot do anything for those who are here illegally. What happens normally is that people come here for a job, then, for any number of reasons, they lose the job and as a result of that even their residence permit. So, they become illegal. Our role is to help, even financially, people who suddenly lose their job and have a family to feed, children who have to finish their school year, etc.

How did the project of the new cathedral get started?

The great number of Catholics in Bahrain obliged me to ask the king for land. The church that we have in Manama is too small. I asked the king for a piece of land in the south of the country and he granted the request immediately. Since the bishop is in Bahrain, this new church will be the cathedral of the Vicariate of Northern Arabia and it will be dedicated to Our Lady of Arabia, patroness of the Gulf.

What moved the King of Bahrain to give you the land?

Of course, I don't know his personal reasons, but I think he wanted to prove that Bahrain is a country open to all. In fact, there are Catholics and even Jews who are members of the Council of the king! In this region, where fanaticism is strong in some countries, the example of the king of Bahrain should be considered a model of openness.

The Cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia is an enormously costly project; are you not concerned that a backlash on the part of the Bahrain government, or a radical change in regime, could shutter the initiative? Or worse, could the building not become the target of anti-Christian violence?

The problems in Bahrain are not between Christians and Muslims but among Muslims themselves, between Shiites and Sunnis. I trust in the good will of the people of Bahrain. I have been in Bahrain for two years now, and never have I perceived any negative attitudes toward Christians. In Bahrain, as well as in Kuwait and Qatar, I move about in my cassock and with my pectoral cross. There never have been problems; on the contrary, I am very much respected. The Catholic Church is known to all as a Church that respects all and helps all.

Unprecedented rise in government restrictions on religious freedom in Bahrain

BHRO (25.01.2014) - The Religious Freedom Unit at the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory ("BHRO") has regarded the results of the international study by the Pew Research Center on global religious hostility published on 14th January 2014 as threatening to the entire human race.

Global religious hostilities, including government restrictions on how individuals can practice their faith and conflicts between religious communities of different faiths, reached a six-year high in 2012, according to the Pew Research Center with a growth of almost 26%.

A third (33%) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29% in 2011 and 20% as of mid-2007. Religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas. The sharpest increase was in the Middle East and North Africa which are still experiencing the effects of the Arab Spring.

Bahrain has marked an unprecedented rise in religious hostility. Incidents of religious hostility were on a clear rise in all parts of Bahrain especially after the government deliberately demolished 38 Shia mosques, representing almost 5% of the registered mosques in the Ja'afari Directorate.

The head of the Religious Freedom Committee at the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory, Sheikh Maytham Al Salman, has called on the international community to exert pressure on the Government of Bahrain to adopt international levels to ensure the protection of religious freedoms and provide international permanent monitoring mechanisms for freedom of religion and worship in Bahrain. The Pew Research Report has reported on religious restrictions and hostility on a governmental and social scale measuring hostility on Adapted a 10-point index.

The Government Restrictions Index (GRI) measures government laws, policies and actions that restrict religious beliefs and practices. The GRI is comprised of 20 (questions) measures of restrictions, including efforts by governments to ban particular

faiths, prohibit conversions, ban worship or processions, limit preaching or give preferential treatment to one or more religious groups, and discriminate against certain religious groups.

The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) measures acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society.

Al Salman stated: Although there is a clear rise in the Social Hostilities Index (SHI), the rise in the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) is much higher and more alarming. He has called on the Government of Bahrain to ensure impartial legislation, law enforcement, judicial and administrative processes to guarantee freedom of worship and religious practices without any discrimination.

"Religious and sectarian discrimination can lead to frustration, hostility and fanaticism", he said.

The Government Restriction Index (GRI) results of the Government of Bahrain have confirmed systematic violations of human rights affiliated with religious beliefs and background, discrimination against religious groups, preferential treatment to certain religious groups and prohibition of religious worship rights for certain religious groups.

GRI No.4 has found that the Government of Bahrain interferes with worship or other religious practices of certain religious groups. A clear rise was reported from 2007 to 2012 after the Government of Bahrain began systematically prohibiting worship or religious practices of certain religious groups in many incidents. The result shows that Bahrain has grown from 0.33 in 2007 to 1.00 (max score) in 2012 confirming that the Government prohibits worship or religious practices of one or more religious groups as a general policy as stated in Pew's report.

GRI No.5 has confirmed that the Government of Bahrain restricts public preaching by certain religious groups. This is a clear indicator of the on-going restrictions on Shia Muslims in preaching their beliefs. The Religious Freedom Unit at the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory has reported 52 Shia preachers and artists being summoned in 2012 and 41 in 2013.

GRI No.8 found the government restricting religious literature or broadcasting. Bahrain scored 1.00 (max score) due to the continuation of restrictions on Shia Muslim publications. On 19 September 2013, the Minister of Justice in Bahrain, Sheikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa, regarded the biggest Shia religious foundation (the Olamaa Islamic Council) as an illegal organization that operates in breach of the Constitution and the Law. The Olamaa Islamic Council delivers Islamic teaching curriculums and lessons in accordance with the Ja'afari school of Islam to thousands since governmental schools and private schools are prohibited by the Ministry of Education from teaching Islamic studies in accordance to the Ja'afari school of Islam.

GRI No.11 confirmed practices of harassment or widespread intimidation towards certain religious groups. The Government of Bahrain scored the maximum score as well (1.00) in GRI No.11 while 2007 results were nil. This significant shift indicates the growth in the level of governmental intimidations to the Shia sect within the country. Governmental owned or financed media played a destructive role in insulting the Shia population and degrading them in official TV and newspapers. The campaign of inciting sectarian hatred against Shias continues. Pro-government social media accounts continue to use abusive and offensive language insulting to Shias. The BICI has stated in November 2011 that some programs in Bahrain's state-run television have incited hatred against the Shia population. Anti-Shi'ism continues to spread throughout Bahrain due to the utilization of official media and governmentally financed media to promote the culture of sectarian intolerance, noting that Bahrain only has one independent newspaper.

Many pro-government journalists writing in governmentally financed newspapers like Al-Watan newspaper (Arabic) have continued to frame Shias as Traitors, Safawis, Unpatriotic, and other degrading disesteemed social frames. State-run TV has failed to respect the cultural heritage, linguistic accent, social background of Shias. In fact, Shias are rarely seen in TV as presenters, actors, or guests.

The Religious Freedom Unit at BHRO has constantly stated that it is the responsibility of the Government of Bahrain to build a culture of harmony between different factions of the Bahraini society and put an immediate end to ongoing sectarian discourse by the government and government affiliated organizations.

The GRI index has also found that the Government of Bahrain displayed hostility involving physical violence toward minority or nonapproved religious groups. It confirmed that the Government of Bahrain did not intervene in cases of discrimination or abuses against religious groups. The GRI also indicated that the Government of Bahrain has formally banned certain religious groups from exercising their worship rights for security reasons as per their justification. Question 17 in the GRI indicated that the some levels within the Government of Bahrain did attempt to eliminate an entire religious group's presence in the country in 2011. 2011 has not only witnessed the demolition of 38 Shia mosques and tens of attacks on Shia places of worship; pro governmental loyalists were publicly calling for purifying Bahrain from the Shia sect. The Pew report also reported in GRI No.19 has used force towards religious groups that resulted in individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, tortured, detained or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed.

GRI 20.2 confirmed that the government practices clear discrimination between religious groups since one religious group or sect has more privileges than the others and/or that government access is unavailable to the other religious groups. The study also confirmed in GRI 20.3 that the government provides funds or other resources for religious education programs and/or religious schools with obvious favoritism to a particular group since Shia Muslims are denied the basic right to teach their children in accordance with the Ja'afari jurisprudence in public and private schools.
