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Campaign for Sakharov Prize to Meriam Ibrahim

HRWF (30.06.2014) – This year *Human Rights Without Frontiers* calls upon the European Parliament to nominate Meriam Ibrahim for the Sakharov Prize, the annual EU Human Rights Award, for her outstanding courage to keep her faith despite a sentence of 100 lashes and the death penalty by hanging. Meriam Ibrahim was charged with apostasy and adultery because she was alleged to have converted to Christianity and married a Christian man.

Meriam Ibrahim, who was pregnant with her second child, refused to renounce her Christian faith and instead gave birth in prison in appalling conditions. This remarkable act and commitment to her faith is admirable and should be applauded. A fitting tribute would be for the European Union to award the Sakharov Prize to this brave woman who has inspired many people with her courage and determination to stand up for what she believes in.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is granted to those who carry the spirit of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989) who in 1970 co-founded the Committee on Human Rights in the USSR: the peaceful struggle for human rights. With this in mind, the Parliament selects laureates who, like Sakharov, dedicate their lives to the safeguard of the fundamental human rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Meriam Ibrahim's action fully fits into the moral values defended by Sakharov and the European Union. As pressure from the Soviet state increased, so did Sakharov's resolve in his fight for freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. Sakharov's willingness to sacrifice his own freedom to the cause of human rights is a quality that is shared by every Sakharov Laureate.

As 1990 Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi said upon receiving the award, that she and her fellow Laureates strive to create societies worthy of Andrei Sakharov's ideals of freedom and dignity. These are the ideals that Meriam Ibrahim represents and she symbolises the hope and determination of all the others who are fighting for their rights.

Support us in our endeavour to make Meriam a Sakharov laureate.

Willy Fautré, director

Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels)

Statement on Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, a Sudanese believer sentenced to death for apostasy

European Commission (10.06.2014) - The President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy and the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz together with all religious leaders participating at this year's high-level meeting

express their deepest dismay and concern with the fate of Mrs Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, who has been sentenced to a hundred lashes and sentenced to death by hanging on charges of apostasy and adultery. She recently gave birth to a baby girl while in prison. The above mentioned Presidents of EU institutions as well as all religious leaders present at the high-level meeting which include Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, underline Sudan's international obligation to protect the freedom of religion and belief and unanimously call upon the responsible Sudanese authorities and appeal courts to revoke this inhumane verdict and release Mrs Meriam with the utmost urgency.

The participants in today's meeting welcome the fact that the Court of Appeal has accepted the appeal and demand that the Sudanese government – in line with universal human rights - to repeal any legal provisions that penalise or discriminate against individuals for their religious beliefs or for changing their religion or beliefs or for inducing others to change a religion or belief, especially when cases of apostasy, heterodoxy, or conversion are punishable by death.

This is in line with Sudan being privy to the UN charter on Human Rights.

Freedom of Religion and belief is a universal human right that is valued highly by the European Union and needs to be protected everywhere and for everyone. To underline the Union's strong commitment to the protection of freedom of religion and belief, the European Union in June 2013 adopted Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief.

Background

In late 2013 Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, daughter of an Ethiopian Christian mother and Sudanese Muslim father was accused of adultery by her father's side of the family. The apostasy accusation was added in December 2013. As the father left the family when Meriam Ibrahim was six years old, she was raised as a Christian. She married a Sudanese-American. The verdict at the court of first instance was delivered on 12 May 2014, giving Meriam Ibrahim three days to renounce Christianity. On 15 May 2014, the verdict was reconfirmed as Meriam Ibrahim chose not to convert to Islam. On 27 May 2014 she gave birth to a baby girl at the prison clinic. She is imprisoned along with her 20-month-old son. On 5 May her file was successfully transferred to the Appeal Court.

Sudan has ratified the relevant UN and African Union conventions and thereby has an international obligation to defend and promote freedom of religion or belief, which notably includes the right to adopt, exchange or abandon one's religion or belief of one's own free will.

The Delegation of the European Union to Sudan in Khartoum is closely following the case. It has hosted a series of meetings with the lawyer and the EU Human Rights Counsellors, recalling the EU Guidelines on freedom of religion and belief of 2013. Freedom of religion was also raised in the EU's recent local statement on the national dialogue on 28 May 2014. The issue was raised at various government levels, including with a presidential

advisor. In several EU Member States the respective Sudanese Ambassadors have been summoned regarding the case.

Links

Press release and list of participants at the High-level religious leaders meeting 2014

http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-650_en.htm

http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-407_en.htm

EU Guidelines on freedom of religion and belief

https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf

Statement by HR/VP spokesperson on 15 May

http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140515_01_en.pdf

Delegation of the European Union to Sudan:

http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/sudan/index_en.htm

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Religious leaders in Europe seek ways to promote tolerance toward minority groups

by Vicki McKenna, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (03.04.2014) - The role of religious communities and religious leaders in promoting an inclusive society underpinned the discussions during a roundtable, 'Welcoming the Other: Equal Citizenship in Europe,' on Thursday 27 March. The event was convened by the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL), which brings together about 45 senior religious leaders in Europe from numerous traditions. It was hosted by the Representation of the State of Hessen (Germany) to the European Union.

An analysis of legal, social and spiritual citizenship formed the basis of the roundtable. Social citizenship was described as being of particular concern to religious communities in terms of promoting social cohesion and responsibility. Spiritual citizenship likewise was discussed in the context of advancing acceptance of 'the other' through religious teachings, combating discrimination and building democratic cultures.

There needs to be a balance between freedom of expression and freedom of religion to combat the growing hate factor in public speech, said Ambassador Torbjørn Frøysnes, Council of Europe Representative to the EU.

Mr Frøysnes commented on the Council of Europe's internet campaign which provides an educational programme on the European Convention of Human Rights with the aim of fighting intolerance in Europe. He further discussed the cultural city programme which was launched to highlight the positive impact of diversity and to promote intercultural awareness training and policies.

Stein Villumstad, ECRL General Secretary, warned of the increasing marginalisation of minorities groups, pointing out the increased fear associated with losing jobs, social benefits, culture and identity. The 2013 Religions for Peace World Assembly in Vienna took as its theme the welcoming of the 'other' and actions directed toward the promotion of human dignity. The Assembly Declaration underlined the importance of promoting 'a more robust notion of citizenship that acknowledges basic human rights, including freedom of religion and belief.'

'I would argue for a policy which respects the separation between church and religion, while appreciating the fundamental values of allowing religion and belief to play an important role in peoples' lives and in society,' said Mr Villumstad.

'Religious communities are well placed to promote an inclusive "we" society in which freedom of religion and belief is not only respected but promoted. Religion and belief in the public sphere should be visible, contributing to a wholesome society,' continued Villumstad.

Mark Barwick, HRWF Policy Adviser, explored the significance of respect, understanding and solidarity as core principles promoting equal citizenship. 'At a minimum, religious leaders and communities must be careful, especially in public forums and in their publications, to use language that promotes respect and harmonious relationships within society,' he said.

Religious leaders and their communities can play an active role in promoting a tolerant and diverse society in which all people can exercise their rights as equal citizens, said Barwick.

Rabbi Arie Folger addressed increasing obstacles which undermine the social and spiritual citizenship rights of minorities in the EU. These obstacles include the view that religiously motivated male circumcision is a violation of the rights of the child, a ban on ritual slaughter, as well as statements made in legislation and parliamentary assemblies that marginalise minority religions.

'There is a need to raise tolerance within Europe towards freedom of religion,' stressed Mr Folger. 'Human rights are part of how we view other people. Denying those rights to fully express themselves and to live peacefully undermines respect for human dignity'.

US and EU explore cooperation on religious freedom

By Brian Pellot

The Washington Post (13.02.2014) - In the first meeting of its kind, members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom met with the European Parliament's

working group on freedom of religion or belief to explore opportunities for trans-Atlantic and international cooperation.

“One nation speaking alone may just be accused of name-calling, but many nations speaking together will certainly have an effect, and that’s what we hope to see,” said Commissioner Mary Ann Glendon of U.S. foreign policy positions toward religious freedom.

Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations’ special rapporteur on freedom of religion, delivered the keynote speech Wednesday (Feb. 12) at the European Parliament in Brussels. He noted increased interest in religious freedom in recent years but said that the topic is often viewed with unease or suspicion.

“Freedom of expression, being the epitome of liberal rights, is seen as a green light for provocation,” Bielefeldt said.

Freedom of religion, on the other hand, is often considered a stop sign. In Bielefeldt’s view, this “misguided” assumption stems from religious defamation, hate speech, blasphemy and apostasy being used to stifle expression.

Dennis de Jong and Peter van Dalen, co-presidents of the EU working group, discussed the group’s first annual report on freedom of religion in the world. They argued that religious freedom should be given more prominence in EU foreign policy and gave recommendations for 15 countries where the situation is particularly dire.

“In Egypt, Coptic Christians must be able to freely and safely practice their faith. In Pakistan, we demand that hate speech be scrapped from school books, in particular where they are subsidized by the EU. In India, we’d like to see states that have introduced anti-conversion legislation repeal those provisions,” van Dalen said.

In its 2013 report, the U.S. commission recommended that the State Department re-designate Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan as countries of particular concern for religious freedom. The body also recommended that Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam be added to this list.

Katrina Lantos Swett, vice chair at USCIRF, outlined specific restrictions and incidents of torture, detention and harassment against faith groups in these and other countries.

“In Russia, host of the grand spectacle of the Sochi Olympics, conditions continue to worsen as the government uses extremism laws against certain Muslim groups and so-called nontraditional religious communities, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses, through raids, detentions and imprisonment,” she said.

Lantos Swett praised President Obama’s remarks on international religious freedom at last week’s National Prayer Breakfast in Washington.

“The United States cannot and should not do this work alone,” she said. “We are better and stronger when we work together.”

MEPs Van Dalen and De Jong present unique report on freedom of religion

Press release

EP FoRB working group (13.02.2014) - At a conference held in Brussels on February, 12 the European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (EPWG), co-chaired by MEPs Peter van Dalen (ECR) and Dennis de Jong (GUE/NGL), presented its first annual report on freedom of religion in the world. The report takes stock of developments regarding religious freedom and concludes that this human right is increasingly violated, around the globe. The report proposes to give the promotion of religious freedom a more prominent place in EU foreign policy. It furthermore makes recommendations for EU action in case of fifteen countries where the situation is particularly dire.

The report was presented at a conference jointly organised with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, who also presented their annual report. UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, gave the keynote speech.

The conference welcomed the adoption of EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief, by the EU Member States last year. Participants agreed that this was a major step, however, the process of ensuring a thorough implementation has only just begun. Also, complementing measures were needed.

Peter van Dalen said:

"Today is a sad day as right now many millions of people are bullied, discriminated, persecuted and even killed for their faith. I hope that our work may contribute towards improving this situation."

"We made several recommendations on specific countries. On Egypt for example, we would like the EU to unfreeze the aid pledged, but tie it to human rights conditions; Coptic Christians must be able to freely and safely practise their faith. On Pakistan, we demand that hate speech be scrapped from school books, in particular where they are subsidized by the EU! On India, we'd like to see the states who have introduced anti-conversion legislation, to repeal those provisions."

Dennis de Jong said:

"I am grateful for the co-operation we developed with the EEAS on the EU Guidelines. However, we now need to follow this up through an informal dialogue on the toolkit which will serve as an instrument for embassies and EU delegations to implement the Guidelines."

"Similarly, we need to further develop our dialogue with the EEAS also on the countries of concern: we identified many such countries and we now have to focus on the instruments the EU and the Member States have to help to change the situation in these countries."

Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt said:

"I see an enormous practical potential in the EU Guidelines, in harnessing the existing capacities of the EU and its Member States to make Freedom of Religion or Belief a reality. I value the Working Group's strategic role in promoting the Guidelines and their efficient implementation. The European Parliament would be well advised to upgrade the working group to an intergroup."

The report can be viewed here:

<http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/EPWG-2013-Report-Final-for-printing.pdf>

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