

# Eritrea: Newlyweds among 32 Christians arrested in fresh crackdown

World Watch Monitor (28.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2E4Beqm> – Eritrean police have arrested 32 Christians in the capital, Asmara, this month, including a newlywed couple and ten of their guests.

Twenty were arrested on Sunday, 25 March, all of whom remain in detention.

The newly married man and two of his guests are being held in a prison north of the city. The newlyweds and ten guests were arrested at the couple's home on 5 March, a local source told World Watch Monitor.

Ten friends were visiting the couple for a traditional coffee ceremony to welcome the bride when the local security officers forced their way into the house and arrested all 12 people there. They were taken to Asmara's No. 5 Police Station.

The authorities released eight of the group two days later, after they presented valid travel IDs (documents of permission to move around Eritrea). The four remaining Christians, including the newlyweds, were moved to Adi Abeito Prison, north of Asmara. According to the World Watch Monitor source, the newlywed couple was split up after the arrest and the bride was released yesterday (27 March).

Eritrea's human rights record was recently condemned at the UN Human Rights Council. Kate Gilmore, the UN's Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in her opening remarks that over 100 people were arrested in Eritrea in 2017 for practising religions not officially recognised by the state.

A monitoring group for the UN, United Nations Watch, said "thousands" of Christians are also facing detention as "religious freedom continue[s] to be denied in Eritrea". The group also asked why the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, "failed to closely assess this situation".

The UN Human Rights Council heard that the Eritrean government's claims of improvement in the human rights situation were unfounded.

Eritrea is sixth on Open Doors International's 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian. In 2002, the government introduced a law prohibiting Christian practice outside the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, as well as Sunni Islam.

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## **Pakistan: Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan face an existential threat: New report**

FOREF Europe (27.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2uwDWpa> – The persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan has worsened in the last several years, as Ahmadis are “violently targeted, intimidated, and harassed at all levels of society.

Impunity and incitement have created a climate of religious hysteria in which targeted communities, both Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis are losing their lives with shocking increased frequency,” according to a report published by the International Human Rights Committee and the Asian Human Rights Commission, in partnership with the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

***“A noose is tightening around the Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, who face discriminatory legislation and lethal mob violence encouraged by political and governmental authorities,”*** according to Dr Aaron Rhodes, President of FOREF.

The 100-page document, which is based on interviews with hundreds of victims, experts, and journalists, details the legal discrimination faced by the Ahmadi community, relevant developments in international human rights, and social and political tendencies.

It further documents crimes, state negligence, and complicity; violations of internationally guaranteed rights and freedoms; prejudice and social exclusion; discrimination faced by women; discrimination in education; and obstacles faced by Ahmadis when professing their faith.

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## **KENYA: Poverty drives some**

# Kenyans to rent out their wives

*Poverty and unpredictable tourism industry forcing men on the east coast to send spouses into prostitution.*

By Osman Mohamed Osman

Al Jazeera (28.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2umTEda> – It's a cloudy Sunday morning in Kenya's Kwale county and Sande Ramadan just woke up to get ready for another weekend of work.

Wearing a green vest and khaki shorts, he washes his face and proceeds to the living room where his wife Janet Wambui serves him breakfast.

"Thanks for waking me up, I hate being late for my client," the dreadlocked father of three tells his wife. "She asked me to be with her until next weekend," he adds as he sips black tea.

Ramadan is a male sex worker.

Wambui, his tall dark-skinned wife, works in the same industry. She came back home two nights ago after spending 10 days with a German tourist in an expensive cottage house, a few kilometres from Maweni village where the couple resides.

Ramadan and Wambui have been married for 20 years now.

But it wasn't always like this. One day in 2006, Ramadan was hawking clothes to tourists along Diani Beach in Kwale town, 30km southwest of Mombasa, when a German tourist approached him. He wanted a lady to spend some time with until his holiday ended.

The 37-year-old, who speaks fluent German and teaches his wife the language, promised the man he would introduce him to his sister.

"My husband came home that evening and asked me if I can act as his sister and take up the offer. After a few days of deliberation, I agreed," says Wambui, 38, sitting near Ramadan while tightening her black turban.

Wambui saw how life changed for other women who entered prostitution. She was a housewife who depended on Ramadan's income, which was too little.

"Life was tough for us. My husband's unpredictable income was not enough and when he asked me to accept, I had no choice," she says.

The family can now afford three meals a day and the children's school fees.

In Kenya's coastal towns, such stories are not new, especially in poor neighbourhoods such as Maweni. Husbands agree to rent their wives to rich tourists, mostly from Europe, without them knowing the women are their spouses.

"Why would I make another woman rich while I have a wife at home?" Ramadan said. "This was an opportunity for us to make some cash to pay our bills."

### ***Tourism reliance***

The East African country received more than one million tourists in 2016, according to the Kenya Tourism Board, a government corporation. This number translated into \$100m earned in taxes, making Kenya one of the top tourism destinations in Africa.

In 2017, TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel website, ranked Kenya's Diani Beach in Kwale, where Ramadan and Wambui live, the seventh-best beach in Africa.

But all these accolades do not translate into success in the villages where locals survive solely on tourism.

Ramadan Juma, 43, has been a beach operator for more than 20 years. It's a sunny Saturday afternoon and Juma is at Diani reflecting on existence with his colleagues.

"Life is becoming difficult by the day," he said, wearing his

black sunglasses to fend off the glaring sunlight.

On a good day, he earns about \$40 by helping out tourists navigate the blue waters of Indian Ocean. But nowadays, he complains the situation has become desperate.

“We have been neglected. We depend on tourism as a source of living. Since most of us do not have a constant income, my colleagues go to the extreme and give away their wives to have a good living,” said Juma, who also chairs the Diani Beach Boys Association.

Kwale County’s chief tourism officer Anthony Mwamunga says the local government is training beach vendors and guides to gain skills to help them earn a decent living. He adds there’s not much that can be done about prostitution.

“These cases are from poor men and women who have nothing to do,” Mwamunga told Al Jazeera. “Tourists come here to have a good adventure and having a partner is part of it. This makes it hard for us to stop these cases.”

Back at the spectacular white-sand beaches on the Indian Ocean, Tobias Juma, 42, woke up one day to find his wife had packed up and left him.

In 2012, he was working for an Austrian man who asked Tobias to hook him up with a lady.



“That is how I connected my wife to the Austrian man. All I wanted is my family to have a better life. But they fell in love along the way and they agreed to move to Europe,” he said.

Before she left, Tobias’ wife was providing for him and their daughter.

“She was our family’s breadwinner. She would bring an average of \$400 every month for my daughter and me after staying with the Austrian tourist. I have been struggling since she left,” he said.

Tobias hasn’t heard from his wife since, and now takes care of his daughter on his own.

### ***Dangerous risks***

Communities along the Kenyan coast have seen a dramatic increase in HIV cases annually.

The National Aids Control Council estimates that Kenya’s coastal counties reported 5,335 new HIV/AIDS cases in 2016, surging from 325 reported in 2014.

Faith Mwende is the Kenya advocacy manager for AIDS Healthcare

Foundation, a global non-profit creating awareness about HIV prevention.

“The danger is when such women engage with more than one sexual partner, the chances of getting sexually transmitted diseases and infections are very high, especially when she doesn’t know the status of the other person,” Mwendu said.

Despite these dangers, Ramadan and Wambui are not about to give up on the sex trade. The rent for their house is about \$80 a month, and they have three children to feed and educate.

“I am doing this to have a better life. It sounds immoral, but my husband is aware and supports it. So why not?” Wambui said as she bid Ramadan goodbye.

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# **WORLD: Exploiting women for prostitution a crime against humanity says Pope Francis**

By Philip Pullella

Reuters (19.03.2018) – <https://tmsnrt.rs/2IdXxM0> – Pope Francis branded exploitation of women for prostitution a “crime against humanity” on Monday and asked forgiveness from society for Catholic men who use prostitutes.

The pope made his frank comments in a remarkable, freewheeling question-and-answer session with young people from around the world who came to Rome to prepare for a bishops’ meeting scheduled for October at the Vatican.

Blessing Okoedion, a 32-year-old Nigerian who was once a victim of human sexual trafficking, told the pope she was troubled that many clients of prostitutes on the streets of Rome were Catholic.

“I ask myself and I ask you, is it possible for a Church that is still too male chauvinist to be able to question itself truthfully about this high demand by clients?” she said.

Francis responded that in Italy it was likely that some 90 percent of male clients of prostitutes were baptised Catholics.

“I would like to take advantage of this moment to ask forgiveness from you (exploited women) and society for all the Catholics who carry out this criminal act,” he said.

“I think of the disgust these girls must feel when men make them do these things,” he added.

Prostitutes, most of them victims of human trafficking from Nigeria, other African countries and Eastern Europe, are found at night on the streets of Rome’s periphery and around parks.

At the meeting with the some 300 delegates at a university in Rome, Francis said sexual exploitation of women stemmed from a “sick mentality” embedded in many people. He added that feminism had still not be able to remove it and asked the young people to fight against it.

“(It says) women are to be exploited in one way or another. And that is what explains this ... it is a sickness of humanity, a sickness of looking at society in a certain way, a crime against humanity,” he said.

Francis rejected the idea that going to prostitutes could be considered harmless.

“Who does this is a criminal. This is not making love, this is torturing a woman. Let’s not confuse terms. This is criminal, a sick mentality,” he said.

Francis also heard some tough talk from Angela Markas, 22, of Australia. “There is a tendency in the Church to avoid matters that are not-so-easy to talk about. This includes same-sex marriage, our sexuality, and also, the role of women in the Church,” she told the pope.

Earlier this month, Catholic women led by former Irish president Mary McAleese demanded a greater decision-making role for women in the Church, urging the pope to tear down its “walls of misogyny”.

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# LEBANON: Education and Empowerment to #GiveHope to young girls



Painting by a SB OverSeas beneficiary

*As written by Zuzana, a volunteer at SB OverSeas in Lebanon. SB OverSeas is currently working to provide education in Lebanon for 1,400 refugee children. This story shows how education and empowerment is an important tool in preventing child marriage from the perspective of those in the ground in Lebanon. Find out more about the work SB OverSeas does here: <http://sboverseas.org>.*

SB Overseas (29.03.2018) – Before the war began, child marriage in Syria was on the decline. But this progress has become a mere memory during the past seven years of conflict as marriage for young girls has become for some, the only promise of protection and economic stability.

Parents who find themselves as refugees in a new country, as outsiders living in harsh and overcrowded conditions, are often more inclined towards immediate solutions, struggling to see or be persuaded by the long-term consequences of seeking or accepting marriage for their young daughters. And their children, whose lives were yesterday defined by going to school, playing, dancing and laughing with their friends, are today characterised by the load they carry—the weight of others' expectations, responsibility and punishment for circumstances out of their own control. Child brides are left as onlookers, cut off suddenly and prematurely from their own childhoods and from the world of their friends.

Grandparents once had a particularly influential position in deciding when a parent or child asked for marriage; in many cases, they argued against their granddaughter's marriage and for her right to learn and play. But the war has broken communities and separated generations, meaning that many are making decisions without the trusted voices of older family members, religious elders, and other senior authorities.

Teachers are often amongst the first to witness the drastic shift in young girls' lives when they marry. They are saddened by every empty desk, where their former students once explored their ambitions and worked towards creating their own futures.

Ahmed, himself a Syrian refugee, teaches maths, Arabic, and English in an educational center hosting students from rural Syria, where the practice of child marriage had not completely diminished even before the war. When telling his experience over the past year, he expressed disappointment at the number of students he had seen forced to trade their school days for marriage and at the lack of understanding of the costs. For these girls, getting married means isolation in small, dark rooms of an unfinished shelter: their new home.

“They are not ready for this. They are the victims,” Ahmed said. Ultimately, parents make the final decision about the proposed marriage, a decision for which the girls are not accountable, he explained.

Aisha, who is a psychologist in the same center, adds that girls marrying at a young age, often as young as thirteen, are especially vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse. They are unprepared for the traumas that may accompany marriage, she said, including miscarriage, loss of childhood and divorce. A young divorced girl may face mistreatment for the rest of her life because of the stigma associated to the latter in her community. This stigma may keep her from regaining normalcy: a childhood and an education.

Ahmed, as a father, has been able to speak with some of the students’ fathers, who are normally the family’s decision makers. From his experience, several fathers are open to discussion and reconsideration. Aisha leads awareness and empowerment sessions with young girls at the center teaching them about healthy relationships, self-worth and goals for the future. She also encourages mothers to help their daughters feel comfortable talking about their fears and dreams. One



mother in the community now takes her daughter for daily walks. During this time together they talk about anything and everything, thus breaking harmful taboos.

Only education and long-term engagement within a community that has lost critical support systems can shift today's trends in child marriage. Ahmed and Aisha's strategy to bring their community closer and building trusting relationships is a long-term one; it is careful, and it is effective. Their work has allowed lasting change for girls and their families. They hope not only to preserve the future of this generation, but to place the power of decision in their hands—hands that will one day rebuild their country.

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# Iraq holds more than 19,000 accused of Daesh, militant ties

Daily Sabah (22.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2I7GxHY> – Iraq has detained or imprisoned at least 19,000 people accused of connections to the Daesh terrorist group or other terror-related offenses, and sentenced more than 3,000 of them to death, according to an analysis by The Associated Press.

The mass incarceration and speed of guilty verdicts raise concerns over potential miscarriages of justice – and worries that jailed militants are recruiting within the general prison population to build new extremist networks.

The AP count is based partially on an analysis of a spreadsheet listing all 27,849 people imprisoned in Iraq as of late January, provided by an official who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

The AP determined that 8,861 of the prisoners listed in the spreadsheet were convicted of terrorism-related charges since the beginning of 2013 – arrests overwhelmingly likely to be linked to Daesh, according to an intelligence figure in Baghdad.

In addition, another 11,000 people currently are being detained by the intelligence branch of the Interior Ministry, undergoing interrogation or awaiting trial, a second

intelligence official said. Both intelligence officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the press.

“There’s been great overcrowding ... Iraq needs a large number of investigators and judges to resolve this issue,” Fadhel al-Gharwari, a member of Iraq’s parliament-appointed human rights commission, told the AP. Al-Gharwari said many legal proceedings have been delayed because the country lacks the resources to respond to the spike in incarcerations.

Large numbers of Iraqis were detained during the 2000s, when the U.S. and Iraqi governments were battling militants, including al-Qaida, and Shiite militias. In 2007, at the height of the fighting, the U.S. military held 25,000 detainees. The spreadsheet obtained by the AP showed that about 6,000 people arrested on terror charges before 2013 still are serving those sentences.

But the current wave of detentions has hit the Iraqi justice system much harder because past arrests were spread out over a much longer period and the largest numbers of detainees were held by the American military, with only a portion sent to Iraqi courts and the rest released.

Human Rights Watch warned in November that the broad use of terrorism laws meant those with minimal connections to Daesh are caught up in prosecutions alongside those behind the worst abuses. The group estimated a similar number of detainees and prisoners – about 20,000 in all.

“Based on all my meetings with senior government officials, I get the sense that no one – perhaps not even the prime minister himself – knows the full number of detainees,” said Belkis Wille, the organization’s senior Iraq researcher.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who is running to retain his position in national elections slated for May, has repeatedly called for accelerated death sentences for those charged with terrorism. The spreadsheet analyzed by the AP showed that 3,130 prisoners have been sentenced to death on terrorism charges since 2013.

Since 2014, about 250 executions of convicted Daesh members have been carried out, according to the Baghdad-based intelligence official. About 100 of those took place last year, a sign of the accelerating pace of hangings.

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# Algeria closes fourth church in four months



*Interior of a church in Tizi Ouzou (photo credit: World Watch Monitor)*

By Abdelaziz Bouteflika

World Watch Monitor (22.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2I43trM> – Another church has been closed down in northern Algeria, as pressure against Christians intensifies in the Maghreb country.

The village church in Azagher, near the town of Akbou, was forced to stop all activities on 2 March. The church had been running for over six years.

Two weeks earlier, on 18 February, the leaders of the church had received a notification that they must close their church within 15 days.

The notification stated that the church building, "which was originally intended for the poultry business", did not meet the standards required by law in order to host a public meeting. It pointed to the lack of a second exit or fire extinguisher.

It also said the fact the church had a foreign pastor (he is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo) contradicted a 2008 law "concerning the conditions of entry of foreigners into Algerian territory and their residence, as well as their movements".

The church is the fourth forced to close in the past four months. The three others were in or around the town of Oran, 600km west of Akbou. Unlike the church in Azagher, the three other churches were all affiliated to the EPA, Algeria's main Protestant-church body, officially recognised by the government since 1974.

Of the EPA's 45 churches, 25 have received notifications to comply with safety standards in the past few months.

Advocacy group Middle East Concern said earlier this year that the closures were part of a “coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities”.

But the Algerian Minister of Religious Affairs denied discriminating against the country’s Christian minority. Mohamed Aissa told Ennahar TV earlier this month that the churches “did not meet the standards required of a place of worship”.

“The institutions that were closed have been closed down because they were built without complying with the regulations of the Republic,” he said, adding that if a building lacks emergency exits, it must be closed, “even if it is a mosque”.

“When a place of worship is built without any notice showing it’s a place of worship, which may enable the state to protect it, this place must be closed,” he added.

In response, a spokesperson from the EPA told World Watch Monitor “the government is simply implementing the 2006 law of regulating non-Muslim worship. This law is a Sword of Damocles suspended above the churches. It is the legal instrument that the government uses to silence the Church. The purpose of this law is precisely to curb the activities of churches and to control them”.

The law stipulates that permission must be obtained before using a building for non-Muslim worship, and that such worship can only be conducted in buildings which have been specifically designated for that purpose.

But in practice, the authorities have failed to respond to almost all applications from churches for places of worship, including churches affiliated with the state-approved EPA.

In view of the authorities' failure to respond to applications, it has become standard practice for churches to rent premises and inform the local authorities that they have done so.

A local church leader, who wanted to remain anonymous, told World Watch Monitor the government "does absolutely nothing to help Christian communities to afford an adequate place of worship". He added that it is almost impossible for Christian communities to buy their own plot of land because it is so expensive.

As a result, all Protestant churches, affiliated with the EPA or not, are forced to rent premises, while those who rent their properties to a church also face threats and intimidation from the authorities, making it even more difficult for Christian communities to find a place to meet.

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## **Russia backed Luhansk 'republic' bans Jehovah's Witnesses and other 'non-traditional' faiths**

KHPG (06.02.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2HYkrYA> – The self-proclaimed 'Luhansk people's republic' [LPR] has yet again followed Russia's lead, this time by banning the Jehovah's Witnesses, calling them and other banned faiths 'religious groups'. The move comes just days after the Kremlin-backed 'LPR parliament' passed several 'laws', including one aimed at hunting down and prohibiting so-called extremism in religious or political organizations, as well as in the media.

Dmytro Sidorov, who is called the 'acting LPR minister of culture, sport and youth' announced the ban on Monday 5, He explained that in the so-called 'law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations', adopted on February 2, they had specifically excluded 'religious groups'. He defined the latter as organizations with five people (presumably meaning

at least that number) which “do not have a direct relation to any of the traditional faiths”. Although he suggests that the Jehovah’s Witnesses had been removed earlier, Monday’s announcement is the first formal confirmation of an actual ban on the organization, not its literature. It comes nine months after Russia reverted to Soviet practice and banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses, claiming the faith to be ‘extremist’.

It took the so-called ‘Donetsk people’s republic’ until 28 July 2017 to declare Jehovah’s Witnesses’ printed material ‘extremist’. It was claimed that the material aroused enmity on religious grounds and propagandized the superiority of the Jehovah’s Witnesses over other faiths.

In ‘LPR’, they went even further, claiming, on 28 August 2017, that the Jehovah’s Witnesses were helping Ukraine’s Security Service [SBU] and “neo-Nazi groups”. An investigative search had supposedly established not only that the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Luhansk and Alchevsk were in breach of ‘LPR law’, but that they were probably “agents of influence of the Ukrainian Security Service”. It was asserted that the search carried out had found agitational material containing Nazi symbols, as well as leaflets calling for cooperation with the SBU. Leaflets from the SBU and the Azov Civic Corps, it was claimed, had previously been pasted around Alchevsk.

The suggestion that Jehovah’s Witnesses, who avoid any involvement in politics and have faced persecution rather than take up arms, should have “assisted radical, neo-Nazi groups and other military formations” was overtly absurd, and unbacked by any evidence.

According to the same 'law', all religious organizations and associations in 'LPR' will need to undergo compulsory registration, otherwise their activities will be regarded as illegal.

It is unclear what is required for such compulsory 'registration', but the imposition of Russian requirements in occupied Crimea was used to put pressure on and / or drive out a number of religious organizations. In both Crimea and the militant-controlled areas of Donbas all faiths and denominations except the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate have come under major pressure.

The 'arrest' of world-renowned religious scholar Ihor Kozlovskyy in January 2016 coincided with propaganda measures against the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and other faiths which the militants called 'sects'. While that was in 'DPR', there is nothing to suggest that the Luhansk militants would follow different policy.

The 'bill' on religious organizations was fast-tracked through 'parliament' on 2 February, together with similar 'laws; on 'countering extremist activities', 'counter-terrorism'; and one allowing for detention without a court order for up to 30 days.. If the documents, which are as yet not posted, do happen to clearly define 'extremist activities', the official 'LPR' website is not letting on.

Whatever 'extremism' may be, the bill now establishes "a system of state bodies" aimed at countering it. Should these 'state bodies' consider that political, religious or other

organizations are carrying out harmful extremist activities, their activities can be suspended before a court bans them, with the same 'preventive measures' allowed with respect to the mass media. Dissolution is envisaged, by court order, of legal entities considered to be providing an 'extremist organization' with financial support, venues, printing or educational facilities and technical back-up.

Some of the measures are directly lifted from the Russian measures seen applied in Crimea since Russia's invasion. These include the possibility of formally 'warning' the leaders of religious organizations, political parties or the media of "the inadmissibility of doing things which could result in extremist activities". In Russia, two such 'warnings' can be sufficient to seek an organization's or media publication's closure.

All of this coincides with a change to the 'LPR constitution' allowing for individuals to be detained for up to 30 days without a court order. This is purportedly to prevent actions which could threaten the 'republic's security, and is allegedly during the unspecified period of 'martial law'.

At one level, it is difficult to see how the measures introduced differ from what has long been the case. Most of the people seized and held hostage in the self-proclaimed 'Luhansk and Donetsk people's republic', simply disappeared, with few, if any, normal procedural requirements observed.

The warning now, however, is that any media, religious or

political organizations could be summarily closed for what the Russian-controlled militants deem to be 'extremism'. 'LPR' has already imposed 10, 14 or even 17-year 'sentences' for no more than critical comments on a blog or a flash mob against the 'LPR flag', and there is no reason to expect that 'extremism' charges will be any more justified.

Ihor Kozlovskyy, who was released in the exchange on 27 December 2017, after almost two years' imprisonment, calls the situation for religious organizations in occupied Donbas "catastrophic". He says that the militants are imitating Russia with respect to religious matters, and that anti-Semitism and Islamophobic sentiments are rampant, and expressed also by the leaders of the so-called 'republics'.

### ***Religious situation in Crimea annexed by Russia***

Religious freedom in Russian-occupied Crimea is greatly curtailed. According to the United Nations, there were roughly 2,200 religious organizations, both registered and unregistered, in Crimea before the 2014 occupation. As of September 2017, only 800 remained. In June 2017, after the Russian Supreme Court decision to ban Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist, all twenty-two local Witnesses organizations in Crimea, representing 8,000 congregants, were officially banned as well.

Although Russian repression of Crimean Tatars is mainly motivated by political rather than religious concerns, it disrupts Crimean Tatar religious activities and institutions. Russian authorities have co-opted the spiritual life of the Muslim Crimean Tatar minority and arrested or driven into exile its community representatives.

Oppression through the judicial process also continues apace. For example, in August 2017, the main church space of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in Simferopol, the administrative capital of Crimea, was seized by bailiffs enforcing a February 2017 court decision transferring its ownership to the Crimean Ministry of Property and Land Relations. According to the United Nations, five UOC churches have been officially seized or shut down since 2014. Meanwhile, Russia's laws on religion and extremism, strengthened in July 2016, have been used to punish believers of various churches, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, for the exercise of their faith. (Source: Atlantic Council/ Excerpt, 31 January 2018: <https://bit.ly/2nvfq13>)

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# Lebanon: Sherine's Story, a story of child marriage



Painting by an SB Overseas Beneficiary

*As written by Raisa Elhadi, who is currently volunteering with SB Overseas in Lebanon*

HRWF (22.03.2018) – This is a story of a girl named Sherine, but her name could be Amina, or Amal, or Sara, or any one of hundreds, even thousands of names of girls with almost the same story. Girls whose futures have been wrested from their control over and over again in so many different ways and who, somehow, still manage to feel hope and passion and optimism for a different, better life than their own. Sherine is only one of those girls.

Sherine's family, like so many others, came to Lebanon seeking safety from violence. As a thirteen year old, Sherine had studied up until the fifth grade in Syria. Growing up she had aspirations of becoming a doctor, a dream only reinforced by the sight of all the violence she saw around her during the war. Sherine thought her family's stay in Lebanon would be brief, and she would soon return to Syria to complete her studies and fulfill her dream.

Shortly after their arrival in Lebanon, Sherine's mother asked her what she thought about getting married. There was a young man from the family's town back in Syria who was interested in taking Sherine as a wife.

"It's up to you," Sherine shrugged, ambivalent. Marriage didn't seem like a very big deal to her. How different could it be from the wedding games she played with her friends in her yard in Syria or in the streets of Shatila?

So Sherine's family decided to wed her to the man from their town, and Sherine went along with it, unaware of the gravity of the union she was about to undertake. Within a month of fleeing to Lebanon, Sherine, still just thirteen years old, married a twenty-five year old man she barely knew.

Her ambivalence didn't last long. From the very beginning, Sherine's marriage darkened her life like a cloud. Rather than spending time with her parents and siblings, playing in the streets with her friends, or studying, Sherine spent her days cleaning and cooking for her husband. The only times she left



the house were to fetch groceries and household supplies from the market, or on rare visits to her family's house. Real marriage was nothing like a game. Instead, it was full of responsibilities and obligations that took up all her time and energy, crushing her youth and depleting the reading and academic skills she had built up in school.

Sherine's family had tried to explain, before her wedding, the physical expectations that would befall Sherine as a wife. But Sherine had been a child, naive and unaware, and she hadn't understood. Her wedding night came as a nasty shock.

Things got worse over time. Sherine's housewife skills fell short, and that angered her husband. When he came home to an empty table or messy house, his temper swelled, and he began hitting her as punishment. Jealousy festered, and he forbade Sherine to put on makeup and forced her to wear long, loose abayas. Before long, Sherine's husband was intervening in every part of her life. She spent her days trying to appease him, afraid of his anger and violence, fading to a quiet shadow of who she once was.

When her husband's anger was especially bad, she would flee to her family's house for comfort and safety. She asked her family to help her divorce her husband, but her mother tried to placate her instead.

"No marriage is ever perfect in the beginning," she said. "Just be patient, and you'll get used to him and begin to accept him."

One day during a particularly fiery bout of rage, Sherine's husband smashed the furnace in the kitchen. In his anger, he beat her and swore divorce upon her. Through her fear and pain, she felt a wash of relief and hope that maybe she could escape and go back to her life before. But as refugees, their marriage wasn't registered, and both their union and their divorce were bound only through words. Soon after the fight, her husband took her back, and the nightmare resumed.

Sherine tried to be patient, but her marriage wore her down. Her husband's anger carried into the bedroom, where he was rough and brutish with her. Evenings soon became a nightmare that was nearly too horrible for Sherine to bear. When she escaped to her family's house, she begged them for a divorce.

Finally her family agreed, and they managed to register her marriage with the court so that her divorce could be officially recognised. Sherine's nightmare was over, and she returned to live with her family. But she didn't want any other girls to be put through what she had experienced.

She began to spread the word among her friends and peers about the true meaning of marriage. As a young teenager, Sherine had agreed to marriage blindly, without any understanding the responsibilities and realities of married life. She advised other girls never to accept early marriage, and revealed the details of what marriage could be like. She hoped that with the necessary knowledge and insight, other girls would be more aware than she was and would be able to protect themselves and, ultimately, their futures.

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## **Kazakhstan: Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan, a shock wave from Russia?**

By Willy Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (\*)

HRWF (22.03.2018) – The total population of Kazakhstan is estimated at about 19 million. The last national census also reported approximately 70 percent of the population was Muslim, most of whom adhere to the Sunni Hanafi school. Other Islamic groups account for less than 1 percent of the population when taken together.

Approximately 26 percent of the population is Christian. The

majority of these are Russian Orthodox. The country also has Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Baptists, Jews, Buddhists, Mormons, Baha'is and Scientologists.

Jehovah's Witnesses numbered about 17-18,000 with a Memorial attendance of about 30-32,000.

The history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan began in the 19th century. The first of the Bible Students (as Jehovah's Witnesses were then called) was a Russian Empire citizen of Polish nationality, Mr. Semion Kozlitskiy. He was banished because of his faith on penal servitude in the settlement of Bukhtarma, nearly Ust Kamenogorsk, East Kazakhstan. He lived there until his death in 1935.

The following page of the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan begins in the 1940s. Then, many believers from Ukraine and Moldova were banished to corrective-labor camps in Kazakhstan (the notorious camps of the GULAG). At the end of the 1940s, the religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses reached the South of Kazakhstan, in the region of Almaty.

In the 1950s some of released Jehovah's Witnesses decided to go on living in the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan. The first organized communities appeared in several cities: Zhezkazgan, Karaganda and Satpayev in Central Kazakhstan. According to the official state statistics, the total number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan was about one thousand by the 1970s.

Following the independence of Kazakhstan on 16 December 1991, Jehovah's Witnesses first registered in 1992 and re-registered in January 2013, pursuant to the new Religion Law of 2011. Currently, communities of Jehovah's Witnesses are registered in all areas of Kazakhstan. They have 59 local religious associations and one regional religious association, which helps to coordinate their activity in the country.

Since last year however, state repression has particularly targeted them. From the cases and incidents reported hereafter, it is obvious that there is a political strategy aiming at the disappearance of Jehovah's Witnesses and other peaceful religious movements of foreign origin in Kazakhstan.

## **Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom**

On **20 April 2017**, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that the Jehovah's Witnesses Administrative Center was an extremist organization, that it was to be closed and all Jehovah's Witnesses' activities banned. The decision was confirmed on appeal. Nowadays, their 395 congregations can no longer operate legally and their 170,000 members are deprived of all their right to religious freedom.

### ***Suspension of the Operations of the Administrative Center***

Two months later, on **29 June 2017**, the Almaty Administrative Court found the Administrative Center of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan "guilty" of alleged failure to comply with regulations requiring full coverage of on-site surveillance cameras. It therefore suspended all of the Center's activity for three months and imposed a fine of 680,000 tenge or USD 2160) based on the anti-terrorist law under article 149 (2) of the Administrative Code.

The court's decision was the result of an inspection alleging that the Center needed 3 more security cameras in addition to the 25 already installed in compliance with legislation concerning public venues. However, State officials had approved a plan on **6 February 2017** for the Center's property that showed the location of all installed security cameras. By approving that official plan, the State officials had confirmed that the Center was in full compliance with the relevant legislation.

On **12 July 2017**, the Witnesses filed an appeal. On **3 August 2017**, three weeks later, the court amended the decision to allow the Center to operate once again, although the three-month suspension remained in effect regarding the use of the Kingdom Hall and a tent on site.

### ***Bank Accounts of All Legal Entities Frozen***

Another important pillar of the Witnesses' activity that was attacked was their bank accounts. On **5 July 2017**, the Halyk Bank, which had managed the Center's financial assets since 1998, suddenly and unilaterally terminated its banking contract without explanation. Local branches of Halyk Bank also cancelled their contracts with the local legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country. After considerable effort, the Witnesses managed to open an account with ATF Bank but after a few weeks, it also unilaterally put an end to their contract.

Through informal inquiries, the Witnesses learned that the National Bank of the Russian Federation had issued a black list of companies and organizations considered undependable or "extremist" and that the National Bank of Kazakhstan relied on this list in checking banks' business arrangements throughout the country.

### ***Manifestation of Belief Characterized as "Extremist Activity"***

Criminalizing the freedom of expression of the Witnesses and characterizing the public manifestation of their belief as extremist activity is another way of muting and paralyzing the movement.

On **18 January 2017**, Mr. Teymur Akhmedov , a 60-year old father and husband with an impeccable reputation was arrested while trying to share his faith with others. He was placed in pre-trial detention under Art. 174, § 2 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan for alleged extremist activity and incitement of social, national, clan, racial, or religious

discord. The Criminal Code provides prison terms of between five and ten years in such a case.

On **24 January 2017**, Mr Akhmedov's attorney submitted an urgent complaint to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) on his behalf.

On **2 May 2017**, he was sentenced to a five-year prison term to be followed by an additional three-year ban on his religious activity.

On **20 June 2017**, the Judicial Chamber for Criminal Cases of the City of Astana ruled to uphold the previous court decision. This was enforced on **29 June 2017**.

On **14 September 2017**, the UN WGAD released an advance version of its Opinion determining that the detention of Teymur Akhmedov is arbitrary and violates his fundamental right of freedom of worship and belief. The Kazakhstan government was urged to "take the steps necessary to remedy the situation... and release Mr Akhmedov immediately."

After the UN decision was officially released on **12 October 2017**, Mr Akhmedov's lawyers filed an appeal to the Supreme Court requesting that it implement the WGAD decision, acquit him of the charges, and order his immediate release but this did not happen.

Mr. Akhmedov had been suffering from poor health even before his imprisonment more than a year ago. On 8 February 2018, he underwent surgery to remove two tumors, one of which was malignant. His family and his attorneys pleaded again with the Kazakh authorities to release him from detention. They were concerned about his detention conditions in the correctional facility in Pavlodar and about his need for an appropriate treatment for his cancer. Their pleas have been ignored. The US ambassador in Kazakhstan has made many efforts to get Mr. Akhemov's release and transfer to a hospital abroad where he could get an appropriate treatment, in vain. According to the

latest news, he was being transferred last week by train to the north of the country to be hospitalized: a trip of 1200 km that would last 7 days.

### ***Manifestation of Belief Construed as “Missionary Activity”***

In the last few years, a law prohibiting “missionary activity” was repeatedly instrumentalized to criminalize the individual sharing of their beliefs, the main target being Kazakh Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Kazakhstan authorities primarily restrict religious freedom by applying the Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations adopted on **11 October 2011**. Art. 1, § 5 and 8, § 1 of this law prohibits unregistered “missionary activity”.

The Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) claims that it is illegal for Jehovah’s Witnesses to share their Bible-based beliefs with friends, neighbours and other interested persons, and to participate in religious services at their registered places of worship without first obtaining registration as “missionaries.” The application of this law to the religious activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses has led to many administrative convictions, fines, court actions and harassment by authorities.

On **11 July 2016**, the UN Committee on Human Rights’ (CCPR) concluding observations on Kazakhstan (117<sup>th</sup> session) included recommendations that Kazakhstan:

“Should guarantee the effective exercise of the freedom of religion or belief and freedom to manifest a religion or belief in practice” – par. 48

“Should consider bringing article 22 of its Constitution in line with the Covenant and revise all relevant laws and practices with a view to removing all restrictions that go beyond the narrowly construed restrictions permitted under article 18 of the Covenant.” – par. 48



Despite a positive decision on religious activity from Kazakhstan's Supreme Court on 1 June 2017, lower courts are slow to apply it and Jehovah's Witnesses continue to be harassed and fined by authorities for manifestation of belief.

### ***Interference of Public Authorities with Religious Services***

Authorities have found chairmen of Local Religious Organizations liable for administrative violations for allowing minors to attend religious meetings. Often, local law enforcement officers have approached non-Witness husbands and influenced them to file complaints against congregation elders, even when there was no conflict in the family.

Last year, two Witness elders in Karabalyk and Shahtinsk were sentenced to a heavy fine for allowing children to attend religious services: the equivalent of 35 and 50 times the monthly minimum wage. As of today, a third case in Balkhash is pending.

### **Some Positive Developments in Courts**

Last year, some court decisions were positive in cases of proselytism.

On **6 April 2017**, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan ruled in favor of Yury Toporov, a Jehovah's Witness, using Article 18 of the ICCPR as the basis for its decision.

Lower courts had wrongly convicted Mr Toporov of "illegal missionary activity," reasoning that he was required to register as a "missionary" to give a talk at a religious service of Jehovah's Witnesses at a rented place of worship. The Supreme Court concluded that this manifestation of belief is a fundamental right for which registration is not required.

On **6 April 2017**, the Supreme Court also ruled in favor of another Witness, Andrey Rakin, in another case of alleged "unregistered missionary activity". However, in this case, the

Supreme Court did not address the merits of the alleged violation. Instead, the Supreme Court limited its judgment to concluding that the State authorities had not provided sufficient evidence that Mr Rakin was engaged in so-called missionary activity.

On **6 April 2017**, the Karabalyk District Court ruled that Irina Malykhina, a Jehovah's Witness, was not guilty of illegal missionary activity because of the absence of any administrative violations on her part.

On **1 June 2017**, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan acquitted Andrey Korolev on the charge of "unregistered missionary activity." The Court granted a protest (a special form of appeal) filed by the Prosecutor's General Office on Korolev's case behalf. The protest was based on Article 18 of the ICCPR and argued that Korolev should be acquitted because publicly sharing his faith with others was a peaceful manifestation of his faith and "could not be considered as unlawful 'coercion'."

In the aftermath of these court decisions, on **18 July 2017**, Jehovah's Witnesses organized an informative campaign to acquaint local authorities with the latest Supreme Court decisions. On that occasion, the Prosecutor and the head of the Religious Affairs Department of Kyzylorda Regional Prosecution Office publicly supported the decision that door-to-door preaching is not to be considered as missionary activity, and added that they have no objection to the preaching activity.

## **Meetings with Officials**

What is interesting to note with Jehovah's Witnesses is their sense for strategy. Apart from defending their rights in courts to the highest level, they give the preference to dialogue with the authorities rather than "naming and shaming."

In 2017, they had several meetings with various Kazakh authorities: Ministry of Justice, Ombudsman Office, Committee of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Civil Society and the General Prosecutor's Office.

Meetings were also arranged at the OSCE, the UN and the Office of the Commissioner General for Human Rights.

On 15 June 2017, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses met with representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office in Astana to discuss the possible withdrawal of 28 pending complaints from the UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) as the aforementioned Supreme Court rulings completely resolved the issues of their so-called illegal missionary activity.

On 30 June 2017, the complainants' lawyer sent a letter to the CCPR with a request to recall and stop consideration of the 28 complaints if Kazakhstan complied with its agreement. Otherwise, the applicants would ask the CCPR to resume consideration of their complaints on the merits and issue a decision in respect of Kazakhstan.

## **Religious Freedom Objectives**

Considering the attempt to suspend the operations of their Administrative Center,

Considering the illegal detention of Teymur Akhmetov,

Considering the characterization of the public manifestation of religious beliefs as "extremist activity",

Considering the repeated practice of construing the individual sharing of one's religious beliefs as "missionary activity" deemed illegal if the person is not registered as a missionary,

Considering the interference of the public authorities in

religious services,

Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan request the government of Kazakhstan

- fulfill its obligations under international law to guarantee freedom of religion, expression, assembly and association for all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses,
- release Teymur Akhmetov from prison as a matter of urgency,
- stop considering the peaceful movement of Jehovah's Witnesses an "extremist religion",
- put an end to the arrest, prosecution and harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses for so-called illegal missionary activity,
- stop prosecuting congregation elders for allowing children to attend religious services, even with one of their parents.

(\*) Paper presented on 19 March 2018 in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) at the conference "Religion and civil society in the post-Soviet era: Central and beyond" sponsored by the American University of Central Asia and Cesnur.

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