

# **“Freedom of religion or belief is a litmus test for all human rights”**

*In a hearing on freedom of religion or belief, Human Rights MEPs focused on the persecution of various religious minorities & were informed about the “rising tide of intolerance” worldwide.*

European Parliament News (22.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2mTYiVD> – The European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) today held a hearing on “Freedom of Religion or Belief: the situation of persecuted minorities, notably Christians”, chaired by DROI Chair MEP Pier Antonio Panzeri (S&D, IT). The hearing with several experts from different parts of the world focussed on the persecution of various religious minorities, notably Christians, Shias and Rohingya.

A “rising tide of intolerance” in the world was deplored and confirmed by statistics according to which 70% of the global population suffer from restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), with a negative tendency for the future.

“Freedom of religion or belief is a litmus test for all human rights”, said Ján Figel’, EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU, to MEPs.

Speakers stressed that Christians at present suffer a degree of persecution unparalleled in history, especially in the Middle East, but also in China, India, North Korea and Russia.

The plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, culminating at present in a systematic campaign seemingly aimed at exterminating

them, was also discussed, including the historical background of the conflict.

Furthermore, the hearing focussed on the massive discrimination against Shias in Bahrain, where Shia Muslims form the majority of the population, but had to witness the destruction of dozens of Shia mosques, just one example of the many harassments they face.

Finally the question was raised whether secular societies need better “religious literacy”, ie a greater understanding of religious issues.

MEPs emphasised the need for enhanced EU action for FoRB.

You can [rewatch the hearing through this link](#).

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# Budapest Declaration praised for its stance against persecution of minorities

By Asif Aqeel

Daily Times (19.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2A2uWdf> – Analysts express mixed sentiments on a recently passed Budapest Declaration, praising it for its stand against religious persecution but also highlighting the need for such documents to be framed in a language that does not show bias towards a particular community.

The declaration adopted following an international consultation in October expresses solidarity with persecuted Christians and other religious minority communities and seeks to help them stay in their historic homelands. It calls upon policy makers, influential individuals, and governments from across the globe to promote free exercise of religion.

The international consultation had been organised by the Hungarian government's Deputy State Secretariat for the Aid of Persecuted Christians. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also addressed the consultation, echoing concerns raised by Pope Francis in September 2015 when he said that by remaining silent world leaders were being complicit in the persecution of Christians.

At the consultation, the Hungarian prime minister said, "It is a fact that four out of every five people oppressed due to their religion are Christians ... The greatest danger we face today is the indifferent, apathetic silence of a Europe which denies its Christian roots."

He said persecution of religious minorities was an underreported topic in the international press. "One needs a magnifying glass to find political statements condemning the persecution of Christians," Orban added.

Other speakers stressed that the west should be ashamed that it could not come to the aid of persecuted Christians and other religious minorities that were under political, social and economic pressures because of their faith.

Even before the passage of the Budapest Declaration, the Hungarian government had already started initiative like Hungary Helps to facilitate persecuted minorities in their homelands. Under this initiative, the Hungarian government provides assistance to Christians refugees from various Asian and African countries so that they could return to their homelands.

Speaking to Daily Times, Dr Elizabeth Kendal, an expert associated with the Melbourne School of Theology, said the declaration was bound to be greatly appreciated for its stance for persecuted communities. "It is a good start. Persecuted religious minorities often feel alone, hidden, abandoned and forgotten. A declaration such as this, indeed any statement that acknowledges their suffering, is bound to be greatly appreciated," she said.

Condemning persecution and calling for promotion of religious liberty is more important than some might realize, she added.

Dr Kendal said her only disappointment with the declaration was its failure to identify the nature of persecution accurately. She said the persecution suffered by Christian and other minorities were not mere atrocities. "The problem is systemic. Multitudes of Christians suffer crippling generational poverty due to systematic discrimination, much of which arises out disinformation and prejudice as much as policy," she said.

In conversation with Daily Times, other experts drew attention to the need for framing such declaration in a universally applicable and secular language.

“For worldwide recognition it [the declaration] will most likely go through the United Nations General Assembly, but then the text will have to be amended in order not to show any bias towards Christianity,” Aidtrade director Peter Bronsveld said.

He said it would have been impossible for a public sector body to pass a similarly worded declaration in Germany, Netherlands, Belgium or France.

Zoltán Lakner, a Hungarian political analyst, went as far as terming the Hungarian prime minister’s address at the consultation as an assault on the European Union.

Differing from Lakner, Dr. Kendel said Hungary and other nations could make a strong stand for religious liberty without violating the separation of church and state. “Indeed, every state that has ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has an obligation to defend and advance religious freedom as a universal human right.”

On the declaration’s focus on sustaining minorities in their homelands, she said it was a difficult endeavour but remained a step in the right direction.

### ***Public memory of religious strife in Hungary***

Public discourse and official history in Hungary retains the memory of living under the Ottoman rule. The Turkish Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent had incorporated central Hungary, including Budapest, into the Ottoman Empire in 1541, and the control lasted til 1699. During this period, most of the Hungarians moved to other places where they felt safer from the Ottoman control. The result was that the Christian population decreased in the country. Hungarian art and history

still retain memories of Ottoman rule.

Regarding the resurgence of a Christian identity at the state level, France-based analyst Dr Azam Gill said the phenomenon was visible in many western countries. The most recent example is the largest rally with at least 60,000 people at Warsaw to celebrate Poland's Independence Day on November 11," he said. The theme of the rally was 'We Want God'. During their interviews with Al-Jazeera, the organisers said the event was a reminder of Poland's Catholic identity and a response to Europe's 'invasion by immigrants'.

Dr Gill said rising incidents of terrorism by European citizens affiliated with militant Islamist outfits, uncontrolled migrations and their adverse impact on economies, and the eagerness of church leaders to remain politically correct had encouraged a conservative movement that sought resurrection of the rejected political status of the church. "The church leaders should use this opportunity to present the true face of Christianity. It is time for complacent and complicit church leaders to start earning their gold and purple by reclaiming their religion from the clutches of ambitious wolves in sheep's clothing," he said.

"This European grouping has superimposed Christianity's promise of spiritual salvation over worldly redemption and set itself up as a savior. The explosive content of mixing religion and politics must not be ignored," he said.

### ***Christian minorities in South Asia***

According to the International World Watch List, Pakistan is on the fourth number where Christians are persecuted because of their religion. Thousands of Pakistani Christians have fled to Thailand and have filed for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In March 2015, the Jubilee Campaign, a US nonprofit, co-founded by British parliamentarian Lord David Alton, reported that around 4,000

Pakistani Christians were seeking asylum in Thailand.

Karachi University assistant professor Dr Sabir Michael, a panelist at the consultation, stresses that the situation of Christians is far worse in India than in Pakistan. The reality does not get highlighted because of successful lobbying by the Indian government.

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**RUSSIA: Oryol District Court extends the pretrial detention of Dennis Christensen for another three**

# months

JW World Headquarters (21.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2zaXygv> –  
On November 20, 2017, a judge of the Sovetsky District Court of the city of Oryol ruled to extend Dennis Christensen's pretrial detention until February 23, 2018.

Mr. Christensen, who has Danish citizenship and is married to a local resident, was arrested on May 25, 2017, at a Bible study meeting, which he was attending with his wife Irina. FSB officers investigating the case inaccurately claimed that Christensen "was continuing" the activity of the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Oryol, which had been liquidated by a court decision. However, he has never been a member of this organization, which the court could have easily confirmed by simply looking at the documents received from the local department of the Ministry of Justice. During the six months since Christensen has been detained, FSB investigators have interviewed dozens of residents of the Oryol Region and other areas in an attempt to find evidence that Christensen was engaging in unlawful activities.

After a three-hour hearing, Judge Andrey Tretyakov refused to change the measure of restraint to a softer one, such as house arrest. The court also ignored official guarantees from the Royal Embassy of Denmark, which under humanitarian considerations gave assurances that they would not provide Christensen with a new passport to replace the one seized by the investigators or assist him in traveling outside the Russian Federation.

The fact that the local religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Oryol was liquidated and its activities prohibited does not annul the right of "everyone" (not only Russian citizens) to freedom of religion, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. According to the fundamental law of the country, everyone is



guaranteed freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, including the right to profess individually or together with others any religion, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious and other views and act according to them.

The main occupation of Dennis Christensen in Oryol was installing wooden structures. He was in Oryol for personal reasons, and not at the invitation of any organization. Dennis Christensen is completely innocent.

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## **RUSSIA: Misuse of anti-extremism in October 2017**

*Prosecuting Religious Organizations and Believers*

SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (10.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2mMxvuj> – On October 13, the Parliamentary

Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a Declaration on Freedom of Religion in Russia. The declaration was signed by 28 deputies from 14 European countries. The authors of the declaration noted that, *"whilst the Russian Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of religion or belief, this fundamental right is at risk as the Russian authorities continue to foster an atmosphere of intolerance, discrimination and persecution against religious minorities throughout the entire Federation."* The total [ban](#) imposed on Jehovah's Witnesses in 2017 served as the principal example of this trend. According to the declaration, Evangelical Christians, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Scientologists and representatives of other religious groups are being persecuted in Russia; some of them remain under arrest awaiting their trial on the basis of the 2002 law on combating extremist activity, while, in fact, they are charged for *"simply engaging in peaceful religious beliefs and activities."* The Declaration calls on the Russian government to *"put an end to these violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief of members of religious minorities."*

In late October, it was reported that a court in Nizhny Novgorod recognized a citizen of Uzbekistan, a team leader in a cleaning company, guilty under Article 282.2 Part 2 of participation in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat and sentenced her to 1 year of imprisonment to be served in a settlement colony.

The criminal case under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code for involvement in the activities of Tablighi Jamaat was initiated in Crimea in early October. Several homes on the peninsula were searched, and four people were arrested.

It became known in October, that, in late September, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Tatarstan changed the verdict, issued by the Naberezhnye Chelny City Court under Part 2 of Article 282.2 in April with respect to nine Tablighi

Jamaat supporters. The reference to an aggravating circumstance in the form of committing a crime by a group of persons was excluded from the verdict, and, therefore, the prison terms were reduced for all the offenders.

We would like to remind that the Tablighi Jamaat religious association was banned in Russia in 2009; we regard this ban as inappropriate. The movement is engaged in preaching its version of Islam and has not been implicated in any calls for violence.

In October, we learned about at least two cases of prosecution under Article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Offences for distribution of inappropriately banned (in our opinion) religious literature. A resident of Magas faces a fine for storing in a market pavilion two copies of the *Fortress of a Muslim* – a collection of daily prayers, which shows no signs of extremism. A resident of Kunashak, the Chelyabinsk Region, was fined for distributing to his co-religionists an inappropriately forbidden brochure *Woman in Islam and in the Judeo-Christian World*, which extolls the advantages of the women's position in societies that live according to the Islamic tradition.

### ***Prosecution for Anti-Religious Statements***

It was reported in mid-October that a criminal case had been opened in Krasnodar under Article 282 Part 1 of the Criminal Code against Maxim Drozdov. The charges were based on the fact of publication by Drozdov of his own satirical poem "Heretic" on his VKontakte page. Despite the fact that the material in question is an obvious satire on the Orthodox radicals, the investigation declared that the poem was aimed at humiliating the dignity of the social group "atheists." In our opinion, the poem does not give the slightest grounds for criminal prosecution; hopefully, this absurd case will not reach the court.

In late October, the Central District Court of Sochi partially granted the appellate complaint of Viktor Nochevnov, convicted under Article 148 Part 1 of the Criminal Code (insulting the feelings of believers). The verdict of the Magistrates Court was revoked and the case was sent for a new consideration. In August, the Magistrates Court sentenced Nochevnov to a fine of 50,000 rubles. The prosecution was based on the fact that Nochevnov, under the pseudonym "Vityok Vlasov," had shared a series of caricature images of Christ via the social network VKontakte. We [spoke out](#) against the verdict to Nochevnov.

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**Church closures in Egypt: 'We were silent when it was one, now it's four'**



Bishop-General Macarius, a Coptic Orthodox leader, walks around the burnt and damaged Evangelical Church in Minya governorate, about 245 km south of Cairo, August 26, 2013 (Reuters)

By Sonia Farid

Al Arabiya English (20.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2A05Ity> – “We said nothing when one church was closed, so it got worse and a second, then a third were closed, and a fourth is on its way as if praying is a crime for which Copts are punished,” said a statement issued by the Diocese of Minya in Upper Egypt.

The statement listed the names of the four churches, two of which were closed after being attacked by extremist Islamists, the third closed in anticipation of an attack that never materialized, and the fourth was besieged by security forces following an attack and is expected to be closed. “We are concerned that extremists will be able to impose their will on state institutions,” the [statement](#) added, calling upon the governor and security entities to interfere.

The statement issued by the governor of Minya in response

gives, however, a totally different picture. According to the statement, the buildings that were attacked were houses in which prayers were performed without a license. "Two houses were attacked. Security forces arrested 15 suspects in the first and 11 in the second," said the statement. "As for the other places, they were also houses owned by Copts but were not attacked at all." The statement added that the governorates responds to all requests for the construction of churches and makes sure that their number is proportional to population increase.

"In fact, Minya governorate has the biggest number of churches, monasteries, and Coptic community service centers," added the statement, which also called upon the diocese to verify the information it has.

Bishop of Minya Makarios said he would not comment on the governor's statement. The dispute about whether the targeted buildings were actual churches or houses used for prayers started a debate over the legal status of churches and the long-overlooked licensing ordeal.

The "war of statements," as journalist Mohamed Youssef puts it, signals the beginning of a rift between state and church officials. "The governor's statement angered a lot of Coptic activists who called upon President Sisi to personally intervene through forming a neutral committee to look into the crisis in Minya," he wrote. "Many of those activists believe that the new law on the construction of churches has not so far solved any of the problems pertaining to the legal status of churches."

It is noteworthy, Youssef added, that neither Pope Tawadros nor the Coptic Orthodox Church have issued any statement on the matter while Bishop Makarios is the only one in charge. "The Pope has most likely assigned Bishop Makarios the task of speaking in behalf of the Copts of Minya and putting pressure on the governorate to reopen the churches and legalize their

status," he said. "The Pope does not want the matter to be escalated to a dispute between the church and the regime so he preferred to deal with it on a more local level."

Journalist Girgis Bishry, who criticized the governor's statement, argued that the absence of licenses was just a pretext used by the governorate to close the churches and that the whole situation was not dealt with in accordance with the law. "The governor resorted to reconciliation sessions between the assailants and the victims in order to solve the problem, which basically means that the perpetrators get away with what they did," he wrote.

Bishry noted that Minya is the most affected by sectarian violence among Egypt's governorates, with more than 64 churches burnt following the dispersal of the Islamist sit-in staged in protest of toppling the Muslim Brotherhood and attacks targeting churches and Copts still taking places. "This means that Minya is a hotbed of extremists and there is a possibility that the governorate itself is infiltrated by Muslim Brotherhood supporters who intentionally turn a blind eye to such violations," he added. "If this is not stopped, we might wake up one day to find Minya an Islamic state."

MP and political analyst Emad Gad explained that the law on the construction of churches, issued in 2016, is divided into two parts: the first is issuing licenses for new churches and the second is legalizing the status of already-existing churches. "Almost half Coptic Orthodox churches are not officially licensed," he wrote. "Some churches had all the documents completed before starting construction and got permission for construction, but the Security Bureau never gave the actual license so that church remained technically without papers.

Other churches were built without any documents to start with because of the many obstacles security entities placed in their way and these became a matter of fact." Gad added that

the Coptic Orthodox Church submitted a list of unlicensed churches so that they can be legalized, but instead of starting the process of issuing licenses, local authorities started closing them because they are not licensed. “Those authorities totally overlook the fact that such actions are bound to increase sectarian tension as Copts would once again feel deprived of their citizenship rights, on top of which is the right to practice their faith.”

A [report](#) by Girgis Safwat, Teresa Shenouda, and Ali Hussein quotes sources from the Coptic Orthodox Church as saying that the Diocese of Minya sent to the special committee established by the cabinet the document for 50 houses that turned into churches so that their status can be legalized. “Those were originally small houses that parishioners started using over the years for prayers with unofficial security approval so they gradually acquired the status of churches,” the sources said. “Ownership documents were submitted to the committee so that licenses can be issued and the houses can acquire the official status of churches.”

Meanwhile, lawyer and head of the Egyptian Center for Developmental Studies and Human Rights Joseph Malak sent official warnings to the Egyptian prime minister and ministers of interior, parliamentary affairs, and local development to demand stopping the closure of churches and the re-opening of any closed churches.

“This demand is based on the 2013 constitution and law number for the year 2016 on the construction of churches as well as ministerial decree number 199 for the year 2017, which stipulates legalizing the status of existing churches and particularly articles 8, 9, and 10 which consider all existing churches legal,” said the warning.

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## **Algerian church closed for 'illegally printing Bibles and material intended for evangelism'**

World Watch Monitor (20.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2z7ure4> – A church in Algeria's north-western town of Aïn Turk (15km from Oran city) has been closed down by local authorities.

The church, affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria (known as EPA, its French acronym), was sealed off by police on 9 November.

Authorities in Oran claimed the church had been used to "illegally print Gospels and publications intended for evangelism".

The police notification also stated that the church didn't

have state approval. But the president of the EPA, Rev Mahmoud Haddad, denied any wrongdoing, saying the justifications for closing the church were “unfounded”.

“Firstly, this community is indeed affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria, which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974 and is accredited with both the Ministry of the Interior and the local government,” he said.

“Also there is no printing activity of Gospels or Christian publications inside these premises.”

He pointed to several “anomalies and falsehoods” in the notification, which stated that the church of Aïn Turk belonged to a man named “Rachid”, who serves there as a pastor.

“This is not the case,” said Rev. Haddad, who added that the accusations were “unjust and false”.

Youssef, a board member at Aïn Turk church, added: “I am very saddened by this injustice and persecution we are facing in Algeria. The notification of the Prefect is based on false motives.”

World Watch Monitor has reported extensively about [intimidations and harassment faced by churches in Algeria](#).

In May, the human rights situation in Algeria was debated by the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The session was attended by the president of the EPA, and raised hope among the Christian community, which expected positive changes.

A new Constitution, passed in February 2016, established freedom of religious worship. Article 36 states that freedom of religious worship is guaranteed in compliance with the law. But in practice, a number of churches were ordered to cease

all religious activities on the grounds that they were in breach of a 2006 law which regulates non-Muslim worship.

Moreover, EPA international partners planning to visit churches in Algeria have seen their visa application denied.

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