

Belgium: Public condemnation of abuse of imprisonment and disregard of religious beliefs led to release (2006)



St Gilles Prison (© lacapitale.be)

In the summer of 2006, HRWF was visited by the son of an Indian businessman who was arrested and incarcerated in Belgium on the basis of an international arrest warrant. For months, the Belgian authorities rejected his request for extradition to India where he wanted to be tried. During his imprisonment in Brussels, he was denied the assistance of a Hindu spiritual leader, allegedly because Hinduism is not a state recognised religion. Additionally, he was starving because he was denied a diet that respected his religious beliefs as a Hindu. He could not eat meat nor any other food that had been in contact with meat.

That year, Belgium was chairing the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Every year, Willy Fautré, the director of HRWF, participates in the OSCE / ODIHR conference on human rights in Warsaw in September. This event is attended by the 57 OSCE participating states and hundreds of NGOs. Fautré made a public statement on the second day denouncing Belgium's appalling treatment of this Indian citizen. The Belgian delegation denied these accusations.

Later that same day, the Belgian embassy held a reception for all participants of the

conference. Fautré attended it and, shockingly, was verbally attacked by a member of the Belgian diplomatic staff about his statement.

The next day, the Indian businessman was extradited to India as he had been requesting for months! Back home, a court released him on bail.

This powerful example demonstrates the impact of denouncing human rights violations publicly so as to hold all levels of governance accountable to international human rights standards.