

A Global Review of the Denial of Religious Freedom Summer 2001

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This edition of “A Global Review” is the second in our regular series to update IARF members on situations of religious persecution around the world. We have selected a range of countries which were not featured in the last issue of *IARF World*. Please note that, from this time, global reviews such as these will be placed on our web site (<http://iarf-religiousfreedom.net>) on a quarterly basis. We hope that member groups can make good use of this information and alert other like-minded individuals and organisations to its existence. Watch out for the next update on the web in December!

United States

In early September, the world was shaken by news of terrorist incidents committed in the United States. This news dominated headlines both in that country and globally. Despite the legitimate goal of bringing the perpetrators of these heinous crimes to justice, law-abiding Muslims have, in turn, become targets of prejudice and discrimination. Early reports from the US and Australia indicated incidents of mosques being firebombed or vandalised, the stoning of a bus full of Muslim schoolchildren, physical assault against individuals, and hate speech directed towards the Muslim community.

Over 10 American Muslim organisations met in Washington soon after the terrorist incidents to condemn the atrocities, but a statement from these organisations also asked law enforcement officials “to help protect mosques and Islamic centres from suffering the backlash of prejudice and stereotyping. We also ask that all Americans be extra vigilant and careful to defend against blaming and abusing American Muslims for this tragedy.” In remarks to the *Islamic Center of Washington*, DC, US President George W. Bush referred to the terrorist incidents. “These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenants of the Islamic faith. And it’s important for my fellow Americans to understand that,” he said. He added that those seeking to intimidate Muslims in order to “take out their anger” represented “the worst of humankind.”

In other US religion news, President Bush has been giving speeches around the country this summer to build support for his “Charitable Choice” programme in which religious groups would be granted federal funding for carrying out social service activities. A report released by the White House in August cited a variety of institutional barriers, “widespread bias” and “excessive restrictions” that religious organisations face in trying to carry out such activities. The legislation was designed to ease those restrictions and to ensure that religious groups are not themselves discriminated against in, according to Bush, “their important public work.” There has, however, been a great deal of controversy over this initiative with concerns raised about the discriminatory hiring practices of religious organisations and potential attempts for these organisations to proselytise. The initiative has been opposed by groups such as *Americans United for Separation of Church and State* who fear that government funding will be used to promote certain religious beliefs. While a revised version of President Bush’s bill passed the House of Representatives by a narrow margin in mid-summer, action in the Senate is expected later this fall.

Egypt

While some groups claim there have been positive developments in Egypt's protection of religious freedom in the recent past, most human rights organisations assert that discriminations still continue against certain religious minorities. Additionally, the Government maintains strict control of religious institutions in the country and this includes Islamic institutions such as mosques and universities.

In its' 2000 report, the *US Commission on Religious Freedom* noted that there had been improvements in the Government's protection of the rights to religious freedom, especially for the Christian community. These improvements, said the *Commission*, included the facilitation of church repairs and expanded coverage of Christian themes in the media. Nonetheless, the *Commission* reported that, "with respect to the Christian community, restrictions on church building and repair continue to exist and religiously-based discrimination, particularly in government employment, remains a pervasive problem." Church leaders are, however, pleased that Egypt's Supreme Court has ordered a retrial of a highly-charged case concerned with the massacre of 21 Coptic Christians in a New Year's riot in Al-Kosheh in January 2000. The retrial was announced in early August and is expected to take place later this fall. According to *Worldwide Newsroom*, the acquittal of 92 of 96 defendants this past February evoked outrage among the Coptic community. The Egyptian Government has been under international criticism for what was largely regarded as an unfair trial.

More troubling is the situation in Egypt with respect to the minority membership of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith has been banned in Egypt since 1960 and Bahá'ís have been subject to arbitrary arrest and detention with properties confiscated. A statement of the *Bahá'í International Community* made to the U.N.'s Commission on Human Rights in June 2001 refuted statements made by the Egyptian delegation to the U.N. which accused Bahá'ís of extremism and of attacking Islam. The report went on to note that such activities would be against Bahá'í tenants and that followers in Egypt continue to be denied basic human rights such as legal registrations of their marriages and the possibility of worship and community observances. Islam is the official state religion in Egypt and religious practices generally follow Islamic law (Shari'a) as the majority of Egyptians are Sunni Muslims. About 10 percent of the population are Christians with the majority of those belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. There are a smaller number of adherents to Judaism and the Bahá'í Faith.

Turkmenistan

In mid-August, officials from police, the local administration, and the National Security Committee (the KNB) disrupted a prayer meeting of the Greater Grace Protestant Church in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabad. *The Keston Institute* reported that attendees of the meeting were taken to the police department, interrogated, and eventually released. They were told by the authorities that they were not allowed to meet for prayers as their church was not registered. This incident follows the raid of a Baptist church by secret police officers in early July. The only officially registered religious organisations in Turkmenistan are the Russian Orthodox Church and the state-approved Spiritual Directorate of Muslims.

Keston reports that, among other groups, almost all Protestant churches, as well as communities of Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahá'ís, have faced various kinds of harassment over the past several years in an effort to wipe out their activities. The practice differs from what is set forth in Article 11 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan which notes, "Everyone has the right independently to determine her or his own religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others, to practice no religion, to express and disseminate beliefs related to religious preference, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies."

Keston further adds that Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov has also recently launched a campaign to stop the spread of Islamic schools. In June, he ordered the closure of an Islamic school in Tashauz and, according to the Religious Affairs Chairman Yagshymurad Atamuradov, students will instead attend a government-approved Islamic school in Ashgabad.

Laos

A statement from the US-based *Lao Human Rights Council* reports that the Communist Government in Laos has arrested and imprisoned more than 250 Hmong and Lao religious leaders and believers and closed down more than 60 Christian churches and religious institutions in several provinces. *Jubilee Campaign*, a Christian human rights organisation based in England, indicates that it has received information that the central government has secretly ordered local authorities to close down churches throughout the country. This information seems to be consistent with reports from various human rights organisations that church members are threatened at gunpoint, forced to sign documents to renounce their faith, and threatened with loss of land and livelihood if they do not do so.

Another British organisation, *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, reported in July that 8 Protestants had been arrested and given shock treatments in an effort to get them to renounce their faith. A statement by the group noted that the men "were unable to bear the strain of their conditions, which for some included being held in stocks and handcuffs." Authorities are purportedly concerned about a growing evangelical Protestant movement in the country and especially among the Hmong people, a minority group which lives along the border of Laos and Vietnam.

The *Associated Press* (AP), in covering the Christian arrests in Laos, notes that Laos is predominately a Buddhist country with only a small proportion of Christians. "Although it is a one-party state, Laos's constitution provides for freedom of worship," reports AP, "But in recent years there have been reports of localised persecution of Christians by officials apparently wary that church gatherings could be a focus of anti-government dissent. The secretive regime tolerates no political opposition."

Macedonia

The destruction and abuse of religious sites in Macedonia has been a hallmark of the recent conflict in a place where religion and ethnicity remain closely intertwined. The *Keston Institute* reports that attacks on Muslim religious sites is especially serious with some 44 of 500 mosques in the country having been destroyed. Most of these have been shelled by Macedonian security forces. According to *Keston*, there has been little or no damage to churches and monasteries. Alternatively, however, Albanian rebels

(predominately Muslims) are apparently using Orthodox monasteries as military bases to prevent attacks by Macedonian security forces. The *Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE)* in Europe issued a statement in early August expressing “grave concern” that “Albanian rebels in Macedonia appear to be using religious and cultural monuments as military bases.”

The population of Macedonia is approximately 66% Macedonian Orthodox, about 25-30% Muslim, and the remainder are from minority faiths. In a welcome development, religious leaders from Macedonia, including the Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, the Catholic Church, the Evangelist-Methodist Church, and the Jewish community, issued a statement in mid-June condemning the abuse of religion in that country. The document stated, “Our churches and religious communities are not involved in the conflict, and we strongly reject any effort to allow ourselves to be involved and to be manipulated, as well as any misuse of religious symbols and language for the purposes of violence. ... We condemn the use of sacred places and buildings for military purposes, and their desecration and destruction. Also, we condemn the incidents of harassment of religious people. The sacred nature of religious buildings must be respected, as must the personal integrity and dignity of clergy, representatives and officials of religious communities.”

Chile

The Commission on Religious Cults, composed of members of Chile’s Parliament, have been investigating 20 cults which could be deemed destructive to Chilean society. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* reports the Commission members requested that the Minister of Justice order an investigation and, if the antecedents were proved, cancel the legal status of these organisations. According to *El Mercurio*, a Chilean newspaper, the Commission received testimonies of persons belonging to cults and concluded that some 100 organisations of this type operate in the country. The parliamentary group was apparently conceived following the disappearance to two youths affiliated with the “Tibetan Center of Studies,” whose legal status has since been cancelled.

The Commission defined cults as having some of the following characteristics: the faithful are conditioned to engage in practices that violate human dignity, the faithful are encouraged to break ties with their families, followers are manipulated sexually, there are grave injuries to physical and mental health of followers, and leaders financially exploit their followers. An editorial by Jorge Enrique Precht Pizarro, Professor of Public Law at the Catholic Pontifical University of Chile, published in *El Mercurio* noted that a vast majority of countries have not resorted to specific legal classifications of cults, but have dealt with situations of abuse under criminal law. While Pizarro acknowledged that States have the “right and constitutional duty to intervene” in cases of “pseudo religious socially destructive groups,” he added that “the law requires that secular forces not be employed to enforce ideas and much less religious beliefs. The State itself requires that a judicial regime not be created, or special penal sanctions for determined groups or individuals, but rather that common law be applied to all.”

The list developed by the Commission in Chile has some resemblance to the French Parliament’s attempt to produce a list of cults. Subsequent to the last global issues update in the *IARF World*, restrictive legislation was passed in France at the end of May which has been widely criticised for its overly broad interpretations of what is considered appropriate religious practice and the State’s seeming interference with religious liberty. Interestingly,

the French legislation has also been considered by legislators in Hong Kong as a potential model.