

# Serve the suffering

5 October 2010 – ECR/EPP conference on the persecution of Christians

## Introduction

Your honourables, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege for me to be here today and I thank the EPP and ECR group for organizing this conference. Freedom of Religion or Belief is a precious human right and many people in various parts of the world suffer from violations of this right. How can we serve those suffering?

But before I will go more into detail, let me quickly introduce Open Doors to you.

Open Doors has been established in 1955 when a Dutch missionary, Anne van der Bijl, or Brother Andrew as many people came to know him, started to travel to Eastern Europe with a Volkswagen beetle with Bibles but first and foremost, a warm heart for those that were not free to live their faith. That is still an important characteristic of the work of Open Doors: just to be there to listen and to comfort people who are persecuted for their religious convictions.

Open Doors is a Christian organization, therefore, most of the information we have about violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief is about Christians. This is not to say, however, that we do not support religious freedom for other groups. Freedom for just one group of people is no freedom!

We cooperate with others whenever possible in platforms and coalitions like the European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) here in Brussels.

In 55 years time, Open Doors grew out into an almost worldwide ministry with offices in over 20 countries in the free world and representations in almost 50 countries where Christians are persecuted.

Open Doors is almost entirely supported by individual donations. The annual income is around 60 million USD and worldwide, we have almost 600 people employed worldwide.

We were really surprised and honoured when we learned about our nomination for the Sacharov prize this year. We take it as an important recognition of the work we are doing serving those suffering and as an encouragement to keep on doing that. As the ECR is one of the organizers of this conference, I would like to take the opportunity to thank them for the nomination.

So far the commercials. Let us focus on today's topic, serve the suffering.

## The Suffering

Violations of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief take place all over the world and it affects an estimated 100 million people. Figures, however, are highly dependent on the definition used and your estimation of the number of Christians in a particular country. How many Christians are there in China? And should they all be included? Nevertheless, although we might not always realise it here, it seems fair to say that there are still many people in the world whose religious rights are violated, sometimes in very brutal ways.

Open Doors annually releases the so called World Watch List, ranking 50 countries where faith costs the most. Based on a questionnaire with 50 questions covering various aspects of religious freedom, countries are compared. Some of the questions are broad and will affect all religions or beliefs while other questions e.g. those on incidents, focus on Christians only.

This year the top ten consists of North-Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Maldives, Afghanistan, Yemen, Mauritania, Laos, and Uzbekistan.

Before I go into more detail, I would like to highlight two general issues affecting religious minorities in a number of countries.

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## Registration requirements

The first issue is the registration of religious communities. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, every human being has the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief. From a human rights point of view, there is no reason to object a registration system for faith groups. In practice, however, registration is regularly used to control religious groups. If neither the process nor the requirements are clear, applications can drag on indefinitely. Pending approval, new groups are usually not allowed to operate. Further, the registration requirements themselves can be limiting the Freedom of Religion or Belief.

In *Eritrea*, for example, all religions but four were banned in May 2002. They had to re-register with the government before they would be allowed operation. Some refused to re-register but none of those who tried, have been registered so far despite the fact that back in 2006, officials of the Religious Affairs Department in Asmara already acknowledged that several groups had met all the requirements. In April 2005 it was even proudly announced in the UN Human Rights Commission that the Seventh Day Adventists would soon be registered. More than five years later, they are still waiting as are several other groups. In the meantime, hundreds of Christians have been arrested resulting in almost 2,000 believers in prison right now.

In *Uzbekistan*, as in other countries in Central Asia, all faith groups are obliged to register with the government before they can operate. I was tempted to say, operate freely, however, even with an official registration, this will not be the case. Registered churches, from whatever strand, are strictly monitored and several registered faith groups have seen their premises raided and sealed and properties confiscated.

It is almost impossible to get state registration in Uzbekistan, therefore, most Protestant groups operate unofficially. They face fines, threats, beatings, prison, loss of jobs, confiscation of literature and many other things as local authorities are often opposed to the presence of a Christian Uzbek church.

Pastor Dmitry Shestakov from Andijan was arrested in January 2007 and convicted to 4 years prison camp.

In May 2008 Uzbek State television repeatedly broadcast an hour long programme about Protestant churches. "In the Claws of Ignorance" encouraged hatred and intolerance of religious minorities. The programme continues to be used by officials to warn the people of Uzbekistan against Christians.

Pastor Tohar Haydarov, belonging to a non-registered Baptist church in Uzbekistan, was arrested in January and sentenced to 10-years in prison for possession and manufacturing of drugs. His fellow believers insist that the case against Haydarov has been fabricated and that the police planted the drugs on him and in his apartment. The police searched the flat of Haydarov in his absence.

It is not only the Christian community in Uzbekistan that is under pressure. Seven Muslim men have recently been convicted to three-year labour camp terms for holding unauthorised private religion lessons. Four others received suspended jail terms.

Religious minorities in other countries in Central Asia face similar difficulties related to the registration of faith groups as those in Uzbekistan.

*China* could be a conference on its own. There is also an obligation for faith and believe groups to register and strict government control. Registered churches are not completely free to live their faith as they see fit. Other faith groups fail to register or even refuse to register on religious grounds. These are the so called house churches. Some of them, sometimes even as big as several thousand members, are tolerated where other groups, counting just a few dozens of members, are under high pressure for no obvious reason.

So far issues related to church registration. Another general issue I would like to highlight is related to the personal registration of believers.

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### Personal registration (apostates)

Especially in the Middle East, there are several countries where your religion is printed on your ID card or passport and registered in your personal file with the government. Based on the religion registered, you need to follow religion classes at school. Changing your religion to another or to none, is impossible unless you want to change your religion to Muslim.

This rigid registration system, causes serious difficulties for those who want to leave Islam and start to live as a Christian for example. A Muslim man can marry a Christian wife but a Christian man cannot choose a Muslim spouse. So, to whom should a former Muslim woman marry after her conversion? As long as she is officially registered as adhering to Islam, she can only marry a Muslim. Let us assume that she will find a Muslim man who also converted to her faith, at least on paper their relationship can be official recorded. However, Muslims can only be married in a Mosque. This is usually interpreted as a reaffirmation of their adherence to Islam. Children, born to this couple inherit the Muslim faith from their parents who actually live as Christians. Based on their registration, they are obliged to attend Islam classed at school. And by the time that they want to start their own family, history repeats itself.

To break this cycle, *Egyptian Mohammed Hegazy* filed an official request to get his religion changed on his identity papers. He filed his request in August 2007. Now, three years later, his case is still pending. Meanwhile, he is regarded an apostate and under severe pressure from both authorities and society, including his own family members. Hegazy lives in hiding. Unable to work, the former journalist is supported by friends and other Christians.

*Pastor Mahjeed from Kurdistan, Iraq*, who converted from Islam to Christianity, faces similar problems as Mohammed Hegazy. He refused to register his son with the local authorities as he did not want him to be registered as Muslim. The son of Pastor Mahjeed is now about the school going age but, as long as he does not legally exist, entering a school will be problematic.

And these are just two examples of a problem faced by many people in the Middle East.

### How do we serve the suffering (persecuted)

Open Doors is serving the suffering in its own way. We endeavour to strengthen persecuted Christians so that they can stay where they are, in the country where they were born and grew up. Open Doors provides Bibles and other Christian literature, training for both pastors and lay leaders, Socio-Economic Development projects and last but not least, advocacy.

In many countries, religious minorities are regarded second class citizens. For them, it is very difficult to get education, to find a job and, thereby, to house and feed their families. Therefore, Open Doors is providing funds to establish small enterprises in various countries so that Christians can sustain their families.

Religious minorities, often ostracized in their own country, have great difficulties in getting the news out to people of influence and power like you here today. Hence, much suffering goes unnoticed. Further, as many members of the minority group are not aware of their human rights, they take their suffering for granted.

Open Doors is training persecuted Christians creating awareness of their human rights. Based on this new knowledge, we encourage them to claim their rights and speak out against any injustice experienced. Of course, this is not possible in all situations and in all conditions. Nevertheless, we deem it necessary to start fighting this battle inside out.

As it is not possible for all persecuted believers to speak out for themselves, in 2004, Open Doors established an International Advocacy Department to be the voice of persecuted believers in the political realm like at the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Parliament, and national governments. These multilateral and national entities have the opportunity to defend the cause of religious minorities that neither they themselves, nor NGOs like Open Doors, have.

### How can you serve the suffering?

This brings me to the final question of my intervention today: What can you do to serve the suffering? Or, formulated alternatively: What can you do to defend and promote Freedom of Religion or Belief for all?

According to the website of the Council of the European Union: *The European Union is fully committed to promote the universal principles of liberty and democracy, respect for the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms in its Common Foreign and Security Policy, as well through its presence in international fora, or through its financial instruments managed by European Commission.*

Similar quotes can be found on the website of the European Commission.

Further, the Council concluded last November: *The Council underlines the strategic importance of freedom of religion or belief and of countering religious intolerance, and reaffirms its intention to continue to give priority to the issues as part of the European Union's human rights policy.*

Hence, the European Union has high ambitions as far as religious freedom is concerned. Therefore, it should play an important role in the 30 human rights dialogues and in all other contacts with third countries. In my opinion, the European Parliament should continue to remind the European Commission, and especially the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton of these core values of the EU's external policy.

There is new strategy *to hasten the exit from the [economic] crisis and to provide the building blocks for growth, Europe 2020, and rightly so.* However, focusing on economic growth and trade should not go to the detriment of Europe's attention for human rights.

At the plenary meetings of the Parliament there is a reserved time slot for urgency resolutions. Through these resolutions, many human rights violations have been addressed, but what about the impact and follow up on these resolutions? Do you really take these resolutions seriously?

Further, there are several commissions and many delegations, well positioned to discuss human rights violations including violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. The Human Rights Unit consists of committed people ready to support your commission or delegation to address human rights violations. But they need you to put the issues on the agenda.

The European Commission is currently negotiating a *Free Trade Agreement with India.* India is an important trading partner and a market with huge potential. However, it is also a country with a huge Dalit population treated as second class citizens, child labour is wide spread, environmental problems are serious and 3 million

out of a population of 25 million Christians are harassed and discriminated. I do realize that 3 million Christians on a total populace of a billion people does not make a high percentage, however, this may never be an excuse to neglect the serious problems these people are experiencing every day. Therefore, I was shocked to learn that even in the European Parliament there are people advocating against a social paragraph in the new Free Trade Agreement. This is bad news for India, but it would also set a dangerous precedent for other negotiations yet to come.

I know that several argue that the best way to promote human rights is by promoting economic development. That might be true for economic and social rights but I fail to see the direct link between economic development and civil and political rights.

From *Pakistan*, we continue to receive serious allegations of discrimination of Christians in the aftermath of the devastating floods. As an NGO, we do our utmost to pay special attention to these people while reaching out to the victims, however, doing so, we make ourselves extremely vulnerable for accusations of proselytization and soul harvesting. Therefore, we solicit your support to address these issues in your contacts with Pakistani officials.

Since March 2010, the *Kingdom of Morocco* expelled more than 120 foreigners from the country on short notice (usually no more than 48 hours), denied re-entry, or refused the renewal of residency. Some of them have been accused of proselytizing, however, no official cases have been filed and they did not get the opportunity to defend themselves before the court. These actions against foreign nationals appear to be in contradiction of both international and Moroccan law. It is alarming to see that most of those expelled from Morocco were living peacefully and productively within their communities and providing vital humanitarian services. Among them businessmen, educators and social workers. We understand many of these individuals resided in Morocco for more than a decade in full compliance with Moroccan law.

A letter to King Mohammed VI of Morocco on the matter has been drafted and you are kindly invited to sign this letter that is open for signatures both in the European Parliament and the US Congress.

Earlier this year, the European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) suggested a permanent all-party working group with Civil Society Organisations. Such a group should endeavour to address issues pertaining to Freedom of Religion or Belief and concerning the implications of religious or convictional presence in society for European policy-making in a relevant manner. It should allow an open and active discussion of these issues, and especially help feature Freedom of Religion or Belief for all higher up the agenda of the European Union. If you are interested in this initiative, please let me know.

I could go on for a while, but time does not allow me to discuss the situation of Christians in Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Mauritania, Egypt, North Korea and others in more detail but you can make the assessment yourself. The information on violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief is available. I can only encourage you to use the information and to check the political channels at your disposal to address these issues.

Whether you believe it or not, Freedom of Religion or Belief protects us all, believers and non-believers alike and it is definitely worthwhile defending and promoting, both within Europe and abroad.

I thank you for your attention.