Religious Freedom Still Elusive in Asia and Africa
Analysis by Aid to the Church in Need

ROME, JULY 14, 2001 (Zenit.org).- Aid to the Church in Need's latest report on religious freedom in the world chides Asia and Africa for widespread persecution of beliefs.

The 423-page report refers to all violations, not just those that affect Christians.

"What is curious, is to discover that the 20th century, when so much was said and written about respect for human rights, was the century during which Christians suffered the worst persecutions," Attilio Tamburrini, director of ACN's Italian branch, told the Spanish Catholic periodical Alfa y Omega.

Asia

Indonesia, China and other Communist states, Pakistan and countries of Muslim majority are on the blacklist of the report's classification. In those countries, people are jailed and sometimes condemned to death for their convictions.

Muslim militias in the Molucca Islands in Indonesia have systematically massacred Christians, the report says. At the same time, the danger of the enforcement of the Islamic law, or Shariah, continues in many Indonesian provinces.

Some positive, though hesitant, steps have been taken in recent years in Asia. Muslim states such as Oman, Yemen, Bahrain and Iran have made progress in the tolerance of other religions. But in general, Muslims are still banned from converting to other religions, or non-Muslim men are barred from marrying Muslim women.

Africa

Africa continues to be a land of martyrdom for many Catholic missionaries. In the Mediterranean coast there are worrying signs of persecutions against Christians. In Nigeria, several states are adopting Islamic law. Tensions fester between Christian and Muslim communities in the Ivory Coast and Kenya. In Sudan, the Muslim north continues to make war on the animist tribes and Christians of the south. Refugees who flee north are often forced to convert to Islam. Mauritania, meanwhile, enforces a particularly rigorous version of the Shariah.

The Americas
With the exception of Cuba, where the regime marginalizes Catholics, there is no grave situation as regards religious freedom in the Americas. "Narco-guerrillas" in Colombia, however, sometimes violently interrupt the activities of Catholic and other Christian communities. In Mexico, the separation of church and state no longer seems to be regarded by the authorities as a source of conflict.

Europe

Here, in the most secularized societies, lawmakers on occasion seem to repress religions or religious movements.

French Senate, for example, on May 30 approved a controversial law against sects. It is ambiguously worded and could be used to penalize traditional Christian associations, especially monasteries. Prior to the approval of the law, leaders of the French Catholic bishops' conference and the French Protestant Federation sent a letter asking lawmakers to vote against the law.

In Eastern Europe, a statist mentality continues a legacy of the Communist past, which regards religious freedom and association as a "concession" of the state. This is a type of administrative marginalization, which is exercised in the majority of cases by imposing bureaucratic conditions on the registration of Churches and religious communities, or the construction and restitution of churches which were expropriated by force during the decades of totalitarianism.

In territories of the Russian Federation, "the Russian Orthodox Church is trying to attain the (informal) status of state religion," the report reveals. It attempts to achieve this objective by exerting pressure on the government and local authorities so that they will not recognize "nontraditional" religions, which are used to persecution. The former Soviet republics at times also repress Islam.

Chechnya, however, is the symbol of another current, which seeks aggressive penetration of Islam, something which the Russian state reacts to, as evidenced in the current war, with military attacks on civilian communities.

However, there is good news from Switzerland. On June 10, a popular referendum confirmed last December's federal decree, which allows new Catholic dioceses to be formed without government approval.
The law only affects the Church loyal to Rome, and not other Christian confessions. This norm, dating back to the 1874 Federal Constitution, was the last conflict that confronted the state and the Catholic Church.

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