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Blasphemy laws, a source of religious intolerance in Pakistan

PRESS RELEASE - November 13, 2005 - Commission for Peace and Human Development has strongly condemned the incident of religious intolerance in Sangla Hill, in which Four churches, three schools, parish house, convent and a hostel were burnt by a mob of 1500 to 2000 people, on Saturday, and have demanded the total repeal of blasphemy laws.

Expressing his grief on the incident in a press statement here on Sunday, Waseem Anthony, the Executive Director of the commission said that certain discriminatory laws especially the blasphemy laws are the cause of such incidents that provoke people to take law in their hands in the subterfuge of religion.

He said that it is an irony that we haven't learnt any lesson for the incident of Shanti Nagar a village near khanewal, which was wholly changed to ashes in 1997 due to misuse of these laws. Past two decades are full of precedents where people misused these laws to set personal scores. "It is also sad to learn that the local station house officer (SHO) was informed about the tension and was requested for protection by the

local Christian community hours before the incident. Yet the administration failed to stop this incident,” he said.

He said that it is a pity that on one hand we seek help from the international community being a part of the human race and on the other hand we set bad precedents of narrow-mindedness on the basis of religion.

He demanded for an immediate judicial inquiry and stern action against the culprits that include people who instigated others for this act and the administration, which failed to stop it being aware of the consequences prior to the incident. “Moreover concrete and urgent steps are needed from the governments to educate people in terms of tolerance and religious harmony.

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Boston College Launches Center for Human Rights and International Justice with Forum on World Refugee Crisis

At Inaugural Event, Former President of Ireland and U.N. Human Rights High Commissioner Mary Robinson Calls for Attention to Plight of Labor Migrants, U.S. Deportation Policy

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (11-4-05) -- Boston College officially launched its interdisciplinary [Center for Human Rights and International Justice](#) this week with a public forum on the issue of worldwide refugees.

Former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and past president of Ireland Mary Robinson, featured speaker at the November 3 inaugural event, said that the new center -- with the distinctly holistic approach to human rights issues provided by leadership drawn from the College of Arts & Sciences, Law School and Lynch School of Education -- can play a critical role in addressing the plight of the world's refugees, and in particular that of labor migrants facing increasingly stringent deportation policies.

"A significant number of asylum seekers today are not necessarily genuine asylum seekers but are just desperate to get out of the extreme poverty they're in -- and all legal outlets are closed because of Fortress Europe, because of the shutting and harshness of the borders surrounding this country and other developed nations," said Robinson, now executive director and chair of the Ethical Globalization Initiative, a human-rights organization she founded. "The climate has gotten tougher, especially since the terrible attacks in this country of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks around the world.

"There are so few avenues now for legal movement and authorized movement -- apart from trying to climb barbed wire fences and come though tunnels -- [that] there's an overuse of the refugee/asylum routes, and that tends to prejudice genuine refugees and asylum seekers," she said. "They're thought to just be 'trying to get into our country.' It's sad to see the greatening populist exploitation of those who are very vulnerable in countries and the lack of leadership on these issues.

"I am pleased that one of the areas of particular focus for [Boston College's] center is on deportation from this country: how widespread it is, how harsh it is and the need for a more humane, human rights-based approach," said Robinson. "On that issue in particular, the center will be able to make a real mark on policy in this country probably at a relatively early stage."

Robinson, noted for humanitarian efforts during her seven years as Ireland's president, added that the new Boston College center is significant due to its interdisciplinary focus, which will enable it to "reclaim the true agenda of human rights" by addressing not only the political and civil rights of refugees but also "the economic and social dimensions of conflict and displacement and the harrowing realities of refugee status and camps."

"We want to be very deeply interdisciplinary," said center director Rev. David Hollenbach, SJ, a Boston College theologian who specializes in issues of global social justice. "We normally think of human rights as something that's concerned with the law, but it's really about suffering, and how we respond to that suffering in its multiple dimensions: physical, psychological and political, among others."

In addition to Fr. Hollenbach, the center's leadership includes associate directors Donald Hafner, a Boston College political scientist who specializes in international politics, U.S. foreign policy and national security; Daniel Kanstroom, a clinical professor at Boston College Law School and director of its Immigration and Asylum Clinic, whose book on the U.S. deportation system is forthcoming and who has extensive experience litigating immigration and asylum cases; and M. Brinton Lykes, a

professor of social psychology at BC's Lynch School of Education, whose research includes the effects of state-sponsored terror and organized violence.

"Most of the human rights centers at universities in the United States today tend to be focused in law schools and political science departments," added Fr. Hollenbach, who has been a visiting professor in Africa and Ho Chi Minh City and has traveled to Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt to research religion and human rights in the Middle East. "We have law and political science very much represented in our center but we also have community social psychology, theology and ethics.

"We also have a very strong commitment to working very closely with practitioners in the field who are working on some of the major human rights and humanitarian crises of today," he said, citing the center's connections with organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service, operating in 50 countries around the world, as well as with Catholic Relief Services and a number of immigration organizations working to defend people faced with serious deportation orders in the United States.

There are some 35 million refugees and forced migrants worldwide – a number roughly equivalent to the populations of New England, New York and part of New Jersey, said Fr. Hollenbach. "The question is whose responsibility is it to take care of these people?" he said. "It's not just that these people become hungry, but their spirits and their psyches are wounded. How do we help fix that?

"We want to take a very strongly humanistic approach to these questions and that's part of our commitment as a Jesuit university to approaching issues from a deeply human level," Fr. Hollenbach said, citing Boston College's religious and ethical tradition.

Among the questions the Center for Human Rights and International Justice also will examine is what roles international legal structures and organizations can play in a world where right seems increasingly identified with might.

Joint Statement on Kashmir from the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy

We the members of civil society of the state of Jammu and Kashmir are gathered in Kathmandu, Nepal on November 11 - 14th, 2005, under the auspices of the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy based in Washington D.C. We come from both sides of the Line of Control and from the regions of Azad Kashmir, Kashmir Valley, Jammu & Ladakh. We are people of faith. We are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists who believe that faith-based reconciliation is a key to the peace process and to the future prosperity of the Kashmir region.

We are committed to a pluralistic vision of the community and the restoration of human values. As such, we believe that the return of Kashmiri Pandits and all displaced persons to their homeland is central to the peace and normalcy. Therefore, we urge both the governments and civil society to facilitate this process as a matter of great priority.

We are committed to an inclusive community and to demolish the walls of hostility that exist among the various identity-based groups. As such we express appreciation to the governments of Pakistan and India for creating the openings in the Line of Control. However, we encourage all means possible to allow the free flow of Kashmiris so that there might be healing and restoration among us. We also deplore violence in any form from any side.

We are committed to the peace process between India and Pakistan, especially as it relates to Kashmir. As such, we see the need for a unified Kashmiri voice to emerge so that the legitimate aspirations of the people of the State of Jammu & Kashmir might be heard, understood and be given proper respect by India and Pakistan. We also urge the members of civil society to take an active role in the peace process.

We are committed to social justice as a key foundation of Kashmir society. We are committed to sharing power and privilege among different identity-based groups. As such we urge the governments to set up the mechanisms to facilitate the economic restitution and restoration of land and businesses to Kashmir Pandits and all other displaced persons.

We propose that the principles of Human Rights and the essential moral and ethical values of religions be made a standard part of all school curriculums and that security forces be trained in respectful treatment of citizens.

We are committed to a process of forgiveness among Kashmiri people as essential to creating a better future together. We are committed to healing the wounds of our history. Collectively we grieve the sale of Kashmir by the British in 1846 and ask them

to apologize. We call for the establishment of a "Kashmir Truth & Reconciliation Commission" as a means of exposing human rights violations and other wrong doing with an eye towards justice and healing rather than revenge.

We urge the international community to support the ongoing peace process between India and Pakistan. We urge the governments of India and Pakistan to involve all identity-based groups and regions in the dialogue and negotiations leading to the resolution of the Kashmir conflict. We urge all Kashmiris regardless of their religious traditions to pray for peace and reconciliation in our land.

We depart from Kathmandu with a sense of hope and joy at having been together from across the Line of Control and different regions of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. We believe that faith-based reconciliation in Jammu & Kashmir is an idea whose time has come.

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Dr. K.L.Chowdhary

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Religions for Peace Facilitates Landmark Meeting in South East Europe

An important milestone in inter-religious cooperation was reached at the second annual conference of the South East Europe Inter-religious Network (SEEN) in Tirana on 18 November 2005. Over 50 senior religious leaders from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia came to a consensus on key issues around which they could collaborate and support one another, including: pledging just and equal treatment for all religious communities; recognizing the contributions of women of faith; promoting religious theological institutions and religious education; protecting holy places; and recognizing the need for restitution of real and movable property including confiscated religious items of all religious communities. The religious leaders also agreed on promoting multi-faith dialogue and building Inter-religious Councils in order to overcome conflicts in society for establishing peace, pursuing justice, and advancing sustainable development. The conference, entitled "Advancing Peace and Stability through Regional Cooperation," was designed to provide a forum to share experiences, learn more about the struggles of the other communities, and develop joint strategies for fostering religious harmony and strengthening the role of religious communities in building peace and stability in the region.

The resulting Communiqué, drafted and endorsed by all participants and included below, defines the commitments to cooperation agreed upon.

The SEEN is a body of senior religious leaders and representatives in South East Europe's historic religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Bektashi who have committed themselves to cooperating for conflict transformation, peaceful co-existence and advancing sustainable development. In addition to religious leaders from the region, the conference was attended by members of the European Council of Religions Leaders/Religions for Peace (ECRL) and representatives of local and

international political institutions and international agencies including heads of the Albanian parliamentary commissions and the Ambassadors from the United States, the United Kingdom and the Royal Government of the Netherlands.

The World Conference of Religions for Peace organized the meeting in cooperation with World Learning and with the generous support of the German Embassy, United States Agency for International Development, the British Embassy, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Greek Embassy.

For additional information regarding Religions for Peace's program in South East Europe, please contact Ms. Angela Oliver, Director of the Conflict Transformation and Women's Program, at aoliver@wcrp.org, or The Reverend Canon Flora Winfield, Assistant Secretary General for Europe, at florence_crt@yahoo.co.uk.

Religions for Peace builds, equips and networks Inter-Religious Councils to harness the untapped power of religious communities to transform conflict, promote peace and advance sustainable development. Founded in 1970 as an international, non-sectarian organization, Religions for Peace is now the largest coalition of the world's religious communities, with affiliated Inter-religious Councils in four regions and fifty five countries.

Communiqué

South East Europe Interfaith Conference - Advancing Peace and Stability through Regional Cooperation - Tirana, Albania

November 16 - 19, 2005 - We, participants in the second meeting of the South East Europe Inter-religious Network (SEEN), express our commitment to advancing peace and stability through regional cooperation. Following last years meeting in Leuven, Belgium, we today meet in Albania, a country that symbolizes for us the collaboration among religions in building an open and stable society. We support and encourage one another in promoting multi-faith dialogue and building Inter-religious Councils in order to overcome conflicts in society for establishing peace, pursuing justice and advancing sustainable development.

At this second historic gathering we commit ourselves to draw from the deepest and most genuine layers of our teachings and traditions to build free and just societies that respect the religious freedom and particularity of the other. We recognize our duty as religious leaders to break down stereotypes and foster understanding of the other. We all speak from a position of pain and a position of truth and recognize our interconnectedness.

Our discussion was framed by sessions on religion and the state, religion and conflict transformation, religion and education and the role of religious women in civil society. We recognize the need to support each other in addressing these issues.

As religious leaders and representatives, we commit ourselves to the following:

Calling on ourselves to develop together a transparent language that is understood by the societies in which we live;

Contributing our religious forums and institutions to advancing dialogue towards overcoming stereotypes and towards promotion of multi-religious and multi-cultural understanding and collaboration;

Pledging to work towards just and equal treatment by the law for all communities and their religious leadership;

Continuing to strengthen and build the South East Europe Inter-religious Network (SEEN) and developing our partnership with The World Conference of Religions for Peace, specifically Religions for Peace/Europe, the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) and other international bodies;

Recognizing the necessary and substantial contribution and impact that women have in our religious communities;

Supporting the development of the South East Europe Women of Faith Network (WOFN) and working to promote the role of women within our respective communities;

Standing in solidarity in supporting the religious leaders of Kosovo as they move forward in inter-religious dialogue and cooperation and supporting their joint initiative to convene in Kosovo early in 2006;

Affirming the religious leaders of Albania as they commit themselves to continue inter-religious cooperation and move towards the establishment of an Inter-religious Council;

Calling on our governments to acknowledge the constructive role of religious communities in building stable civil societies;

Recognizing the need to support each other to encourage our governments to take action as soon as possible on the restitution of real and movable property including confiscated religious items of all religious communities;

Calling on our governments to stop the confiscation of and to return all holy places (mosques, churches, monasteries, synagogues, teques etc.) to their intended religious use;

Calling our governments to promote and protect religious theological institutions and religious education;

Appealing for the new or continued collaboration of governments with religious communities in introducing the teachings of religious values in the public school systems;

Standing in solidarity in the promotion of religious values in the public arena;

Recognizing that the wearing of prescribed religious attire is a personal right and should not be seen as opposing or compromising the secular principles of any state;

Calling on local and international political factors in Bosnia-Herzegovina and other states in the region to create a legal system in the state that will enable every ethnic group to be equal and for every citizen to enjoy equal rights and live with full and protected national, religious and cultural identity.

We further affirm the need for multi-religious engagement in South East Europe, and will work together to this end.

We thank the religious communities and people of Albania for receiving us in their beautiful country. We also thank the organizers, the World Conference of Religions for Peace and World Learning for convening this meeting and acknowledge the generous support from the United States Agency for International Development, the German Government, the Embassy of the United Kingdom, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Greek Embassy.

This communiqué is fully endorsed by all participants and agreed upon on this day, 18 November 2005 in Tirana, Albania.

The Catholic Peacebuilding Network (CPN) is a voluntary network of practitioners, academics, clergy and laity from around the world which seeks to enhance the study and practice of Catholic peacebuilding, especially at the local level. The CPN aims to deepen bonds of solidarity among Catholic peacebuilders, share and analyze "best practices," expand the peacebuilding capacity of the Church in areas of conflict, and encourage the further development of a theology of a just peace. While it is a Catholic network, the CPN believes that authentic and effective Catholic peacebuilding involves dialogue and collaboration with those of other religious traditions and all those committed to building a more just and peaceful world.

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