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HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHL
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N. 170923c

Saturday 23.09.2017

Intervention of the Secretary for Relations with States at the United Nations on the protection of religious minorities in conflicts

The following is the intervention that the Secretary for Relations with States, H.E. Msgr. Paul R. Gallagher, pronounced yesterday at the United Nations Building in New York, during the 72nd Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, on the protection of religious minorities in conflicts:

Intervention of H.E. Msgr. Paul R. Gallagher

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Fellow Panellists, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to participate in this morning's side event on the Protection of Religious Minorities in Conflict, sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Hungary in collaboration with the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See and the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy.

The need to focus on safeguarding religious minorities in situations of war and conflict arises from the revolting reality that, as all of us have seen in the last several years in various blood-drenched parts of the world, war and conflict often provide the backdrop for religious minorities to be targeted for persecution, sexual and all forms of physical violence, subjugation, false detention, expropriation of property, enslavement, forced exile, murder, ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity.

Recent experience makes the protection of religious minorities one of the most urgent responsibilities of the international community. Such protection must extend beyond merely preventing the intended or actual annihilation of minorities, but must include examining and addressing the root causes of discrimination and persecution against them and spur the vigorous defence and protection of their human dignity, the rights to life and to freedom of conscience and religion.

When we survey the world situation, we see that persecution of religious minorities is not a phenomenon

isolated to one region, like, for example, the barbarities committed by ISIS in the Middle East. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its 2016 Annual Report said that there are severe systematic ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom happening in 27 different countries. The 2016 Religious Freedom in the World Report by *Aid to the Church in Need* said that 38 of the world's 196 countries showed unmistakable evidence of significant religious freedom violations, with 23 amounting to outright persecution. The 2016 Interim Report of Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt, then Special Rapporteur of the United Nations on Freedom of Religion or Belief, described that violations of religious rights of minorities exceed the methodical, continuous and appalling violations committed by state and non-state actors such as terrorism, vigilantism, mass and individual killings, forcible deportations, ethnic cleansing, the rape and kidnapping of women and selling them into slavery, destruction and confiscation of property, attacks against converts and those who are alleged to have induced them, and encouraged or condoned violence against non-believers and persons belonging to religious minorities. They also include, he said, anti-apostasy and anti-blasphemy legislation, bureaucratic harassment and administrative burdens with regard to building houses of worship and schools, discriminatory structures in family law and education, and stigmatization of people as unbelievers or heretics.

In short, these three extensively researched reports of last year show that attacks against religious minorities are rather widespread. While almost every identifiable faith group experiences some degree of persecution somewhere in the world, Christians remain the most persecuted. Furthermore, there has been an upsurge of anti-Semitic attacks, notably in parts of Europe, and Muslims face serious persecution, often from fundamentalist groups who do not share the same interpretation of the tenets of their faith.

In this context, what is needed to protect religious minorities? I would like to mention briefly seven essential elements.

First, there is the need for action. The recent examples of savagery against religious minorities must shake the international community from any and all inertia. Those who are entrusted with safeguarding respect for fundamental human rights must fulfil their responsibility to protect those in danger of suffering atrocious crimes. We must raise awareness of humanitarian emergencies and respond generously. Similarly, with regard to the situation in the Middle East, the conditions for religious and ethnic minorities to return to their places of origin and live in dignity and safety, and with the basic social, economic and political frameworks necessary to ensure community cohesion, must be provided and ensured. It is not enough to rebuild homes, which is a crucial step, as is happening in various towns in the Nineveh Plain thanks to the generosity of governments like Hungary or charitable organizations like *Aid to the Church in Need* or the *Knights of Columbus*. What is also needed is to rebuild society by laying the foundations for peaceful coexistence.

Second, the rule of law and equality before the law based on the principle of citizenship, regardless of one's religion, race or ethnicity are essential to establishing and maintaining harmonious and fruitful coexistence among individuals, communities and nations. The law must equally and unequivocally guarantee every citizen's human rights, among which is the right to freedom of religion and conscience, which involves the right to change freely one's religion without suffering discrimination or being marked out for death. Even in places where one religion is accorded special constitutional status, the right of all citizens and religious communities to freedom of religion, equality before the law, and appropriate means for recourse when their rights are violated, must be recognized and defended. A properly functioning State that works for the common good is a prerequisite for protecting religious minorities and ensuring their future.

Third, there should be both mutual autonomy and positive collaboration between religious communities and State. They, in their own fields, are autonomous and independent from each other. Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the wellbeing of the same person who is both faithful and citizen. The more both foster sounder cooperation between themselves while respecting each other's autonomy, the more effective will their service be for the good of all. When religious communities and State becomes confused or conflated, as Pope Francis said this April at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, "religion risks being absorbed into the administration of temporal affairs and tempted by the allure of worldly powers that in fact exploit it."

Fourth, religious leaders have a grave and specific responsibility to confront and condemn the abuse of religious

belief and sentiment to justify terrorism and violence against believers of other religions. They must constantly affirm that no one can justly kill the innocent in God's name. As Pope Francis said in Egypt, and before that in Albania and in many other settings, there must be a "firm and clear 'No!' to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God." Social, political and economic issues that demagogues can exploit to incite violence must also be tackled.

Fifth, there is an urgent need for effective interreligious dialogue as an antidote to fundamentalism with the aim to overcome the cynical assumption that conflicts among religious believers are inevitable, and to challenge the narrow-minded interpretation of religious texts that demonize or dehumanize those of different beliefs. Effective interreligious dialogue can, ought and often does show the paradigm for political and interpersonal conversations necessary for social harmony.

Sixth, education a good education in general and a solid religious education in particular are key in preventing the radicalization that leads to extremism, persecution of religious minorities and terrorism. Society reaps what it sows. It is key that teaching in schools, in pulpits and through the internet do not foment intransigence and extremist radicalization but dialogue, respect for others and reconciliation. At Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Pope Francis underlined that an education in "respectful openness and sincere dialogue with others, recognizing their rights and basic freedoms, particularly religious freedom, represents the best way to build the future together, to be builders of civility. ... The only alternative to the civility of encounter is the incivility of conflict. ... To counter effectively the barbarity of those who foment hatred and violence, we need to accompany young people, helping them on the path to maturity and teaching them to respond to the incendiary logic of evil by patiently working for the growth of goodness. In this way, young people, like well-planted trees, can be firmly rooted in the soil of history, and, growing heavenward in one another's company, can daily turn the polluted air of hatred into the oxygen of fraternity".

Seventh and lastly, we must block the flow of money and weapons destined to those intending to use them to target religious minorities. As Pope Francis pointedly remarked at the end of his Al-Azhar address, "An end must be put to the proliferation of arms; if they are produced and sold, sooner or later they will be used." Stopping atrocities not only involves addressing the hatred and cancers of the heart that spawn violence but also removing the instruments by which that hatred actually carries out that violence.

The protection of religious minorities in conflict is, indeed, one of the most urgent responsibilities of the international community today. I thank the Permanent Mission of Hungary, the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, and all of you for coming today to make sure it gets the attention it deserves.

Thank you for your attention.
