

“Freedom of Religion in the Context of Humanitarian Emergencies”

Panel Debate during the High Level Seminar on
The Status of Freedom of Religion in the World
Geneva, Switzerland, 25 November 2016
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I would like to begin by thanking the Organization “Aid to the Church in Need” for its dedication, perseverance, and effective action in defending the right to freedom of religion throughout the world. The research and resulting data that this organization presents to us each year indeed helps us to become stronger advocates in defense and safeguarding of this right. Even a brief review of reportage by global media outlets (although this is not always the most reliable source for shaping our understanding of the world in which we live!) should adequately demonstrate the crucial juncture that we face regarding the nexus between freedom of religion and humanitarian emergencies. Yet I constantly meet the “naysayers” who claim that religious authorities are “using” this argument to attract more attention, - and resources! - to their respective faith traditions.

Perhaps a more convincing argument could be developed by examining the overall situation of religious freedom rather than focusing only on humanitarian emergency situations *per se*. In a 2016 report on data collected during 2014, the Pew Trust reported that, of the nearly 200 countries and territories included in their study, 82 (41%) had religion-related terrorist activities in 2014, up from 73 (37%) in 2013. In some countries, the terrorist activities were limited to recruitment or fundraising. But in 60 countries, religion-related terrorism led to injuries or deaths, including at least 50 casualties in each of 28 countries.¹

But now I will turn my attention to the topic to which I was assigned: “Freedom of Religion in the Context of Humanitarian Emergencies”. In this regard, I will make three brief points to allow sufficient time for the respondent as well as for debate among all of you participants.

1. Religious Persecution and/or severe limitations imposed upon religious freedom as root causes of humanitarian emergencies

The report being launched during today’s session articulates my point better than I could hope to express it, so I quote:

According to UN figures, there were an estimated 65.3 million refugees by the end of 2015 – which is the highest figure on record, and a rise of more than nine percent on the previous year ... the most recent figures equate to, on average, 24 people being displaced from their homes every minute of every day during 2015. Although economic factors played a major part, the countries which largely accounted for the increase in refugees were centres of religious extremism – Syria (Daesh), Afghanistan (Taliban) and Somalia (Al Shabaab). There were many people who were fleeing specifically because of religious persecution but for the most part people fled because of the violence, breakdown of government and acute poverty of which religious extremism has been cause, symptom or consequence or all three simultaneously. To this extent, extremism

¹ *Trends in Global Restrictions on Religion*, Pew Research Centre: Religion and Public Life, 23 June 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/06/23/trends-in-global-restrictions-on-religion/>

has been a key factor in the migrant explosion. Religious extremism has played a dominant role in the creation of terror States which are being emptied of people.²

I just returned from a field visit to Turkey, where my organization, the International Catholic Migration Commission, operates a Refugee Service Centre to process applications of mainly Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and Iranian refugees to apply for third country resettlement to the United States of America. There I heard one story after another of horrendous acts against families and entire villages and local communities due to manipulation of sacred texts and inaccurate interpretations of religious teachings to “justify” murder, maiming, and sexual and gender-based violence – directed at people of different religious or ethnic backgrounds. Our staff in Turkey often is overwhelmed by the testimonies of these refugees – for example of the twelve-year-old child who was severely burned by ISIS operatives after he watched them kill his older brother.

In a recent Summit of Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders, held in Tehran, and for which was I was privileged to serve as Co-Coordinator, the clergy and religious scholars called for, *inter alia*:

- The resolution of wars, conflicts, religious disputes, and civil tensions by constant commitment to enter peaceful, respectful, and diplomatic and religious dialogue and to avoid violent confrontations or actions;
- The re-reading, renewed comprehension and accurate teaching of our religious beliefs, values, and principles, respectful of every human person, of human dignity and of human rights and responsibilities;

2. The Special Vocation of Religious Organizations to Prevent and Respond to Humanitarian Crises

Religious leaders and organizations inspired by faith played an active and prophetic role in preparing for and engaging in last year’s World Humanitarian Summit. At that time, Caritas Internationalis offered the following relevant insights:

Faith-based Organizations make an important contribution to analysing needs and formulating responses; facilitate dialogue between various responders and affected communities; and enhance/protect civil society space ... By joining together across faiths, traditions and structures, religious leaders can impact safety and security and bring international attention and understanding to issues driving conflict. The potential of religious leaders to provide protection and mitigate conflict is often overlooked by the international humanitarian community.³

During the many events that coincided with the Opening of the UN General Assembly in September of this year, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State to His Holiness Pope Francis, urged joint action by governments, religious leaders, and all people of good will, to recognize and take direct action on the responsibility to protect:

²Aid to the Church in Need, 2016 Religious Freedom Report <http://religious-freedom-report.org/main-findings/>

³“Caritas Internationalis: A Faith-based Perspective for the World Humanitarian Summit,” July 2015

The Holy See will continue to promote both the fundamental moral and juridical principle of the Responsibility to Protect and the right understanding of the social consequences of religion. Let us hope that through the combined efforts of the leaders and believers of all religions and all people of good will, in conjunction with State institutions, based on respect for life and human dignity, and oriented to the good of the human person, it will be possible, one day, to put an end to the atrocities, which for too long have shaken the conscience of humanity, undermined its moral and spiritual fiber and turned people away from the plan of God.⁴

3. The Impact of Religious Freedom in prevention of humanitarian emergencies and promotion of Integral Human Development

What better example than tragic situation in the Central African Republic which was incorrectly identified as a “religious conflict” but, in fact, was due to many other factors, which His Eminence Dieudonné Cardinal Nzapalainga already has described with much detail and passion. I would like to conclude, however, by citing the profound guidance and motivation offered by Pope Francis to the citizens of this deeply divided country during his visit there last year – he not only urged them to overcome immediate divisions but assured them that their peacemaking could have repercussions on the development of their own country and on the entire continent of Africa:

I strongly urge you to make your country a welcoming home for all its children, regardless of their ethnic origin, political affiliation or religious confession. The Central African Republic, situated in the heart of Africa, with the cooperation of all her sons and daughters, will then prove a stimulus in this regard to the entire continent. It will prove a positive influence and help extinguish the smouldering tensions which prevent Africans from benefitting from that development which they deserve and to which they have a right.⁵

Thank you for your kind attention and interest in this urgent topic.

⁴ *Upholding the Responsibility to Protect: The Role of Religious Leaders in Preventing Crimes of Atrocity*, **KEYNOTE REMARKS**, by **His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin**, Secretary of State of His Holiness Pope Francis and Head of the Holy See Delegation to the Summit for Refugees and Migrants and to the General Debate of the Seventy-First Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 20 September 2016

⁵ Pope Francis, Address during meeting with the Muslim Community, Central Mosque of Koudoukou, Bangui (Central African Republic), 30 November 2015,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151130_repubblica-centrafricana-musulmani.html