

OBSERVATORY ON INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN EUROPE

High-level experts say Europe failing to protect people targeted for religious beliefs

Vienna, Austria, 29 November 2016 — High-level European officials and other experts attending an international one-day conference on Saturday [26 November] said European governments and the international community were failing to address religious discrimination and the persecution of Christians in Europe and around the world with the seriousness it deserves.

In his opening keynote speech, EU Special Envoy for Religious Freedom, **Ján Figel'** said that “[t]hose who do not understand religion and misuse religion cannot understand what is happening in the world,” he said. He noted that even though more than 100,000 Christians worldwide are killed every year because of their faith, the media and the international community pay little attention. Quoting German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who criticized silence and inaction in the face of evil, and was martyred during the Third Reich, Figel' added that much more must be done against religiously-motivated persecution.

In welcome remarks delivered at the start of the conference on behalf of Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, **Bishop Stephan Turnovszky** said the situation of Christians around the world has never been as precarious as it is today. Although there is no organized or systematic persecution of Christians in Europe, he noted that there are frightening trends involving Christian marginalization, as well as political and media reprisals against those with religious convictions. “There are violent *counter*-demonstrations at pro-life events in many countries,” he said by way of example. But such acts of intolerance are “hardly criticized by the media.”

The Bishop also noted that Europe is increasingly failing to protect new refugees, many of whom have been targeted because of their religious beliefs. “After risking their lives to get to Europe [refugees] are often subjected here to violence, threats, and discrimination on the basis of their Christian faith,” he said. But this is too often overlooked by European authorities, he said.

Swedish MEP **Lars Adaktusson** – a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Subcommittee for Human Rights of the European Parliament – also spoke to conference participants, sharing his impressions from a recent visit to Northern Iraq where he saw “the signs of deliberate destruction and contempt for the beliefs of others”: crushed holy symbols, burned books, Islamic State graffiti on crosses and church walls. Similar attacks motivated him earlier this year to table a resolution, which passed unanimously in the European Parliament, recognizing the systematic killing of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East as a genocide.

“We must never hesitate in the defence of religious freedom,” Adaktusson said in his conclusion. “In the end, it is about standing up for a value-based foreign policy based on human dignity and human rights. Such a policy must include an explicit commitment to the world’s most persecuted religious groups.”

Entitled, “*Embattled: Christians Under Pressure in Europe and Beyond*”, the conference sought to inform lawmakers, professionals, clergy, and the general public, as well as media from Austria and neighbouring countries, about the threats faced by Christians today in Europe and in other regions – and to look at some of the responses being considered to help them. The conference, which also brought Tamás Török, Hungary’s newly named Under Secretary of State in the Ministry of Human Capacities – the only cabinet-level official in Europe responsible for persecuted Christians – was organized by the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians, an NGO based in this city.

During the morning sessions, speakers addressed the situation of Christians *outside* Europe – in countries like Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, and Syria. The programme included the personal testimony of “Timothy C.”, a man who fled North Korea where he faced certain death because of his religious beliefs. Separately, other legal experts spoke about the persecution and killing of Christians in Nigeria at the hands of terrorist group Boko Haram and the little-known Fulani Herdsmen.

During the afternoon sessions, speakers considered the situation of Christian communities *inside* Europe – focusing on growing governmental restrictions on conscience, parental rights, freedom of association, and freedom of speech, as well as hate crimes against the faithful, and acts of vandalism against Christian churches and cemeteries.

Regarding the combined European and international themes of the conference, **Ellen Kryger Fantini**, Executive Director of the Observatory, said: “The persecution faced by Christians around the world must be recognized and treated by the international community with the seriousness it deserves. But the pressure faced by Christians *in* Europe is much more subtle – what Pope Francis has called ‘polite persecution’. If gone unchecked, such incidents can lead to far worse.”

In a concluding statement, Member of the Vienna Regional Parliament and founder of the Observatory, **Godrun Kugler**, encouraged audience members to contact politicians to motivate them to take up initiatives to “create space for Christians in Europe and to address atrocities committed against Christians around the world.”

The conference was organized in cooperation with local partners ADF International, Open Doors, Aid to the Church in Need, and Christian Solidarity International, and with the support of the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies.

More than 100 people attended the conference, which was held at the Archbishop’s Palace in Vienna.

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About the Observatory:

The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe was founded by Gudrun Kugler, and is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization registered under Austrian law. Through its website and its annual report, the Observatory provides European Union institutions, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, and religious institutions such as the Council of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Europe with objective and reliable data on the phenomenon of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in Europe. The overall aim of providing this information is to help officials and policy-makers to take appropriate measures within their respective spheres of competence.

The Observatory is a member of the Fundamental Rights Platform of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. It is funded by private donations.