

Commission on Human Rights

Geneva, 14 March - 22 April 2005

Statement by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, NGO in special consultative status with ECOSOC.

Point 9. Violations of Human Rights

Mr. Chairman:

I wish to address the issue of security as it relates to human rights, and especially as security is appealed to in the violation of human rights.

The argument often made by governments and political leaders is that violations of human rights may be necessary to safeguard national security. Such an argument is facile at best. Worst case scenarios make this the excuse of totalitarianism, the refuge of dictators and demagogues. For who is to determine the best course in such a situation, and how are any checks to be made? Who is able to argue the case against “presumed necessity”? As British prime minister William Pitt observed in 1783, “Necessity is the plea for every infringement of human freedom. It is the argument of tyrants; it is the creed of slaves.”

According to Louis D. Brandeis, “Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government’s purposes are beneficial. The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning but without understanding.”

For “There are more instances of the abridgement of the freedom of the people by the gradual and silent encroachment of those in power, than by violent and sudden usurpation,” adds James Madison.

Ultimately, “Security is the priceless product of freedom,” (B. E. Hutchinson), and this applies to religious freedom especially. True security is not in protection and hardware, but in the mutual recognition of the others right to exist—from which come all the other rights. Sadly, the usual reaction to a sense of insecurity is to enforce conformity, to demand compliance, and to pass laws to achieve this.

The end result is often far from what is desired. In the words of Lao Tzu, “The more laws and order are made prominent, the more thieves and robbers there will be.”

Increased security for its own sake may end up just creating more thieves and robbers. Realizing that, as the Roman poet Horace dryly commented, “Your own safety is at stake when your neighbor’s wall is ablaze,” we do well to safeguard the religious freedom walls of our neighbors—at least as much as we value our own religious freedom and security.

From its very inception over 150 years ago, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has supported human rights. Inspired by biblical values, Adventists then chose to be directly involved in the struggle against slavery and injustice, and continue to work at the forefront of human rights and religious freedom today. Adventists claim the right of every person to choose beliefs according to conscience and to practice and teach his or her religion in full freedom, without discrimination,

always respecting the equal rights of others. Seventh-day Adventists are convinced that in religion the exercise of force is contrary to God's principles.

In promoting religious freedom, family life, education, health, mutual assistance, and meeting crying human need, Seventh-day Adventists affirm the dignity of the human person created in the image of God.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written and adopted by individuals who had emerged from the unprecedented destruction, disorientation and distress of World War II. This harrowing experience gave them a vision of, and a desire for, a future world of peace and freedom. Coming from the best and highest part of the human heart, the Universal Declaration is a fundamental document standing firmly for human dignity, liberty, equality, and non-discrimination of minorities. Article 18, which upholds unconditionally religious liberty in belief and practice, is of special importance, because freedom of religion is the basic human right which undergirds and upholds all human rights.

Today the UDHR is often violated, not least Article 18. Intolerance frequently raises its ugly head, despite the human rights progress accomplished in many nations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church urges the United Nations, government authorities, religious leaders and believers, and non-government organizations to consistently work for the implementation of this Declaration.

From a practical perspective, the Adventist Church is alarmed at the development of religious extremism and its corresponding intolerance in many parts of the world. The egregious use of political might to enforce religious conformity goes against the highest ideals of humanity, and is an affront to the basic principles of human rights. Violations of these rights are occurring on an increasing scale, as noted by the UN special *rapporteur* on Freedom of Religion or Belief in her report.

We wish to place on record our concern for those who are the subject of religious-based persecution, whether state-initiated or state-complicit. Such countries include those in which totalitarianism continues to be enforced as a doctrine of government and those nations where a religious majority seeks to exercise civil power to the detriment of others. As a faith community representing more than 25 million people in 205 countries, the Adventist Church wholeheartedly supports those human rights operations that truly seek to provide the fundamental freedoms that are increasingly under threat in today's world.

Thank you Mr. President.

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Point 11. Religious Intolerance

Throughout history religious believers have often been subject to discrimination, intolerance, and outright persecution. Today, religious intolerance and prejudice are again on the rise. Despite the affirmation of the freedom of everyone to hold and disseminate religious views and to change one's religion—an affirmation sustained in the United Nations instruments and documents comprising an "International Bill of Rights"—many countries deny this right to their citizens. We find it particularly egregious that the death penalty is imposed by some regimes for the simple act of changing from one religion to another.

International instruments, including many UN documents, condemn discrimination against minorities, but tragically, some nations have published lists of religious groups described as potentially dangerous sects. Anti-sect commissions have been set up, investigative personnel have been trained, and restrictive laws passed. Hundreds of thousands of innocent believers are now under official suspicion and are treated as second-class citizens. All this violates religious freedom, which is the most basic and essential of the fundamental rights of humankind.

For more than a century Seventh-day Adventists have been active promoters of religious freedom. We recognize the need to champion freedom of conscience and religion as a fundamental human right, in harmony with the instruments of the United Nations.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a presence in 205 countries. With some exceptions, however, Adventists constitute a religious minority, and have at times been subject to restrictions and discrimination. Consequently, we have always felt it necessary to stand up for human rights and in particular to protest religious intolerance.

Seventh-day Adventists believe in obeying the laws of the land as long as they do not conflict conscientiously-held religious convictions. However, we oppose any law, policy, or activity which discriminates against religious minorities and the free expression of religion.

We are particularly concerned at the treatment of religious minorities in several countries. We are following the situation of freedom of religion in Turkmenistan—the recent registration process that should be commended as at least a visible step to improved religious freedom conditions. We protest the closure of churches and other places of worship in Eritrea, the misrepresentation by the media and extremists of minority religious faiths in some parts of Russia, and the slide towards state church domination in some countries of eastern Europe.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church stands for religious freedom for everyone, as well as for

the separation of church and state. Scripture teaches that the God who gave life also gave freedom of choice. God only accepts homage that is freely given. Seventh-day Adventists further believe that the law must be applied evenly and without capricious favor. We submit that no religious group should be judged because some adherents may appear to be extremists. Religious freedom is limited when aggressive or violent behavior violates the human rights of others.

In support of Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments, and in harmony with its beliefs and its history, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is fully committed to promote, defend, and protect religious freedom for everyone, everywhere. To that end, we will continue to cooperate with the United Nations Human Rights Commission, other international agencies, and religious organizations to encourage every nation to implement the fundamental right of religious freedom. In addition, we will continue to promote dialogue and better understanding between governmental authorities and people who belong to religious minorities.

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Point 12. Integration of the human rights of women and the gender perspective

“Women hold up half the sky” was an often quoted saying at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. This Chinese saying has a great deal of truth as women make up about half the world population. But as those who work with women know, getting support for these women who hold up the sky is not easy. It is something that we must work together on or all of us will soon be crying, “The sky is falling” the sky is falling!”

Not only do women-and the girls who will soon be women-need support, but they need empowerment so that they can better solve their own challenges; and women can best solve most of those challenges themselves. To be able to do this they need the help of all organizations, such as the United Nations; NGO’s, churches and religious organization; and governments. The rewards in improved quality of life for all people will make it well worth the effort.

One of the challenges facing women is education. This ranges from the most basic abilities to read and write, the opportunity to stay in school, or to access advanced education. It has been shown that:

- * Educated women have fewer children
- * Educated women marry later
- * Educating women decreases maternal mortality
- * When the wife and mother is educated there is improved family health.
- * Education leads to decreased infant mortality.
- * Educated women have a greater sense of personal self-worth
- * Education gives a woman increased earning capacity and productivity
- * Children of educated mothers do better in school
- * Educated women are better able to instill high moral values in their children

It is for such reasons that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed programs to benefit women and the girl child.

Female illiteracy is linked to low social status and poverty. Limited access to knowledge and female illiteracy have been shown by UNICEF to be powerful correlates of infant and child mortality. Illiteracy costs governments and businesses money. While not all illiterates are women, most are.

So what do we do about this? We can begin with the children. We must generate an environment for literacy, for education for girls and women. We must educate fathers and husbands to the benefits of allowing girls to gain the maximum education, and to help them realize the improved potential when the wife and mother is educated as well. We must then find ways to help women who seemingly have missed the opportunity for education to make up for lost time.

For these reasons, the Seventh-day Adventist Church supports one of the largest education programs around the world, offering equal education to boys and girls.

All of this leads to empowerment. A woman who has been educated, is resourceful, is aware of her rights and how to maintain or gain these rights; thus realizing she has something to contribute to her family, her community, her church, and her government.

As a faith-based organization we also believe that empowerment includes a woman's right to choose her own religion. She needs to be educated so that she can make an informed decision, and then given the right by her family, community and governmental laws to follow her own convictions.

Our challenge to the United Nations, NGO's, and other representatives present here today is to develop concrete action plans for empowering today's women and girls and to work in partnerships with local governments and institutions.

As a faith community representing more than 25 million people in 205 countries, the Adventist Church wholeheartedly supports all efforts to improve the quality of life of women in those categories mentioned above, and will continue to actively work through its congregations, institutions, and organizations to collaboratively achieve these objectives.

Thank you Mr. President.

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Point 13. Rights of the Child

Mr. President:

This statement regarding the Rights of the Child as they relate to religious liberty and freedom of conscience is made by General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has clearly identified the fundamental human right of religious freedom that is established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many other national and international instruments. In particular Article 14 point 1 obliges signatories to make a definite commitment to this basic human right:

“States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”

Additionally, Article 30 expands the right to freedom of worship and practice as follows:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

The Adventist Church is concerned that despite such clear and unequivocal language, certain states parties are not complying with these explicit obligations.

Seventh-day Adventists affirm the right of every child to a happy and stable home environment, and the freedom and support to grow up to be the person God intended. We also recognize the positive contribution made by the Convention on the Rights of the Child to assist in making such a situation a reality through its clear commitment to religious freedom. As a Church, we seek to aid children who suffer.

Poverty impacts children’s development, robbing them of necessary food, clothing, and shelter, and adversely affecting their health and education.

Illiteracy makes it difficult for the parents to earn wages or care for their family or for the child to reach his or her potential.

Millions of children have no access to health care because they lack the proper insurance coverage or they live where medical care is unavailable.

Children are corrupted and exploited when they are used for cheap labor, sweat shops, armed conflict, and the perverted sexual pleasure of adult predators, and are exposed to sexually explicit materials in the mass media and on the Internet.

Every year many children die violent deaths. The vast majority of individuals who suffer in armed conflicts are women and children. Children bear deep physical and psychological scars, even after the fighting stops.

In response to the above issues and needs, Seventh-day Adventist Church has issued an official statement that identifies the following rights of children

1. The right to a loving and stable home where there is safety and freedom from abuse.
2. The right to adequate food, clothing, and shelter.
3. The right to proper health/medical care.
4. The right to an education that prepares children for a positive role in society by developing their personal potential and giving them earning capacity.
5. The right to a religious and moral education in the home and church.
6. The right to freedom from discrimination and exploitation.
7. The right to personhood, respect, and the development of positive self-esteem.

We conclude by appealing to the States representatives here to recommit themselves and their national governments to ensure that the Convention is not merely a document of good words and intentions, but becomes an instrument that makes a definite and positive difference for good in the lives of children in our world today.

Thank you Mr President.

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Point 14: Minorities

Mr. Chairman:

I speak on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a faith community representing some 25 million people in 205 countries. On behalf of all minorities, especially religious, the Church wishes to raise some specific concerns regarding their treatment by governments and majority organizations within society.

The exercise of power and control to limit human rights in general and religious freedom in particular is rightly critiqued by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, in particular Article 18. The rights to freedom of worship, practice and assembly are all guaranteed, as is the right to educate according to faith convictions, and the right to change religion.

However such rights are frequently denied religious minorities, a situation that is frequently compounded by national, ethnic or linguistic discrimination.

How is it that states around the world continue to both actively suppress and indirectly discriminate against religious minorities on the basis of their religious beliefs? As signatories, the nations represented here today bear the responsibility to ensure that their assurances given in such matters are upheld so as to ensure the equal and non-discriminatory treatment of religious minorities.

Other problems are related to governmental policies that can be seen as directed against religious minorities. The onerous registration requirements that are increasingly being developed, are clear examples of deliberate discrimination against minority faiths by the state and suggest undue influence from representatives of majority religions.

Not directly mandated by the state, but still of great concern, are the permitted actions of religious majorities against religious minorities. Here again, states are failing their position as guarantors of safety and security for all their citizens. Actions such as the beating and harassment of members of minority religions, forcible conversions, the burning of places of worship, stigmatism and discrimination in society and employment, demand the outright condemnation of all, especially those charged with providing law and order in these countries.

Worst of all, of course, are those signatories to the Declaration who completely ignore its provisions and allow or even sanction the killing of men, women and children of minority religions.

The right to change one's religion, as clearly enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is denied in practice by majority faiths in many nations who have signed and accepted the provisions of this international declaration. The right to life is surely the fundamental human right, yet this is systematically being denied in far too many countries represented here today.

To kill—or allow the killing—of human beings simply because they are of a different faith is surely the ultimate example of gross human rights violations, and should be repudiated by all here present, since the right to life is upheld by both the Declaration and many other international accords, as well as the doctrine of all major religions. For those who believe they have the power to impose their belief structure because of their majority status in society, we would remind them that all religions are a minority somewhere.

Mr. President, we ask that this body once again categorically and explicitly condemn all violations and instances of discrimination against religious minorities, upholding the principle of equality in law and practice, and demonstrating that any such violations bring the severest response from the international community.