

European churches debate response to anti-Christian violence

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Warsaw, Poland (ENInews). When Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's only Christian cabinet minister, was assassinated on 2 March, it was only the latest act against Christians to provoke outrage worldwide. Now, church leaders in Europe are debating the best course of action to be urged on governments to counter the wave of violence.

Bhatti, 42, was gunned down after he criticised his country's laws against blaspheming the name of the Prophet Muhammad. Taliban militants and Al-Qaeda militants took responsibility.

"We're living in globalised times, which have made many groups feel insecure about their own identity, an identity which has then become radicalised and closed rather than open to others," said Rudiger Noll, director of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC).

"In Europe, where religion has often been seen as a problem, public opinion hasn't been particularly concerned about the fate of religious communities. This seems to be changing now, as false images of religion give way to a greater awareness of its contribution to the common good."

Calls for steps to combat anti-Christian violence have mounted in the wake of recent attacks, including a New Year's Day bomb blast which killed 23 Coptic Christians and injured over 70 in the Egyptian port of Alexandria.

In February, European Union foreign ministers condemned the use of terrorism "against Christians and their places of worship, Muslim pilgrims and other religious communities," and reiterated the EU's "strong commitment" to promoting and protecting religious freedom.

However, while welcoming the pledge, some church leaders think the EU's 27 member-states should go further. In late March, the Russian Orthodox church's

representative to European institutions, Antoni Ilyin, called for a special EU centre to monitor Christian rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

Last year, a Brussels-based commission representing the EU's Roman Catholic bishops, COMECE, submitted 11 policy recommendations, including the creation of a "religion unit" in the EU's External Action Service and measures to link EU aid agreements to protection of religious rights.

"It isn't up to churches to suggest practical action - what we're calling for is a clear warning about the consequences of continued persecution," explained Johanna Touzel, French spokesperson for COMECE, which has a Dutch president and bishops from Ireland and Poland as vice-presidents.

"Officials have been reluctant to mention Christians, fearing this risked a clash of civilisations by identifying Europe with Christianity. But respect for fundamental rights is already a condition for EU aid, so concrete steps should be taken to uphold this. Now that revolutionary changes are occurring in the Arab world, Western governments have a responsibility to set some ground rules," she said.

Though united with others on the need to counter persecution, Noll is sceptical about using aid as a lever, and believes churches should be defending all religious groups, not just Christians.

"In the ecumenical movement, we've always fought for the implementation of human rights and religious freedom for everyone, following up specific cases in our approach to the institutions," the German Lutheran pastor told ENInews.

"When criminal acts are committed, these should be prosecuted with the strongest means available. But governments should also actively ensure minority communities in each society can practice their religion. When religious groups have some space in the public sphere, they tend to be less radicalised."

In a recent report, the Dutch-based Open Doors International said persecution of Christians was currently harshest in communist-ruled North Korea, but also listed predominantly Muslim Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Yemen and Mauritania as among worst offenders.

The Vatican's Agenzia Fides newsagency recorded 149 separate attacks on Christians during 2010 by Hindu militants in India, while human rights campaigners in nearby Indonesia reported 46 attacks by Muslim extremists.

In a January cross-party resolution, the European Parliament said the EU had included a "democracy clause" in agreements with third countries, and should "pay increased attention" in future treaties and reports to "the situation of religious communities, including Christians."

Foreign Ministers from Italy, France, Hungary and Poland demanded a "strong and clear political answer" during the same month in a letter to the EU's British High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, who assured the Strasbourg parliament her External Action Service would not "turn a blind eye" to the plight of Christians.

In March, the Vatican's permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, highlighted an "increased proliferation of episodes of discrimination and acts of violence," citing evidence that 75 percent of those "killed because of religious hatred" worldwide were now Christian.

"The state must enforce its laws that fight against religious discrimination -- vigorously, and without selectivity," Tomasi told the U.N. Human Rights Council in March.

In early April, the CEC launched a "Euro-Arabic Dialogue" in Crete to determine how Christian and Muslim groups can build on "existing relationships of trust" to ensure civil society plays a role in the transition to greater mutual co-operation.

"Some people say Christians are presenting a soft target because they don't fight back. But we should remember many Muslims view Christians as forming part of a strong missionary network, and see themselves as on the defensive," said Noll.