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Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Persecution of Christians: Focus on China, Pakistan and India

Society for Threatened Peoples is concerned with the frequent violation of the fundamental right of freedom of religion in many countries. The situation of Christian minorities in the following three countries is particularly alarming.

Persecuted Christians in the People's Republic of China

The freedom of religion or belief in China is constantly and drastically decreasing. Even though the Chinese constitution claims that 'Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief' and Protestantism and Catholicism are officially recognized religious traditions, practice shows that Christians in China are not free to practice their believe. China's Government requires the country's 70 million Christians to join state-run churches, which are led by pastors committed to the State's flag, values and laws.

However, the majority of Christians refuse to join those state-run churches, due to the lack of ethic and spiritual authenticity, and instead they practice their faith in underground house churches. Their gatherings are under constant risk to be stormed by State authorities. For example, on May 3 2020, the police burst into a service in Fujian Province, used brutal force and confiscated phones. Regularly, members or leaders of house churches are being detained. Bishops and Pastors are being harassed and sentenced to imprisonment.

This year's Easter, police broke into the homes of Christians attending an online service of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. They registered their ID cards before taking them to the police station for investigation. Young people under 18 are not allowed to participate in religious services.

Even officially recognized churches fear interventions, because any kind of misbehavior can lead to a close-down of the church. Many crosses have been removed from the churches under protest of the communities. In at least nine provinces officially recognized churches have been demolished in 2019, and protesting members have been removed by force. On April 13 2020, officials from Xiaxu village, Province of Jiangxi, forced the director of a venue belonging to the old Local Church to clear out the building, which was demolished by more than a dozen urban management officers and an excavator. Police replaced images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi Jinping, trying to implement a cult of personality. During the COVID-19 crisis, the Chinese Government has reinforced the surveillance of minorities, installing cameras around churches. Despite the repression, more and more people join Christian churches.

The Situation of Christians in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

In Pakistan, 1.59 percent of the population is Christian. Due to the hostile relation between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority, there are often conflicts arising. Religious freedom is constantly decreasing. The blasphemy laws and the failure of the Government of Pakistan to address the kidnapping and forced conversion of young girls to Islam enhance the precarious position of Christians. They still have to fear bombings and mob attacks.

In Pakistan, the laws criminalize acts and speech insulting a religion or belief, or for example defiling the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad. It is frequently abused to take revenge after private disputes. The 20-year-old Christian student Sunny Waqas was arrested and accused of having insulted the prophet Mohammed while playing cricket in 2019. The week before, he had been involved in a fight with other members of the team. The young man fears a hard punishment or even the death sentence. This is just one example of false blasphemy accusations, which happen frequently. It also happens that people accused with blasphemy are killed before seeing any courtroom.

On April 29 2020, the house of a Christian parliamentarian, Khalil Tahir Sindu, was attacked by unidentified motorcyclists. He is convinced that the attack happened because of his vocal support for the rights and protection of religious minorities. In Shekhupura district of Punjab province, the Trinity Pentecostal Church has been demolished on May 9. The Pastor explained that the Muslim neighbor tried to grab the land from the community and that he had already attacked the church in the past. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic the attacks on churches continue, hatred against Christians continues to rise and the Government does not show any efforts to protect the religious minorities and their places of worship.

More recently, Christians have been denied access to humanitarian aid and protective gear against COVID-19, being told that only Muslims receive the food supplies.

Furthermore, Society for Threatened Peoples is concerned with the practice of kidnapping young women, which often is accompanied by forcing them to convert to Islam. In October 2019, the Sindh Government rejected a bill seeking to criminalize forced conversion. This way the Government of Pakistan facilitates impunity for kidnappers.

Situation of Christians in the Republic of India

In India, 79.8 percent of the population is Hindu, 14.2 percent Muslim, 2.3 percent Christian and the rest belongs to other minority groups. The Government under the Bharatiya Janata Party has strengthened policies violating the religious freedom in India: while the Muslim population is the biggest minority suffering from the Government's Hindu nationalist ideology, violence against Christians has also increased with at least 328 violent attacks. Considering that many cases are not being registered, Society for Threatened Peoples expects the real numbers to be much higher. Only 36 of those incidents reported resulted in the police filing the case, but none of them have resulted in prosecution.

Another point that brings Christians into danger are the Anti-Conversion laws implemented in ten states. This law criminalizes forced conversion and it encourages Hindu extremist groups in their discriminative acts. The States that implemented the law have significantly higher amounts of physical violence against Christians.

Apart from physical violence, Christians suffer from exclusion and discrimination. They are being told to leave the villages, or to pay illegal taxes for staying. Some people do not let them shop in Hindu shops, deny access to water or destroy the harvest. The police's failure to investigate those acts creates a climate of impunity. Often the police even believe the false "conversion" accusations and arrest the victims of the mob lynching's.

An example for mob violence is the case of Jai Singh, a 53-years old pastor in Bitchpuri village, that happened on January 5. The man was leading the morning prayers, when a mob of 200 people started to beat him and his son. Only after one hour, the police broke up the beating but then arrested the pastor himself, holding him in jail without his medication. He has only been freed three days later, when local Christians raised his bail.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Governments of the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India to:

- end the persecution of Christians and guarantee their religious freedom, including not to interfere with police force in places of worship,
 - end impunity for aggressions against religious minorities,
 - criminalize false blasphemy accusations and violent rhetoric to prevent mob lynching.
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