



General Assembly

Distr.: General
23 February 2010

English only

Human Rights Council

Thirteenth session

Agenda item 9

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Joint written statement* submitted by Nord-Sud XXI, the Union of Arab Jurists (UAJ), the Arab Lawyers Union (ALU), the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), the General Arab Women Federation (GAWF), the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD), non-governmental organizations in special consultative status, Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples (MRAP) and Liberation, non-governmental organizations on the roster

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

[15 February 2010]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Islamophobia or the fear of the religion of Islam and hatred to Muslims is characterized by gross misunderstanding of Islam and its unjustified association with radical political movements that resort to terrorist violence at a time when the religion of Islam has nothing to do with these practices. Islamophobia is being propagated by opportunist politicians using populist demagoguery and banking on the peoples' fears of global phenomena like economic uncertainty, political tension, armed conflicts and war, international terrorism and insecurity as well as fears for personal socio-economic welfare perceived to be under threat from immigrants especially Muslims.

We note that the referendum organised in Switzerland on 29 November 2009 in response to an initiative of right-wing political parties i.e. Swiss People's Party and the Federal Democratic Union to ban the construction of Minarets in the country is an integral part of the growing Islamophobic sentiments all over Western Europe. Indeed, there were only four Minarets in Switzerland and two of these Minarets are in fact built in industrial estates away from residential areas.

The vote to ban the construction of Minarets in Switzerland was supported by 57% of Swiss voters and backed by a 22 majority of Switzerland's 26 Cantons. The Swiss Federal Government opposed the vote to ban construction of the Minarets but its action to educate the masses and to defeat and prevent the notion to ban the Minarets from prevailing seems to be disproportionate with the gravity of this political notion and that such a notion represents a direct assault against religious symbols and rituals of Muslims as a specific minority religious group.

The ban of the construction of Minarets in Switzerland is a blow to the centuries' old Swiss traditions of tolerance, freedom, equality and the respect of personal liberty. Equally, this vote represents a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other regional and international human rights treaties to which Switzerland is a State Party. It also challenges the growing important role played by Switzerland within the international system and compromises its position as the host country of some UN agencies and programmes, in particular the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the core UN human rights system and mechanisms.

We applaud the responsible attitude of politicians, religious leaders, opinion-makers and media commentators in Switzerland and across the world who denounced the outcomes of this vote and considered them an affront to religious freedom and tolerance. In this respect we note with appreciation the popular action in Switzerland – particularly in the French-speaking Cantons where left-wing political parties, religious authorities and the Swiss people organised important gatherings in front of the Grand Cathedral of Geneva followed by processions in the city and that during these events public statements were made calling for intervention of the European Court of Human Rights asking it to issue a legal opinion on the legality of this unjust decision.

We commend the Swiss Bishops' Conference for rejecting the outcomes of this vote and criticizing it for heightening "the problems of cohabitation between religions and cultures" and that the referendum campaign had used exaggeration and caricature, and demonstrated that "religious peace does not operate by itself and always needs to be defended."

We note with satisfaction that action against the ban of Minarets in Switzerland has been reported in some parts of Western European countries and that in the Holy See Pope Benedict XVI deplored the ban of the construction of the Minarets in Switzerland considering it a "blow to freedom of religion" and a barrier to inter-religious dialogue that would hamper efforts to narrow differences and to promote understanding thus contributing to peace, justice and peaceful co-existence in the world.

However, despite the widespread rejection of the ban on the construction of the Minarets in Switzerland by political and religious leaders, the outcomes of the vote were widely welcomed, supported and justified by large numbers of people including leading politicians in some parts of Western Europe. Such widespread support indicates the growing Islamophobia and hostility towards Muslims in Western Europe.

Following the Swiss, vote opinion polls in Western European countries such as France, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Holland and Germany showed considerable increase in Islamophobic sentiments. Opinion polls also showed that the numbers of people supporting the introduction of ban on the construction of Minarets and/or those who oppose the construction of Mosques in their respective countries has increased. In a YouGov survey of 32,000 voters during the June 2009 Euro Elections, 44% of British voters agreed with the statement that "... [e]ven in its milder forms, Islam is a serious danger to western civilisation." It was also reported that 18% of participants offered no opinion and only 32% disagreed with the statement. When asked which groups benefit from unfair discrimination, 39% of respondents cited Muslims with only 21% believing that Muslims suffer from unfair discrimination. In France, an official survey found that 46% of the participants opposing the construction of Minarets and 41% are opposing the construction of any new mosques.

We are concerned that the public vote in Switzerland was not only about the construction of Minarets in this country, but that it has far reaching effects throughout other parts of Europe. The outcomes of the referendum to ban construction of Minarets in Switzerland have fostered hostility towards Muslims in Western Europe and further encouraged Islamophobic political parties like the Front National (France), the British National Party (UK), the Freedom Party (Netherlands) and the Northern League (Italy) together with some media like the Daily Express and Daily Star (UK) to make inflammatory anti-immigrant and anti-Muslims commentaries which were, on some occasions, qualified by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as "offensively anti-Islamic." Racist and Islamophobic political parties in Western Europe indicated that they plan to follow the Swiss example. Some non-governmental groups, such as the Society of St Pius X, an ultra-Orthodox Catholic group also supported the Swiss vote.

We note that across Europe racism, discrimination, intolerance Islamophobia and fear of and hostility towards Muslims and Islam are growing and likely to grow over the next few years in a disturbing manner. Political parties with fascist ideologies are gaining ground in some parts of Western Europe. For example in the June 2009 elections of the European Parliament, the Freedom Party in the Netherlands finished second winning as much as 17% of the Dutch vote. It is also noteworthy that the Freedom Party currently holds nine seats in the Dutch Parliament. The British National Party currently holds two seats in the European Parliament.

Islamophobia and hatred of Muslims in Western Europe are growing at a time when Muslims represent relatively small religious minorities in all Western European countries with virtually no political presence or significance. With the building of Fortress Europe through the introduction of strict Schengen Visa requirements and the decline in the number of migrant workers and asylum seekers from the Muslim world into Western Europe, immigration is no longer a threat to Western European way of life as racist and Islamophobic political parties claim. At present Muslims count for about 6% of the total population in France, 5% in the Netherlands, 2.6% in the UK and about 4.5% in Germany.

It is of grave concern that most Muslim communities in Western Europe are well-established citizens with historical links between the countries of their origin and countries of their adoption. These links often date back to the colonial period and to the early waves of migrant workers encouraged by Western Europe to resettle as labour and contribute to

the reconstruction of their respective countries of residence in the aftermath of World War I and World War II.

We condemn the growing phenomena of xenophobic sentiments, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim and anti-Islam incidents and manifestations of bigotry and intolerance anywhere in the world.

Equally condemnable is the increase in political attacks against migrant Muslim communities and Islam in Western Europe. Such developments are, by and large, pervasive and more often than not are tolerated, condoned or encouraged in certain countries under the pretexts of freedom of expression, speech and opinion.

We call on all peace-loving people and the liberal and progressive political forces in Western Europe to redouble their efforts to combat the racist phenomena in all their forms and manifestations. We further believe that governments in Western Europe are in a position to legally and legitimately make a distinction between political parties in order to uphold the values of equality, liberty and religious tolerance enshrined in their constitutions and legislations and to refrain from providing platforms to those political parties who promote racial and religious hatred, intolerance and violence.
