



Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the General Debate Item 3 of the 13th Session of the Human Rights Council Geneva, 12th March 2010

Mr. President,

Three weeks ago the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the permanent Committee of al-Azhar University for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions held the annual meeting of their Joint Committee for Dialogue in Cairo (23-24 February). In their joint declaration the participants recommended paying “greater attention to the fact that the manipulation of religion for political or other ends can be a source of violence”, and avoiding “discrimination on the basis of religious identity”.

Mr. President, in a number of countries freedom of religion is not yet fully guaranteed. Recent surveys indicate that nearly 70 percent of the world’s 6.8 billion people live in countries with high restrictions on religion, the brunt of which often falls on religious minorities. The latter’s rights are seriously violated, their freedom of worship hampered. In some regions followers of minority religions, that are not recognized by law, have to confess their faith in hiding and illegally, in fear of prison terms and persecution. In other places, while the right to freedom of religion is legally recognized, religious minorities are harassed and persecuted by members of the majority religion. Their properties are damaged, their houses of worship are destroyed, their lives severely threatened. These criminal acts are often committed in total impunity. Authorities stand idly by or are partisans in the conflict. Victims are forced to desist from reporting the injustice done to them for fear of further negative repercussions. Perpetrators harassing religious minorities feel encouraged by the silent collusion of State authorities and by a judicial system that is ineffective or partial. The limitation clauses in international instruments should not be used in a disproportionate manner to strike at the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and political opponents but only to protect and promote the human rights of all.

The Holy See calls therefore upon States to respect and promote the right to freedom of religion in all its aspects, through national legislation, including appropriate sanctions against violators to eradicate impunity effectively.

Mr. President, victims of discrimination and violent attacks have a right to obtain redress and compensation for the harm done to them by public or private agents. The State has the responsibility of protecting the fundamental human rights of all people in its territory. In order to obtain just redress, standard and objective methods should be laid down in national legislation for working out retribution and relief measures. As long as the State is not able or willing to provide effective legal protection for all its citizens, the continuous persecution of ethnic and religious minority communities will continue to afflict the world and to weaken the human rights of everyone.

Mr. President, in his address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps last January, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI underlined that “sadly, in certain countries, (...) one increasingly encounters in political and cultural circles, as well as in the media, scarce respect and at times hostility, if not scorn, directed towards religion (...). It is clear that if relativism is considered an essential element of democracy, one risks viewing secularity solely in the sense of excluding or, more precisely, denying the social importance of religion. But such an approach creates confrontation and division, disturbs peace, harms human ecology and, by rejecting in principle approaches other than its own, finishes in a dead end. There is thus an urgent need to delineate a positive and open secularity which, grounded in the just autonomy of the temporal order and the spiritual order, can foster healthy cooperation and a spirit of shared responsibility.”

Mr. President, the way forward rests on an effective implementation of all human rights by recognizing and respecting the dignity of each human being, without distinction of ethnicity or religion; on rejection of all forms of discrimination on the ground of race, colour, sex or religion; on fair treatment in the courts; on an educational system that teaches peaceful coexistence built on mutual respect, solidarity and cooperation as means that promote a healthy social pluralism and a prosperous life for all members of our one human family.

Thank you, Mr. President.