

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

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*Dé Céadaoin, 13 Bealtaine 2015*

*Wednesday, 13 May 2015*

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The Joint Committee met at 10.00 a.m.

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#### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Olivia Mitchell,	Senator Mark Daly,
Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan,	Senator Michael Mullins.
Deputy Ruairí Quinn,	
Deputy Brendan Smith,	

In attendance: Deputies Noel Harrington and Brian Walsh and Senator Katherine Zappone.

DEPUTY BERNARD J. DURKAN IN THE CHAIR.

### **Persecution of Christians: Discussion**

**Vice Chairman:** The draft minutes of the meeting of 6 May 2015 have been circulated. Are the minutes agreed? Agreed. We now move to our meeting with four interest groups to discuss the persecution of Christians. We are meeting the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Bishops' Conference, led by the chairman, Bishop John McAreavey, who is accompanied by Ms Áine O'Reilly and Fr. Timothy Bartlett. We are also meeting Trócaire, which is represented by Ms Noreen McGrath Gumbo, head of humanitarian aid, Church in Chains, which is represented by Mr. David Turner, director, and Mr. Davood Mahmoodnezhad, trustee, and Open Doors UK and Ireland, represented by Ms Zoe Smith, head of advocacy.

I welcome the witnesses and thank them for attending to discuss a subject which has been aired repeatedly at the joint committee in recent times. The format of the meeting will be to take opening statements from each group first. As their written submissions have been received, the witnesses might synthesise them. After we take the submissions, we will have questions from the members. The issues raised will then be brought to the attention of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its Minister. I remind witnesses, members and those in the Gallery to ensure their mobile phones are switched off or set to such a status that they do not interrupt the proceedings.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

With that citation out of the way, I call on Bishop John McAreavey to make his opening statement.

**Dr. John McAreavey:** I thank the Vice Chairman and members of the joint committee for the invitation to attend this morning.

I am Catholic bishop of Dromore and am based in Newry. I am chair of the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Bishops' Conference. I am joined by Ms Áine O'Reilly, a member of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. This is a Catholic charitable organisation that provides solidarity and financial support to the Christian communities in the Holy Land. The organisation has in excess of 200 members in Ireland and more than 30,000 members worldwide. I am also joined by Fr. Timothy Bartlett, an adviser to the council. I am glad to be here this morning with Trócaire, Open Doors and Church in Chains.

The ongoing persecution of Christians is an issue that unites all Christians. Pope Francis has referred to it as ecumenism of suffering. The breadth and scale of this suffering is unprecedented-

ed. The Centre for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that 100,000 Christians are being killed every year because of their faith. That is eleven every hour. Others are being tortured, imprisoned, exiled, threatened, excluded, attacked and discriminated against on a widespread scale. The Pew Research Centre says that Christianity is now the world's most oppressed religious group with persecution against them reported in 110 countries. Many of these countries have significant trade links with Ireland. Persecution is increasing in China. In North Korea, one quarter of the country's Christians live in forced labour camps. Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Maldives all feature in the ten worst places to be a Christian. According to the International Society for Human Rights, a non-religious organisation, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed against Christians.

As the other groups will explain in more detail, the situation for Christians in the Middle East is particularly acute and shocking. The rise of ISIS has accelerated a brutal religious genocide against Christians and other religious minorities which has been ongoing for well over a decade. The former Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, recently described this suffering of Christians in the Middle East as "one of the crimes against humanity of our time". He compared it with Jewish pogroms in Europe and said he was: "appalled at the lack of protest it has evoked". I believe many Christians in Ireland, of all denominations, are appalled at the relative lack of attention being given in the Irish media, in political discourse and in government policy and action to the urgent plight of persecuted Christians in the Middle East at this time. Children, women and men are being beheaded; young men are being brutalised and left to die on makeshift crosses in town squares in a part of the world once described as the cradle of Christianity and of civilisation itself. Ancient churches and religious monuments from various traditions have been destroyed.

Such barbaric actions call out for an urgent, coordinated and determined response from the international community. They are a threat to our common humanity and to the religious and cultural patrimony of the world for future generations. Any response will require an honest and comprehensive effort to address the sources of violent conflict that converge on this region and which have wider political and religious implications across the world.

I have spoken to senior representatives of the Christian community in Iraq in recent days. I will quote from a letter which arrived yesterday from the patriarch in Baghdad. His English is not perfect so I will correct it as I read it:

What has happened is like a tsunami of refugees overwhelming us. Hosting 120,000 displaced persons and giving those food, clothing and medicines has not been easy. We thank all churches, agencies and persons who have supported us. Since eight months ago the city of Mosul and the Christian villages are occupied by ISIS. [He writes that its release is not yet clear, so the end of this is not in sight]. The moment of trial that Christians in Iraq are going through requires a deeper communion between the churches to persevere in our land and to witness our Christian values. For such an emergency situation we need of course material assistance for food and health, spiritual encouragement, solidarity visits to displaced Christians and education, particularly for our schools. Also a political assistance for a fair political solution to the country's situation.

Church leaders in the Middle East find it difficult to deal with the silence of the international community. That is why this meeting today is very welcome because it represents the response of civic and political society in Ireland to a very painful and difficult situation and yet, even here, there is a reluctance, including on the part of Christian-based international aid agencies, to give direct support to minority religious communities, including to the Christian

churches. If these churches are to remain and if they are to draw strength from one another and continue their own religious, educational and charitable activities in the places where they live and work and where they have contributed for millennia to the shared educational, economic and cultural patrimony of their countries, then they need direct aid. I am aware that direct aid to churches from State bodies and agencies is not always simple and yet mechanisms can be worked out with the appropriate accountability. These churches have a right to be supported in rebuilding their bombed-out churches, schools, hospitals and halls that are availed of by the whole community. They have a right to receive support in building bomb-proof walls and security around these buildings and their homes. They are also best placed to ensure humanitarian support gets to those who need it most in the villages, towns and refugees camps where the local church continues to be present. Perhaps because of a fear of being seen as less than secular in their own country, many governments of majority Christian countries in the West are often reluctant to give direct aid to churches and religious minorities in the Middle East, in particular.

**Ms Áine O'Reilly:** In commending the committee for taking up this theme of the ongoing persecution of Christians, as a proud citizen of this country, I believe many Irish citizens, Christian and others would like to see our political representatives and our Government giving much greater attention to this issue. In particular, we ask the committee to provide direct aid to the Christian churches in the Middle East and to other persecuted religious groups so that they can rebuild their communities and infrastructure and protect that which has not been destroyed. If they are to survive they have urgent and particular needs which they alone are best placed to provide. They are also best placed to identify where to provide humanitarian assistance in the most difficult to reach areas which are experiencing immediate violence and oppression. We ask the committee to assist the various Irish aid agencies in providing direct financial support to Christian and other religious communities in the Middle East without fear of being accused at home of being sectarian or giving offence to secularism in a predominantly Christian country. This is a real concern among Christian aid agencies which the committee can help to address. We ask the committee to use its political influence to raise awareness of this issue where possible.

In commending the committee's decision to hold this hearing, we encourage the committee to recommend a full Dáil debate on the ongoing persecution of Christians and respect for religious freedom and the particular plight of persecuted Christians across the world. We ask the committee to encourage the Government and Irish MEPs to use their influence in the European institutions to give greater political priority to addressing this issue at a European and international level.

This includes the need to address the complexity of issues in international relations that contribute to the ongoing conflict and instability across the region of the Middle East.

In keeping with its Christian roots and founding ideals, we appeal to committee members and, through them, to Europe to open wide the doors of our nations to the numerous refugees fleeing religious persecution in the Middle East. Many of them wish to return to their homeland at the earliest possible opportunity. Just as we did some decades ago for the Vietnamese boat people, let us open our shores, our homes and our vacant buildings in a welcoming and reassuring embrace to those fleeing the most brutal attacks by introducing special temporary immigrant schemes focused on responding to this issue.

I am reminded that the links between the Christian community in Ireland and the Christian

community in the Middle East go back to the early Celtic Church. They continue today in the heroic work of many Irish missionaries who work in solidarity with persecuted Christian communities in the Middle East even at risk to their own lives. This continuing link is perhaps most poignantly symbolised by the new mosaic in the apse of the recently restored chapel of the Irish College in Rome. There in the midst of our national patron saints, St. Patrick, St. Brigid, St. Columcille and others is the image of a young Iraqi priest. His name is Fr. Ragheed Ganni. He studied for several years in the Irish college. He worked in Lough Derg and in various parishes throughout the country during his postgraduate studies. He loved the Irish people and they loved him. He radiated joy, gentleness and a true Christian spirit of service to all who knew him and yet his heart was set on returning to bring comfort, strength and support to his suffering people in Iraq. The Church of the Holy Spirit in Mosul, in which he was ministering, was subject to regular bombings and attack. On the feast of the Holy Trinity in 2007, as he finished the celebration of mass, Fr. Ragheed and three subdeacons were brutally murdered. The vehicle in which they had been killed was surrounded by explosives by those who had killed them so that no-one dared approach to offer comfort, prayers or help. Just a week before, Fr. Ragheed had written:

In a sectarian and confessional Iraq, will there be any space for Christians? We have no support, no group who fights for our cause; we are abandoned in the midst of the disaster.

It is with this painful, prophetic cry of a young man who knew, loved and appreciated the Irish people so much that we thank members for giving us time to highlight the plight of persecuted Christians in our world today and appeal to them to consider positively the recommendations we have made.

**Vice Chairman:** We have three more presentations and I ask witnesses to be concise as we already have written versions.

**Ms Noreen McGrath Gumbo:** I am head of humanitarian programmes at Trócaire. Mr. Éamonn Meehan, our director, sends his apologies as he is in Rome at the general assembly of Caritas Internationalis, which takes place only every four years.

Trócaire is the official overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland. It is a registered charity and was established in 1973 with a twin mandate, to combat poverty abroad and to make everyone at home more aware of the needs of developing countries and of our duties towards them. Justice is at the centre of our mandate and this commitment to a just world has been our defining characteristic for the last 40 years.

Trócaire has a long history of fighting for the full realisation of human rights. We work with an extensive network of partners in 17 different countries on various justice related issues. We also work closely with the human rights unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I would like to acknowledge the active role Ireland has played as a member of the Human Rights Council, and particularly in its commitment to Resolution 25/12 on freedom of religion or belief.

Trócaire understands the persecution of Christians and ethnic and religious minorities as a heinous violation of a fundamental human right, namely, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion derived from the inherent dignity of the human person and one of the most vital elements that goes to make up identity. Across the Middle East, the existence of many minorities, including Christians, is seriously threatened by the deepening conflict. In Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, we work among many Christians. We witness a situation where violence, hatred,

extremism, intolerance and exclusion are destroying the social fabric of society and endangering the very existence of many communities, communities that have co-existed peacefully for thousands of years. In conflict, the universality of rights is challenged and rights are denied, freedoms are abused and populations cease to have control over their lives.

In 2014, Trócaire responded to a call from Caritas Iraq to assist Christians, Turkmen, Yazidis, Shabaks and Shia Muslims forced to flee Mosul after it was taken by the Islamic State. Our colleagues in Caritas Iraq say it is not only about religion but about power, control and wealth. A grant of more than US\$400,000 was provided by us to Caritas Iraq which assisted thereafter 4,000 of the neediest families. Families received vouchers to buy basic household supplies, such as mattresses, blankets and utensils and fuel for warmth and cooking during the winter months.

In our work, we serve people of all faiths and none, while recognising the vulnerability of minorities and particularly women and children among those minorities. When we provide humanitarian aid it is given regardless of race, creed or nationality and without adverse distinction of any kind. Our relief efforts are strictly guided by the humanitarian imperative to ensure that no group is excluded or needs ignored. Mr. Meehan, in an e-mail this morning, mentioned that the Pope had addressed the gathering in Rome and emphasised the point that no group should be excluded.

In Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, Trócaire is working with seven local partner organisations, four of whom are Caritas agencies. Some committee members met Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo when Trócaire hosted his visit to Ireland in November last year. He spoke of how, in the midst of the ongoing terror and destruction of Aleppo, people were supporting each other based on what they had and what others needed rather than on religious affiliation.

On 28 April last, President Higgins visited Trócaire's programme partners in Lebanon where he met with staff and with refugees from Syria and Iraq who shared their personal stories of displacement and their hopes to return to their countries which have been ravaged by conflict. In his address, President Higgins spoke of the consequences of diplomatic failure in the region and the human tragedy that has resulted. He noted that displacement is a global problem and that there is a need for urgent and honest recognition of international and moral responsibilities to respond. The President expressed his solidarity with all those displaced by conflict and called for the international community to help carry the burden of the Syria crisis and recognise the strain on countries like Lebanon which currently hosts more than 1.3 million refugees.

The international community can and must do more to support all ethnic and religious communities in the Middle East, remembering always that violence has no religion, gender, ethnicity or morality but reflects a betrayal of basic humanity. Peace is crucial for the future of the Middle East and is the only way to guarantee the existence of minority communities, including Christians, in this region into the future.

On behalf of Trócaire and our partners in the Middle East, I ask the committee to consider the following actions that the Irish Government and the broader European Union must take to show leadership and solidarity and to demonstrate our common humanity. First, the Irish Government must take a more proactive role in ending conflict in the Middle East, building on the experience in Northern Ireland of peace building, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Ireland should increase diplomatic engagement on Syria, supporting the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, in efforts to secure a renewed political process. Second, we ask the committee to work with the Departments of Justice and Equality, Social Protection



and Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure that a greater number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees are offered asylum and protection in Ireland. Ireland has granted refugee status to approximately 90 Syrian asylum seekers since the conflict began, as well as initiating the Syrian humanitarian admissions programme. However, these numbers are disproportional to the gravity of the displacement situation and the EU has largely failed to take responsibility for shouldering the burden of the crisis.

I ask members to continue to engage specifically on the Syrian crisis to ensure that the support provided by the Irish Government is holistic and in tandem with the scale and complexity of the crisis. The Government must give more consideration to the work of national NGOs and local actors in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria that are instrumental in ensuring that aid continues to help those trapped in hard-to-reach areas. In addition to bearing witness to the suffering of others, the staff and families of national organisations in Syria live in fear of being attacked and directly targeted for providing assistance to those in greatest need. Flexible funding mechanisms must continue to evolve to respond to the increasing complexity and desperate nature of the situation and reach out particularly to local organisations providing life-saving assistance to those who are hard to reach and living in constant fear.

**Vice Chairman:** I thank Ms McGrath Gumbo. Our next presentation is from Mr. Turner and Mr. Mahmoodnezhdeh of Church in Chains. I ask them to be concise as we already have the submission. We want to allow adequate time for an exchange with members.

**Mr. David Turner:** I thank members for the opportunity to address the committee. Church in Chains is an Irish charity that seeks to be an Irish voice for persecuted Christians. We have been in existence for more than 30 years when our work began by focusing on the plight of Christian prisoners in the Soviet Union. Deputy Quinn stood with me outside the Soviet Embassy all those years ago.

The world has moved on since then, but the persecution of Christians remains in many countries around the world. We have already heard about the desperate plight of Christians in the Middle East, but it is not only there that Christians face persecution. The persecution of Christians worldwide has been neglected and overlooked for far too long. For this reason, we have worked hard to try to secure this meeting. It is also why we are so pleased that the committee is considering this topic.

Although I will focus on Christians, I want to make it very clear that we strongly believe in religious freedom for all people. While our work focuses exclusively on Christians, we acknowledge that many other religious groups suffer alongside them, for example, the Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, the Baha'i in Iran, Muslims in Burma, China and India and the Yazidis in Iraq.

In seeking to convey the extent of the situation to Irish people, we produced a global guide booklet, of which some members have copies. We colour coded 60 countries. Some are red, denoting severe persecution. These are countries in which every Christian is in danger of persecution, for example, imprisonment, torture or violent attack. Such countries include Pakistan where, as many members know, Christians frequently face violent attack and the blasphemy law causes the imprisonment of many people. Interestingly, that law means that most of those victims are fellow Muslims, but Christians spend many years in prison under it. In Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of tribal Hmong and Montagnard people are persecuted for their faith and ethnicity.

## PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS: DISCUSSION

A large part of the world is coloured orange on our map. This stands for significant persecution, that being, a country where some, but not all, Christians face attack, arrest or restrictions. Large countries are in this category, for example, India. There are many places in India, particularly its large cities, where Christians worship freely. Go beyond the cities to small villages, one will find pastors and small churches facing violent attack from Hindu extremists week after week. The Indian police and Government are doing nothing about this. In fact, persecution in those areas has increased since the Government of Prime Minister Modi came to power a year ago. We could visit cities in China where churches are freely open, but there are also Christians in prison in China because they want to worship in churches whose leaders or activities the Chinese Government does not approve of, and China seeks to control the church. Those who are unwilling to accept that control face the full wrath of the state.

Green coloured countries in our global guide maybe receive less attention because we define that as a limited category of persecution. Some churches or individuals face restrictions or discrimination, for example, finding it difficult to arrange meeting places or to import copies of the Bible. However, these difficulties should be addressed.

I hope the committee wants to take concrete steps and I will suggest three. First, it should invite ambassadors from countries where Christians face persecution to discuss their governments' actions. Ambassadors from China, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are resident in Dublin. It would be good to have them engage with the facts relating to the persecution of Christians in their countries. Second, we would like the committee to encourage the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to make a major speech on the topic. In common with previous Ministers, he has issued some press releases but if Ireland wants to address this situation, a major speech by him would make Ireland's position clear.

Third, an official in the human rights unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should be dedicated, part-time or full-time, to the issue of religious freedom. The unit's staff do a good job and are trying to cover a wide area of human rights, but it would be beneficial if one official, even part time for the sake of resources, was dedicated to the issue of religious freedom. As I am sure members are aware, this would provide the opportunity for continuity and the building of expertise.

I will pass over to my colleague, Mr. Mahmoodnezhad, a trustee of Church in Chains who is originally from Iran. He will briefly discuss his home country.

**Vice Chairman:** I thank Mr. Turner.

**Mr. Davood Mahmoodnezhad:** I thank the committee on behalf of Iranian Christians. This is a major opportunity to represent Christians, who have no voice back home in Iran. I came to this country ten years ago because my life was in danger. They tried to kill me, so I left the country. When I came here and went to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to introduce myself as an asylum seeker, my interpreter was an officer from the Iranian embassy.

We are talking about persecution but it is not just in my country. We do not feel safe here as Christians. For that reason, I introduced myself as a Davood H. M., or no name. After my interview, my family back home was persecuted. It had to write a letter denying that I was a son or brother. My family denied any kind of connection. The committee can see that persecution of Christians is not just in that country. We must start from here and build some committee here that has a love for human beings.



Iran is a country in which one cannot choose the name of one's children. How can people have one faith? If one has a child, one has a booklet from which a name must be found. Most are from holy people. In Iran, one does not have any kind of freedom. Many Iranians are in prison just for saying what they think, feel and believe. Iran is a one-way system because of its regime and government. A person who is in cannot come out and if I am born Muslim, I have to be Muslim. However, I choose my God and who I wanted to follow and serve. This is a crime in Iran.

In Iran now many Christians are in prison and do not have access to medical aid. They are persecuted and tortured. Sometimes it is one or two months until they can see a doctor. This is one of the big problems in prison in Iran. A Christian in prison there can be tortured. Since countries in Europe are focusing on Iran, the Iranian Government is not hanging or killing people in prison any more. They give a Christian a sentence and he stays there for five or ten years. Then, when he comes out afterwards, he has an accident. Somehow, someone comes to rob his house and kills him. Sometimes we think it is good for a Christian to be in prison because he is far safer there and can stay alive, but when he comes out, he has no chance.

This is a country where it is a crime for a person to say what he thinks and believes. In Iran, many Christians have somehow lost their family. Why is this? It is because those responsible find out about it and take the children away. Some families have to separate and defect as a result. The Iranian Government supports that.

As my colleague said, European countries must ask the Iranian ambassadors what they are doing in that country. They should come before this committee to answer these questions. Why have so many educated people left the country or elect not to stay there? I work as a pastor in two churches. When I arrived in this country with the help of the Lord we planned the churches in Dublin and Belfast. I would like to do that in my country and provide for people to practise Christianity or what they believe. In the 21st century it is very sad that a person has to go to another country to practice his faith. I thank the committee for this opportunity to speak.

**Vice Chairman:** Thank you very much. We now proceed to Ms Zoe Smith, representing Open Doors UK and Ireland.

**Ms Zoe Smith:** It is an honour to be here today. My name is Zoe Smith. I head the advocacy department at Open Doors UK and Ireland. We are part of an international organisation which for 60 years has supported Christians facing persecution. We started in 1955 and now work in over 50 countries throughout the world. We support Christians by supplying Bibles, leadership training, literacy programmes, livelihood support, trauma counselling, orphanages and advocacy services, among other things. We work in close consultation with Christians who experience first-hand the denial of their right to freedom of religious belief under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Every year our research team produces the world watch list, which assesses the 50 countries throughout the world where it is hardest to live as a Christian. The team provides an annual ranking of 1 to 50 and analyses the trends and dynamics of global persecution. Since all committee members have the document I will quickly go through the trends and hopefully get to the end quickly.

The first point I wish to highlight is that more Christians are being persecuted in more countries and more severely than since Open Doors started compiling the world watch list 13 years ago, including in countries where historically it had been safe to be a Christian. This not only

restricted to the Middle East. Despite the violence on our television screens this is not even primarily due to increased violence but rather to increased cultural and social pressures squeezing Christians out of society. At issue is the intentional deprivation of fundamental rights on account of one's faith. This is often harder to withstand in the long run than direct violence. Often the visibility of the violence, understandably, attracts all the international attention and policy focus. We recommend that the committee should pay close attention to the legal and cultural pressures on Christians and constitutional sources of persecution, noting early warning signs such as changes in law or jurisprudence, in addition to the violence with a view to formulating effective policy to protect the right to freedom of religion and belief.

Among Christians facing persecution the women of the persecuted church face double discrimination based on their faith and gender. Christian women are often not only of the second gender but also of the second-class religion. Christian women in Egypt often report harassment, verbal abuse and intimidation. In Pakistan and other countries Christian women face kidnapping, forced marriages and forced conversions. One organisation estimates between 100 and 700 Christian women and girls are affected by this each year. Obviously, it is devastating to the communities and families and there is a big shame culture as well. Therefore, getting exact figures on how many girls or women are affected by this is difficult. However, we can see some of the extent of it.

ISIS has further demonstrated this vulnerability by singling out Yazidi Christian women for abuse. Only last week I heard of one Christian woman who escaped ISIS, but she has lost her mind as a result of the repeated rapes and abuse. A nine-year-old Yazidi girl is now seven months pregnant because of the rapes of ISIS. She is unable to cope physically and the doctors fear for her life. These are not isolated instances. Therefore, I call on the committee to explore the value and impact of raising religious freedom as a dimension of women's rights and, when discussing the rights of women, ensure that the religious dimension is not overlooked. In particular, when the Irish Government addresses religious freedom as part of its important role on the UN Human Rights Council, we recommend that this committee advocates the proactive inclusion of female faith group representatives at every instance and works to combat any barriers currently stopping women entering the debate to ensure that gender dimensional persecution is duly considered.

Although it is not the only persecution of Christians, Islamic extremism represents by far the greatest source of persecution of Christians worldwide. In our research, 18 of the top 20 countries listed Islamic extremism as the main source of persecution of Christians and it played a role in 40 of the 50 countries overall. We have already heard about the Middle East, but sub-Saharan Africa is a second epicentre for this trend. We recommend that the committee monitor this and that members keep an eye on that region in particular.

What we term Islamic extremism comes in a variety of guises. There are extremist states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. There are also extremist local governments, such as in north-eastern Nigeria, extremist political movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, extremist violence groups, like ISIS as well as extremist households and individuals, who are effective at clamping down on family members or community members who happen to step out of line and become Christian.

However, Islamic extremism is not the only source of persecution. We have identified eight sources overall. Please ask me to explain these terms later because they contain some jargon. The other seven include religious nationalism, tribal antagonism and denominational protectionism. Religious nationalism is where religion is a symbol of national identity. Tribal

antagonism is represented by what we heard about in Vietnam where tribe members try to get their members to stay in the community at all costs. Denominational protectionism is where one church group tries to dominate all other expressions of Christianity. Communist oppression, such as in China, is where the state tries to control the church. Dictatorial paranoia, where dictators seek to dominate every aspect of society, is another source. Secular intolerance seeks to push religion out of society. Organised corruption arises where Christians who often espouse a different way of life are killed with sickening frequency. Please ask about country examples either by way of questions or afterwards and we can provide these for each heading.

Finally, anti-conversion, blasphemy and apostasy laws continue to blight many lives throughout the world. We appeal to the committee to continue to resolutely support the right of each individual to change religion or choose the religion of her choice and insist that this is a clear implication of the Article 18 protection of freedom of religion and belief.

**Vice Chairman:** Thank you. I compliment each of you on the presentations you have made. You have brought something to our attention of which we were already aware, but to hear it described in the way that you have is particularly important. The committee members, each in their turn, have already raised and dealt with the issue in the House, as has the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. It is true to say that we would all prefer if we could do more but there is a limit to the extent to which a country can interfere in the internal affairs of another country, as we have found out in recent debates and discussion at this committee. We also hark back to warnings given before the invasion of Iraq that an invasion would destabilise the entire region and lead to violent clashes between various ethnic groups. The invasion, however, was outside the control of this committee, the Government and, for that matter, the European Union. Information placed in the public domain concerning weapons of mass destruction was used as the basis for the invasion of Iraq. It was subsequently shown to have been incorrect and, sadly, the cost has been great.

The witnesses made some interesting points which the committee will bring to the attention of the Minister. I have no doubt members will also have interesting points to make.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I welcome the presentations and thank the witnesses for the interesting material and facts they have presented to the joint committee. Bishop McAreavey's remarks on the killing each year of 100,000 Christians paint a disturbing and worrying picture. It is something of an understatement, therefore, to suggest the international community should be concerned about this issue because it is clear that crimes against humanity are taking place on a vast scale.

Bishop McAreavey and Ms O'Reilly asked that direct assistance be provided to rebuild and protect churches and spaces where Christians and other minority groups meet. My understanding is that local Christian leaders in some of the affected areas would prefer discreet support to be provided because public support might lead to further persecution. Can a balance be struck between providing support and avoiding the creation of further difficulties for those who are being persecuted?

Bishop McAreavey raised the important issue of raising awareness. I do not know if the persecution of Christians and other minorities has been the subject of a major debate in the United Nations General Assembly which holds plenary sessions every September. I understand 160 countries are represented at this forum which discusses the issues of the day. The House of Commons held a full debate on the persecution of Christians some time ago and I believe the European Parliament has also debated and passed a motion on the issue. Has the Irish

Catholic Bishops' Conference or its sister organisations in other countries succeeded in having debates held on this issue in other Parliaments, whether at committee or plenary level? As the Vice Chairman stated, Ireland is a small cog in the global wheel. I do not mean to detract from the obligation on the Oireachtas to highlight human rights violations and other concerns. If the sister organisations of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference had an opportunity to make presentations to parliamentary committees in other countries in the West, it would make an important contribution towards raising awareness of the terrible injustice being done to many innocent people.

Ms McGrath Gumbo from Trócaire pointed out that humanitarian aid must be provided to people regardless of their race, creed or nationality. All of us support this principle. She also stated that the humanitarian principles which guide Trócaire's response can be a valuable form of protection for the organisation's staff and its local partners from coercion, threats and demands from armed groups. Will she address the issue of safety for humanitarian workers from all non-governmental organisations on the ground?

Mr. Turner of Church in Chains also raised the need for greater awareness and concern about the ongoing persecution of individuals in international fora. Could Ireland use its membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council to greater effect in terms of keeping this issue on the agenda of the United Nations and international community generally?

Ms Smith of Open Doors noted that the epicentres of the ongoing persecution are the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Are there links between the persecution taking place in these two regions?

Ms Smith also referred to apostasy laws. Are there potential remedies in international law to deal effectively with this important issue?

**Deputy Ruairí Quinn:** I welcome the witnesses. I do not propose to repeat the pertinent questions asked by Deputy Brendan Smith.

Many lessons from history can be utilised in this regard. In his human rights campaign Martin Luther King held up to the white population of America the Constitution of the United States when he called on them to implement constitutional rights for all the country's citizens. This approach is better than telling people to be better or not to do this or that. We must hold people to account by asking them legitimate questions based on the conflict between their actions and that to which they signed up. The lesson from history is that this is the correct approach.

It is good to see Mr. Turner again. The most recent example of the type of scenario I describe was in the agreement on the Helsinki Final Act in 1973. During the negotiations, the Soviet Union sought certainty by demanding recognition for the post-war borders of central and eastern Europe. There were three aspects to the negotiations. The first was the recognition and finalisation of borders, in particular, the division of Germany and its internal border. Agreement was reached on this issue. The second issue was economic and social matters and the third was human rights. In the case of human rights, the Soviet Union, which was the first atheist state in the world, signed up to a declaration of religious freedom for Soviet citizens. It was on the basis of this declaration that those who favoured allowing Jews to emigrate confronted the Soviet authorities. They noted the contradiction between the persecution experienced by Jews in the Soviet Union, which was similar to the persecution the witnesses have described, and the country's public statements on religious freedom, and asked why the government was acting in conflict with the principles it proclaimed.

I am not an expert in this area and I do not know if the European Parliament or other parliaments have taken any action in this area. The joint committee has available to it a professional diplomat from the Department of Foreign Affairs. If an Irish ambassador were called to the Parliament of Iran to answer questions on the reasons Irish people were behaving in a manner that contradicted agreements Ireland had signed, it would have greater substance than simply inviting him or her to a meeting to be scolded. If possible, the joint committee should invite ambassadors from certain countries before it to explain their failure to uphold the values they have subscribed to in official declarations and commitments, including in the United Nations. This would be preferable to giving out to people and would give us some credibility.

It is clear from the presentations that the main problem is the persecution of Christians. As Diarmaid MacCulloch's masterful history of Christianity demonstrates, Christians lived in the areas where persecution is currently taking place long before St. Patrick arrived in Ireland. They were in a majority in these regions for centuries before Islam arrived on the scene and are part and parcel of the culture of these parts of the world. Christianity in those regions is distinct from subsequent attempts by Christianity to convert people in other regions of the world, pre-communist China being the classic example.

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right - the right to believe or not believe has to be a fundamental right. I can see where there would be tensions because of proselytisation or missionaries, on the one hand, as distinct from historic groups who have always been Christian. While I would not make a distinction between them, I think they will evoke different types of attitudes. If we are to take the very clear focus of the persecution of Christianity, which is now, as Bishop McAreavey has said, the highest in the world of any religion, can the committee be provided with information, from the vast amount of work that the witnesses have done, about how specific countries that have signed up to a set of international standards have breached those standards? Then we can explore the possibility of inviting in representatives of those countries, if they are here in this country, and outlining the conflict between what was signed up for and what is happening on the ground, specifically about Christians, because this is about Christian persecution. I think in that respect, this committee, as one of the 28 member states of the European Union, could do that. That ambassador will have to file a report back to his government. It will go back into foreign affairs. There will be a paper trail.

**Deputy Olivia Mitchell:** I do not have any questions. I thank the witnesses for their presentations. They have not told us anything we did not know but it is very depressing to hear so many of them making the same presentation. I am sure that all of us feel that we are already doing what the witnesses are asking us to do, to the utmost extent of our ability. Nothing is new in what the witnesses have said but it has come into very sharp focus with the rise of ISIS at the moment and the horrendous situation, particularly for people in Syria and Iraq who are living in areas dominated by ISIS. In Nigeria, Christian girls have been abducted, and women are particularly vulnerable. The witnesses have probably read that recently, over 230 women and children have been rescued - not the Christian student girls - and of those, 214 had been raped and were pregnant as a result of rape. That demonstrates the absolute savagery involved and that it has been done in the name of religion is an affront in itself. What can be done? We have had the ambassadors in. We have put it to them and there has been total denial that anything untoward is happening. I think my colleagues will agree. If we mention human rights and persecution, they will say it is not happening. They are in complete denial.

I do not believe that the Minister would have a problem with making a major speech but I think to make any progress it is necessary to try to initiate talks on peace and stability in these



countries. The only way that we can have an input is through our role in the EU and through the UN. That is the only prospect of progress. In conclusion, all I can say is that we have heard what the witnesses have said and we will do everything we can as a committee and as a country to raise awareness about these issues to the extent that we can embarrass the countries that allow such things to happen within their borders.

**Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan:** I apologise for missing the beginning but I was chairing an event that also involved Trócaire. The witnesses’ reports were extremely informative but also very challenging. It was very difficult to listen to individual cases, because when it is brought down to individual cases, one can see the effects of the principal questions that have been raised. I agree that there is a very noticeable absence of media attention, particularly on the persecution of Christians. I am not sure whether this is political correctness gone crazy in some particular way.

When we talk about respecting the right to religious freedom and conscience, that has to be done without interfering in the religious freedom of other people. Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and ISIS would all claim that they are acting according to their religious beliefs. We would be very sceptical of and cynical about what they see as religion and love of God. It must also be included that people have to have a right to their own religious freedom and conscience and practice without interfering with the rights of other people to their religious belief.

We have had ambassadors in but I think another important way is to follow up with them on particular cases. Some of us have done that with certain of the ambassadors. The recommendations that the witnesses have outlined in their presentations are extremely practical and I am sure that there is something that the committee can consider.

As it is not only Christians who are being persecuted but other groups also, is there any collective engagement with people from those particular churches? I have been involved with the Baha’i faith and have been in Iran where we raised the issue with the human rights commissioner and at other meetings. I think the collective voice could be very useful on that. Ireland is also on the Human Rights Council and it brought up certain issues on Iran which Iran had to come back and answer, and one of those was about the Baha’i faith, but if we are talking about religious persecution we should include all the groups that the witnesses have mentioned, and obviously Christians as well.

With the Chairman of the committee, at the invitation of GOAL, I had the opportunity to go to the Turkish Syrian border to look at the refugee situation there. We are aware that the Syrian refugees who got into the camps were fortunate, and those who had friends were equally fortunate, but there were Syrian couples and families who came across who depended on Turkish farmers and citizens to support them with living arrangements. There was no doubt that this was a major human rights issue. That brings me to Ireland accepting Syrian refugees. We are not accepting enough but I always have this in my head that we accept a certain kind of refugee. We accept the educated refugee, the better-off refugee, and we are not looking at people like the ones we met when we were in that area of Turkey - very ordinary people living in appalling conditions, some of them with families. When we talk about refugees, I think that is another aspect that we should highlight.

I thank the witnesses for their presentations. The committee must take on board some of the recommendations that have been made because they will be very practical for going forward.

**Senator Michael Mullins:** I join my colleagues in welcoming our guests today. They have

certainly brought home to all of us, in a very graphic way, the issues which we are all conscious of but which we probably need to be presented with in a very graphic fashion, as the witnesses have done today. What we are doing is a major element of heightening awareness in Ireland, within our national parliament, and hopefully at a European and UN level as well. It is obvious that it has occurred in all the countries that have been mentioned where politics has failed and there is a major need for the international community to redouble its efforts to try to restore peace, stability, and normality.

Deputy Quinn made a very practical suggestion for us to hold the representatives of some of those countries to account and to see how they are measuring up against what they have signed up for within their own countries. That would be a very useful debate and discussion to have at the committee.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan mentioned the very significant issues of refugees fleeing torture in the various parts of the world and particularly the major issue of refugees from Syria. We need to take on this issue as a country and we are not doing enough. We have our own problems with accommodation, trying to house homeless people in our country and we are facing major challenges in that regard. Nevertheless, these people have nothing at all and there is no support from anybody. It is incumbent on us to have a major debate in this country on the level of support we can give to these displaced people.

Support is given by Irish Aid to the various non-government organisations and Bishop McAreavey raised the issue of direct aid to churches and religious minorities in the Middle East to rebuild their communities. It certainly seems a laudable suggestion. We have to be cognisant of the issue raised by Deputy Smith on the possibility of that causing further difficulties. I am sure there are ways around this. Ms Smith might spell out a little more what she means by the denominational protectionism and organised corruption. Could she put a little more flesh on that for us? I thank everybody for their contribution. Following this, we should review all the excellent recommendations made by witnesses and see how we can proceed to highlight this issue both at the Government level here and also at EU and UN level.

**Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan:** I have come from chairing another meeting and there was mention of a report done for Trócaire on aid for trade and Ireland is to the forefront of untied aid. The debate hinged around where we are doing business and trading with other countries, particularly in Africa and Asia. Human rights and due governance must be part of this. When we speak of human rights, the right to freedom of conscience and religious believe is part of the process. The Department of Foreign Affairs has taken submissions on this, and although the date for them has passed, there will be consultation. It is another area that we could consider when we talk about freedom of conscience or religion. It is also a human right.

**Deputy Olivia Mitchell:** As everybody probably knows, today there are EU proposals in respect of migration generally to be announced. I understand there are two strands, with one dealing with migrants generally. One recommendation relates to the presentations and requests for action in that it is that the EU would respond to the immediate emergency in Syria and Iraq. Many of the people fleeing almost *ipso facto* meet the UN definition of a refugee; they are fleeing because they are being persecuted. Europe will have to face this and Ireland as a responsible member of the European community will also have to face its responsibilities. These are genuine refugees, no matter what our response may be to the more general and ongoing problem of migration. These are clearly people who are being persecuted and I hope we will be able to respond positively.

**Vice Chairman:** Before calling on witnesses for closing statements, I should mention that the presentation has been most impressive. The response from committee members clearly indicates their knowledge in the area. Individually, we have brought the subject matter before the Dáil by way of parliamentary questions and letters to the Minister and his predecessors.

It goes without saying that religious intolerance is not new and it has been going on for hundreds and thousands of years. Over Christmas I took to reading about the Crusades in one of my madder moments. It was an interesting period and it is odd that nothing has changed; intolerance is the same as it was then and it continues. There is something particularly sensitive about religious intolerance. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan mentioned an interesting point. Various countries have anti-blasphemy laws but each in their turn believes those laws apply to others only and not themselves. That is the interesting point. There is good cause for anti-blasphemy laws but they should apply to all. This means the degree to which a person can become offended by an ignominious reference to religion is lessened.

All members have dealt with scores or hundreds of refugees over the past ten or 15 years, and we continue to do so. The horrific stories we hear from time to time have been confirmed by the witnesses. I remember dealing some years ago with a young woman from Rwanda who had been a victim of rape and continued abuse in the war. She was 19 years old but on looking at the individual, one would know immediately what she had been through. I remember at the time trying to get a hearing for her here but because this was not her first landfall in Europe, we could not help. She eventually died on the streets in London. Those stories repeat what we have heard many times in the past.

The war in Vietnam started through religious intolerance. Madame Nhu was the influential sister-in-law of President Diem at the time. It has been mentioned many times that the regime was not tolerant and it kept freedom to a minimum but, ironically, it stopped the kind of intolerance that followed. The same pattern emerged in the western Balkans, and after Tito's reign, everything else happened. I am sure all members have at some stage visited Mostar, which has two cemeteries, one on each side of the road. There are 500 Christians in one and 500 Muslims in the other. We have it here as well. Reference has been made to the extent to which we can use the Irish analogy in dealing with issues overseas. I assure the witnesses that we have tried that too. We have done it as a committee and I know the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its Minister and his predecessor have done exactly that. It does not necessarily resonate with the people with whom we have discourse. They only see one side.

In 1979 I stayed in a kibbutz in Israel and we visited both sides. We got both types of opposing propaganda. I remember an army colonel making a speech detailing all the atrocities which occurred that were offensive to him. I returned two years ago and I heard the same speech. Nothing seemed to happen at all. Any time there is a conflict of that nature, with major emphasis on the atrocities of the past, there is no moving forward. Northern Ireland was a somewhat different case. It is true the issue had been ongoing for 700 years and there was a national issue. Oddly enough, it was the forces outside of Northern Ireland and even Europe that forced the opposing sections to concentrate on the issues. It was an interesting time and an interesting place to be. While it sets an example to the rest of the warring world, it does not resolve the problems, unfortunately.

We will go to work on the recommendations of the witnesses and members. Given that the recommendations have been made before, we should not expect dramatic results. We have raised these issues, and continue to do so. The policy has been raised most recently by the Minister in debates here and throughout Europe. At the March Human Rights Council, the Minister

made freedom of religion and belief a key theme, saying: “Violence in the name of religion is a disturbing phenomenon and one which is not confined to ISIL”. The entire free world supported ISIS in the initial stages. Everybody thought they were freedom fighters and that they were going into Syria and Egypt to free the people. This was not what they were doing. They had a different agenda. In Iraq, forces were overrun virtually overnight by people who had prepared plans well in advance, knew what they were doing and were well-funded. The affront to society of people being publicly beheaded on television for us to look at nightly on our screens is something that focuses the mind.

Ireland has done as much as it can do along with its colleagues in Europe, through the UN and the EU, and it will continue in this regard. The fact we have not seen dramatic results to the extent we would like is not a reflection of a lack of effort but an indication of the magnitude of the task before us.

**Dr. John McAreavey:** In availing of the opportunity given to us today, we want to give a voice to the voiceless who do not get a chance to speak for themselves. Restriction on the practice of religion is an abuse of human rights. The issue of human rights is largely the currency through which we deal with these matters and it is right that we do it. I am delighted that there is a gentleman from Iran here today as part of one of the other delegations. Although we had planned to have a citizen of Iraq as part of our delegation, on reflection, he felt it was too risky for his family, who are still in Iraq. We are sensitive to the difficulties that speaking here can create for others.

Deputy Smith made a very powerful point about the need for sensitivity. Even in a discussion such as this, there is a danger that Christians in some of the countries in which they are in the minority might continue to be seen as crypto-Westerners. In speaking out for these people, we are not asking for anything for them other than that they be respected citizens of the country in which they live. We are not asking for any particular privileges but are only saying they should be respected and that their rights in those countries should be acknowledged. Deputy Quinn made a point about holding countries to what they have signed up to, which is important. He will know better than many people that it is not easy. A few years ago, I was with Trócaire in Pakistan and was told that although the law on bonded labourers there was perfect, the culture meant that action was not taken against wealthy landowners who were abusing labourers.

I appreciate very much the experience and wisdom of the Deputies and Senators. In speaking here today, I would like to think that our main target is the people of Ireland, particularly on issues such as opening our doors and being more sensitive to the needs of people fleeing war-torn areas, such as Syria and Iraq. Our own people will have to free our politicians up and say we must do what we have to do, difficult as our situation is and will probably remain.

Religion never comes unalloyed. There is a toxic mix between a kind of religion and a kind of politics. Christians in many parts of the world pay a price for what the West has done and, in some instances, is not doing. In an ecumenical context, I have heard it said that Washington is the new Rome. The Crusades were directed from Rome. A very practical example is that Christians in Pakistan feel the backdraft from drones in Afghanistan. What Washington does is seen as “the West” and the new Rome. The West has much to answer for in terms of its foreign policy bias and willingness to tolerate situations such as in Israel and Palestine, which, although not easy to resolve, will not be resolved by a totally partisan approach.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak for those people who cannot speak for themselves. I hope, through the exposure of this topic, people in Ireland, Christians and those

who do not consider themselves Christians, might be moved to a deeper compassion and hospitality, where it is required. I invite my colleague, Fr. Tim Bartlett, who has not spoken, although he is not easily kept silent, to make his contribution.

**Fr. Timothy Bartlett:** Amid such eloquent contributions, I would have been happy to have remained silent. However, I will take up the bishop's last point. I thank the members for taking an interest in the matter and holding this hearing. As well as raising the issue among our people, all the groups present are feeding back directly to people on the ground who are encouraged, supported and helped by the knowledge that this is taking place in the Irish Parliament today. The members must not undervalue such events, familiar as they and the issues may be. They are tremendous and important acts of solidarity and support.

I will focus on an issue Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan raised that has not yet been examined, namely, the question of what is happening in our culture. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks identified the issue as "one of the crimes against humanity of our time" and said he was "appalled at the lack of protest it has evoked" in many western Christian societies. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan mentioned political correctness. Ms Smith mentioned the cultural freeze or squeeze on Christianity in many allegedly secular countries. To be very positive about that, in terms of a challenge to us all, for far too long the issue of the right to religious freedom and conscience in a diverse, pluralist, modern democracy, such as our own, has been a second-class right and has never really been given the exposure or consideration it deserves and yet it is fundamental to the effective operation of a genuinely diverse society. We could make a tremendous contribution, particularly the members, as political and public representatives, to lift the public debate into a more mature, calm, respectful, and considered debate about the calibration of that, even in our own society.

There are some Christians who would say there are signals emerging in our country, North and South, that they are being told not to take up a particular post or not to follow a particular line of business which might bring their conscience on certain matters into conflict with the services they will be expected to provide under our laws. Without taking a position on that issue, it is a real issue. It concerns the interface between religious freedom, secularity and what is a genuinely diverse pluralist society and how we calibrate these as fellow citizens in the interest of our common humanity and our shared interest in a peaceful, stable society and from that to the world because this issue will continue to grow in our global society and global institutions.

I disagree with the Vice Chairman when he suggests things have not changed. They have changed. We now have a humanitarian principle and concept in human rights law. The fundamental values of Christianity are implicit in all those things. Many would argue they stem from a Christian influence on the development of civilisation. That is not the relevant point. Pope Benedict XVI emeritus talked about the future of the world depending on a shared humanistic synthesis where we can all gather around common values. There also needs to be an honest, constructive discussion about the right to be different and the space to be that in an appropriate way that is still consistent with the common good. There will never be a Christian crusade again, other than in defence of the right to life but there will never be any proactive taking of anybody's life by Christians today. I could not foresee that in any circumstance. I hope our common humanity has progressed. That is why we are here expressing concern about these issues. I thank the committee and encourage it in its work.

**Deputy Ruairí Quinn:** I congratulate Fr. Bartlett on his contribution. I would love to see traditional Catholic and Christian people in this country mobilised to respond to what he has described. We will respond, and we are responding. There are three kinds of Catholics on this



island, certainly in this State: Catholics by conviction, Catholics by culture and Catholics by compulsion. The Catholics by compulsion are those people who feel they cannot get their children into the local school, or one of the seven Catholic schools in many of the towns around the country, unless they have that child baptised. It is institutional hypocrisy, which does nobody any good. Fr Bartlett and his colleagues control 90% of the primary schools in the Republic of Ireland in those towns where there is a demand – we have the patronage report – for diversity. It is not easy to persuade in terms of which of those six or seven schools will be transferred or that how can that happen. Progress on the pluralism and patronage report has been painfully slow at a time when our population numbers for primary school are growing and will not stop growing until 2028.

It requires leadership from the Irish Bishops' Conference. Change is always difficult and there has to be buy-in but there has been painfully slow change in this area. It would remove the necessity in many towns for people who feel the only way they can guarantee their child a place in a primary school is to go through the charade of having their child baptised. That must be a terrible insult to committed Catholics or Christians. That is what is happening. If that change could happen, it would be a very clear recognition that here on this island, in this State, there is a respect for pluralism which naturally translates into those areas where Christians are not just being discriminated against but are being murdered for their very beliefs and for historic beliefs they held in those communities long before St. Patrick came to this island.

**Vice Chairman:** We can have a discussion on that issue at a later stage and I will be delighted to accommodate it. Maybe Fr. Bartlett is right and maybe I am wrong. I am not so sure civilisation has changed. Man's inhumanity to man has not ceased or changed at all. It continues as it was. For example, the war in Rwanda was started by a zealot who had access to a propaganda outlet, a radio station. He revved up the intolerance to such an extent that 500,000 people were killed and the killing was justified by the people who thought that way. That is man's inhumanity to man. In the western Balkans, similar violence happened in the past 20 years.

While civilisation has come a long way and we have achieved a great deal, we have put man on the moon and have a few other achievements worth mentioning, we still have much to learn about tolerance and the degree to which tolerant people are willing to be tolerant of each other and recognise each other's existence and their right to exist. I hate to preach. That is not my job; that is Fr. Bartlett's job.

The briefing note from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade notes:

Officials from the Department have met frequently with local Christian leaders from the Middle East region, and discussed the issues affecting their communities. Many of these groups have requested that efforts made on their behalf be carried out discreetly, as any special attention from western countries might increase their difficulties.

Ireland's 2013 Presidency of the European Union was the occasion of the adoption of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which were approved by EU Foreign Ministers on 24 June 2013.

... Ireland led negotiations on behalf of the EU on the resolution brought forward by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) entitled "Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief". This resolution was also adopted by consensus

by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2013.

We will bring the witnesses' remarks to the attention of the powers that be.

**Mr. David Turner:** I want to respond briefly to members' comments. I thank Deputy Quinn for his specific recommendation that countries be held to account for the commitments they have signed up to. That is a real step forward which this committee could take. Church in Chains, with the other groups, would be very happy to supply a list of the commitments the countries have signed up to. Taking on board what Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan said about individual cases, we could match commitments on the one hand with individual cases on the other hand and the committee could take that forward. We would be happy to work with the committee secretariat on that list.

Several contributors spoke about taking this forward at EU and UN level. I agree with them on that. It strengthens my point that a call be made for an official within the human rights unit to be dedicated at least part-time to religious freedom. That would mean that organisations, such as ours, could liaise with that individual and there could be continuity of focus. Deputy O'Sullivan also mentioned strengthening the case if we work with other religious groups. That is beginning. I have very good relations with the Baha'i community in Ireland. When it appeared before this committee to speak about the situation in Iran, it also mentioned the fact that Christians were persecuted. I made sure in my contribution to mention its situation. There is the beginning of something and I would be happy to work with others on that. We are not looking for special treatment for Christians, we are looking for equal treatment.

**Ms Zoe Smith:** Deputy Brendan Smith mentioned the epicentre of extremism in sub-Saharan Africa and asked whether it was connected with the Middle East. There are some connections. Boko Haram has pledged allegiance to ISIS a number of times. The media are playing an interesting part in the persecution there in that groups that previously would only have been known locally are now known internationally and able to feed off each other's success. To that extent, the success of ISIS in the Middle East spurred on Boko Haram, al-Shabab and so on. There are splinter groups in various countries. We are not sure how powerful they are, but they are, at least verbally, connected with one another. We are interested in sub-Saharan Africa as the growing epicentre of Islamic extremism, particularly in countries where it has not previously been an issue such as Kenya. I visited that country about three years ago and was a little frustrated in going there because I did not think Christians faced many problems, but we are all aware now that they do and they have been growing over time. We are aware of and concerned about this. We are also concerned about the situation in Tanzania where there are sporadic attacks, the number of which has been increasing. It is something on which to keep an eye.

Apostasy and blasphemy laws work on an international level. The Vice Chairman has mentioned a resolution at the United Nations to combat hate speech. It has been a real success, as it replaced a resolution on the defamation of religions, which effectively legitimised all apostasy and blasphemy laws internationally and which had been voted through continually at the United Nations. There was a huge campaign a few years ago to get rid of it. For the first time in a long time, it was not tabled in 2012, which was a major success, but it has not been defeated, which is a shame. It has not been voted out, but it has not reared its head for a while. I have heard different country representatives say that to maintain the *status quo* at the United Nations on freedom of religion, one must work incredibly hard to stay still and not regress. Ireland is already working to ensure a lack of international resolutions supporting apostasy and blasphemy laws and it would be great to see that work continue that.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights is very explicit in what it covers. One of the things it covers is the freedom to choose or change one's religion or beliefs or not to hold a religion or beliefs at all. That freedom is under constant attack in various parts of the international community and successive treaties on human rights; the right to choose and change religion is often dropped. I do not think it made it into the Commonwealth human rights charter, for instance, and there are other regional human rights charters in which freedom of religion is mentioned but the right to choose and change one's religion is not. Maintaining the specific wording is something on which Ireland can definitely work and it would make a significant difference for those who decide to leave a religion or choose another one and follow their conscience.

It is great to see Senator Michael Mullins back. He asked me to expand a little on the issues of denominational protectionism and organised corruption. To do this, I will use two country examples. We see denominational protectionism in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a great deal of control over society. Members of other Christian denominations face harassment, intimidation and false imprisonment because of this. When one talks about the persecution of Christians, it is awkward to mention that Christian groups do not always like each other, but it is something of which we are aware and which needs to be addressed. A good news story from Syria is that different denominations that have been suspicious of each other for a long time are increasingly working together and realising we are all one in Christ. That is very good news as far as we are concerned. In Colombia we run an orphanage for children of Colombian pastors who dared to speak out against the guerilla organisations and lead young people who could have been caught up in violence to Christ and show them there was a different way of life. For this they have often forfeited their lives. That is what we mean by organised corruption.

Mr. Turner mentioned the asylum system and the fact that he had received a translator from the Iranian embassy. In the United Kingdom we are working with the Home Office on the asylum procedure to make it more accessible for Christians who face persecution. For instance, in one of the questions asked five years ago which, thankfully, is no longer asked the applicant was asked how they cooked a turkey at Christmas time as a means of proving they were a genuine Christian.

**Vice Chairman:** Translators are always available in this country. Asylum seekers should not attend a hearing without the assistance of a translator.

**Ms Zoe Smith:** Absolutely. It is also important to make them aware of the sensitivities involved in conversion.

**Ms Noreen McGrath Gumbo:** I wish to make a brief comment on the point raised by Deputy Brendan Smith about the safety of humanitarian actors in challenging contexts. For Trócaire and other humanitarian actors, safety is paramount and guides our decision-making. Trócaire specifically works with local partners, including church agencies. They provide us with local knowledge at all times, but it is the humanitarian principles with which we comply. Our local partner agencies, including church agencies, also comply with the standards of independence, neutrality and humanity that help us to establish and maintain access to communities in need.

**Mr. Davood Mahmoodnezhad:** Deputy Olivia Mitchell has said ambassadors, when invited to appear before the committee and asked about the situation in their country, just say everything is okay. When they attend a committee meeting, the prisoner in Iran has a very relaxing time for a week or two while the government is scared about it. I ask Ireland to do this often

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and it does not matter that countries are not responding, as they know that Europe is looking at them. Prisoners say they get good food and receive medical support because someone in Europe has mentioned their names and drawn attention to their persecution in Iran. Please continue to do this.

**Fr. Timothy Bartlett:** The permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations has made regular interventions on this issue at that level. The Secretary of State of the Vatican, Cardinal Parolin, also made an intervention a few months ago. This can be expected to be a major theme when Pope Francis addresses the United Nations in September.

**Vice Chairman:** Through the NGOs, Ireland focuses on a daily basis on all of these sensitive areas and does so effectively. It also uses its influence discreetly because we are sometimes advised that that is the best way to do it. All of the delegates have been televised live and the Minister, departmental officials and relevant sections will receive a transcript. We will deal further with the issue to the best of our ability and take into account the recommendations made by the delegates in that context. We thank them for their submissions. It has been a very interesting debate, one we needed to have.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.50 a.m. and adjourned at 11.55 a.m until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 May 2015.