



Holy Wisdom

H.E. Rev. Ambassador Anthony J. DeLuca, Ph.D., United Nations Representative and Holy Wisdom Editor; Lynn McGuckin, Assistant United Nations Representative; Holy Wisdom Editor; Rev. Michael Verra, D.D., United Nations Representative.

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UNITED NATIONS AFFAIRS, SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN NEW YORK
2295 Victory Boulevard,
Staten Island, New York, 10314
(718) 698-0700 email: DeLuca@UN.int



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Volume XIII No 12

December 2004



Afghan returnees wall off winter with UNHCR help

QARABAGH, Afghanistan, Nov 29 (UNHCR) – It is late autumn, but still mild enough for Akbar Nusrati to enjoy lunch in the garden of his newly reconstructed house. Until last month, this small patch of earth with its two apple trees was where Akbar, his wife and their three children ate, slept and washed – their only shelter a makeshift tent. With the frigid winter only weeks away, Akbar is grateful to be back in the home he and his family fled during Afghanistan's civil war 13 years ago.

Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, hundreds of other families from the village of Qarabagh, 50 km north of the capital Kabul, have also taken the decision to return after years living as refugees in Iran and Pakistan. For most, what they found when they arrived was rubble.

"It wasn't recognizable as my house," said Akbar. "The Taliban had destroyed it just as they destroyed all the houses in this area."

Caught on the frontline between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance which defeated them, residents of Qarabagh as well as thousands of families from the surrounding Shomali Plain were forced to flee, seeking safety and shelter where they could find it. Tens of thousands of homes, once abandoned, were razed by Taliban forces.

"Without the help we received, we'd still be living in the tent," said Akbar.

The help, which is provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, has enabled more than 5,000 families in Qarabagh to repair or completely rebuild their homes. In the Shomali Plain, some 14,000 families have received UNHCR assistance and more than 300 water points have been established.



UNHCR Goodwill Ambassadors

UNHCR started to work with Goodwill Ambassadors in the early 1980s, when Richard Burton and James Mason were first appointed to make media statements and public appearances for the refugee cause. Today, five UNHCR Goodwill Ambassadors with very different professional and personal backgrounds use their talents and time to advocate for refugees: Barbara Hendricks (named in 1987), Adel Imam (2000), Angelina Jolie (2001), Giorgio Armani (2002) and Julien Clerc (2003).

Goodwill Ambassadors communicate the message of respect and compassion for refugees to the general public in a uniquely powerful way; they capture massive public attention through public events, television shows, radio interviews and popular magazine articles. They effectively use their privileged access to mass media and other resources to give a voice to refugees, who are often victims of forgotten humanitarian crises and who often suffer from uninformed negative stereotyping. Goodwill Ambassadors also voice their support for refugees in meetings with world leaders, diplomats, teachers, national and community officials, as well as the public at large.

COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights concluded today its three-week winter session by adopting its concluding observations on the reports of Malta, Denmark, Italy, Azerbaijan and Chile which were considered during the session.

The five countries are among the 150 States parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which are required to submit periodic reports to the Committee on efforts to implement the provisions of the treaty, which entered into force in 1976.

Among the positive developments in the initial report of Malta, the Committee noted with appreciation the overall high level of protection afforded to economic, social and cultural rights in the State party and its continuing efforts to improve the protection of those rights. The Committee



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COMMITTEE AGAINST TORTURE CONCLUDES THIRTY-THIRD SESSION

The Committee against Torture today concluded its two-week winter session and issued its concluding observations and recommendations on reports from Argentina, the United Kingdom and Greece which it reviewed during this session.

Those countries are among the 138 States parties to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and are bound by the terms of the treaty to submit periodic reports on efforts to ensure that such human rights violations do not occur on their territories. In addition to submitting the reports, the countries sent delegations before the Committee of 10 independent Experts to answer questions.

The Committee said that among the positive developments in the report of Argentina were the efforts made by the State party to combat impunity in respect of crimes against humanity committed under the military dictatorship. The Committee also welcomed with satisfaction the work accomplished by the National Commission for the Right to an Identity, which was entrusted with the task of locating children who disappeared under the military dictatorship. The Committee expressed its concern about the many allegations of torture and ill-treatment committed in a widespread and habitual manner by the State's security forces and agencies and recommended, among other things, that the State party take vigorous steps to eliminate the impunity of the alleged perpetrators of acts of torture and ill-treatment.

Cited among positive developments in the fourth periodic report of the United Kingdom was the State party's assurance that the United Kingdom Armed Forces, military advisers, and other public servants deployed on operations abroad were "subject at all times to English criminal law" including the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment. The Committee also noted as positive the State party's reaffirmation of its unreserved condemnation of the use of torture. Among the Committee's recommendations was for the State party to review, as a matter of urgency, the alternatives available to indefinite detention under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 and to ensure that the conduct of its officials, including those attending interrogations at any overseas facility, was strictly in conformity with the requirements of the Convention.

Positive developments in Greece, the Committee noted, included the ongoing efforts by the State party to revise its

regretted that the Covenant had not been incorporated into domestic law and therefore could not be directly invoked before domestic courts. Among its recommendations, the Committee urged the State party to raise public awareness about gender equality; and to continue and strengthen efforts to promote the integration of persons with disabilities into the labor market.

With regard to the fourth periodic report of Denmark, the Committee noted with appreciation the State party's continuing efforts to comply with its obligations under the Covenant and the overall protection afforded to economic, social and cultural rights in country. It was concerned that the rise in the number of immigrants and refugees arriving in Denmark over the last years had been met with increased negative and hostile attitudes towards foreigners. It recommended, among other things, that the State party closely monitor the incidence of, and combat racism and xenophobia, and that it continue to promote intercultural understanding and tolerance among all groups in society.

The Committee labeled as positive in the fourth periodic report of Italy the measures taken by the State party to combat the phenomenon of trafficking in persons; the State party's efforts to reduce unemployment; and the regularization of 700,000 migrant workers. The Committee was concerned that the State party still considered some economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to housing, not justifiable since they entailed financial burdens upon the State. It recommended, among other things, that the State party intensify efforts to combat domestic violence, especially against women; and that it take the necessary corrective measures to combat discrimination in the housing sector against the disadvantaged and marginalized groups, particularly immigrants and the Roma people.



legislation and adopt other necessary measures so as to strengthen the respect for human rights in Greece and give effect to the Convention. The Committee also welcomed the new Prison Code, the new law on Legal Aid and the law on combating trafficking in human beings. Among its concerns was the lack of an effective independent system to investigate complaints and reports that allegations of torture and ill treatment were not investigated promptly and impartially. It recommended that the State party strengthen existing efforts to reduce the occurrence of ill-treatment, including that which was racially motivated, by police and other public officials, and to review modalities of offering protection to street children while ensuring that those measures protected their rights.

SWAZILAND BRIEFING BACKGROUND

Swaziland is a small, landlocked country between Mozambique and South Africa with a population of about one million. It is about the same size as Wales, with a temperate mountainous region and semi-tropical lowlands. Ethnically 95% African and 5% European, the dominant religions are Christianity and indigenous. Economically, Swaziland is largely dependant on South Africa and exports coal, sugar and textiles. As a British colony, it was never integrated into the Union of South Africa and gained its independence in 1968 as a monarchy. The Westminster constitution was repealed in 1973 and the state is now ruled as an absolute monarchy under King Mswati III (crowned 1982). Tensions have been growing between the traditions forms of life and government and modern expectations.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

The Prime Minister declared a National Disaster in early 2004 following Swaziland's severe drought caused by the failure of the rains for the past four years. Poverty is widespread and two thirds of the population live on less than \$1 a day – one third of the population is receiving food aid from the WFP and other agencies. Official unemployment runs at 40% and the formal economy is in decline, although the informal economy is expanding. The country has been hit by globalization, with several major employers closing. Swaziland's status as a preferred nation under the US African Growth and Opportunities Act is under threat because of the poor labor conditions of textile workers. Also, the preferential agreement with the EU for the export of sugar is also under review.

PRINCIPAL ISSUES

1. The Constitution

Historically relatively stable, pressure has mounted in recent years for the reform of the traditional modes of government. The King rules by decree and appoints his own Prime Minister. Parliament is weak and MPs are partly appointed and partly directly elected. Political parties are officially banned but in practice tolerated. Freedom of association and the media is restricted – most media outlets are state owned.

Tensions focus around the long running debate over the new constitution to replace that suspended in 1977

the new constitution to replace that suspended in 1975. A Constitutional Review Commission sat from 1996 to 2001 and recommended no major changes to the system. A new committee is at work and its proposals are now open to consultation – after many delays, a new constitution is expected next year. However, opposition groups and human rights organizations have been banned from making submissions and the King's hostility to democracy is widely known. It is feared that although civil liberties will be extended, ultimate power will still rest with the monarchy. Civil society actors have formed an umbrella organization – the Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civil Organizations – to address the political and economic crises through dialogue.

2. The Rule of Law

Governance and the government's commitment to the rule of law have been criticized. The Prime Minister recently refused to abide by two Appeal Court rulings and the Appeal Court judges resigned in protest. Attempts have been made to undermine the independence of the judiciary. These problems have led foreign donors to restrict the amount of aid given.

The King has been criticized for his personal profligacy; requesting money for a jet, lavish birthday parties and palaces for his 40 wives.

3. HIV-AIDS

AIDS is devastating Swazi society and the economy.

Up to 40% of the population is thought to carrying HIV. The available labor force is being reduced and there are a large number of orphans. The government AIDS program has been somewhat chaotically implemented with reports of ARV drugs being improperly administered and consequently causing further deaths from the side-effects. However, the UN S-G's Special Envoy for Humanitarian Needs in Southern Africa has commended the government's "large strides in beginning to confront the HIV epidemic."

01 December 2004

Palestinians begin Advent on an optimistic note in Holy Land

Bethlehem (ENI). The countdown to Christmas has begun on a rare optimistic note in Bethlehem as Christians celebrate Advent, the period of preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus, and the start of the festive season. "We hope that this year will be a better year," said the Rev. Amjad Sabara, the Roman Catholic pastor for Bethlehem, the town where Jesus was born, following services to mark Advent at the Church of the Nativity.