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ENGLISH

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
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**Oral declaration by the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ)**

**Violation of the right to religious freedom of Christian minorities  
resident in the Palestinian Territories**

The **European Centre for Law and Justice** is a recently accredited NGO which is devoted to the promotion and defence of religious freedom.

For our first intervention, I would like to draw your attention to the situation of the Christian minority living in the Palestinian Territories. This minority is experiencing real difficulties and its presence in the Palestinian Territories is seriously compromised. This is because it not only shares the fate of the Palestinian people, but also suffers intolerable pressure within that population. As a minority within a minority, these Christians are under threat from both sides.

ECLJ understands the legitimate claims of the Jewish and Muslim populations regarding the holy places. But it is inconsistent to claim the benefit of religious freedom for oneself without ensuring it for the minorities for which one is responsible.

Thus access to the holy places and to Bethlehem has become all but impossible for Palestinian Christians. In the Palestinian Territories, a number of Christian schools – which are open to Muslim pupils – have recently been partly destroyed by fundamentalist Islamic militia. The Christian communities are subjected to unbearable pressure of a moral, material and physical nature. A number of reports refer to cases of enforced conversion. For example, in August Ms Sana al-Sayegh, a professor at the University of Palestine, was kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. The lives of Muslims who convert to Christianity are also under threat.

This pressure is the reason for the wholesale exodus of the Christian populations.

Less than 30 000 Christians still live in the Palestinian Territories. Bethlehem was 85% Christian in 1948, but the current figure is less than 20%.

It should be clear to all that the Christian community is no less entitled to live on this land than the other religious communities. But in fact its fate is to say the least neglected not only by the local political authorities but also by the international community.

The exodus of these Christians is a human and cultural tragedy, but it is also a loss for the Palestinian population and for the stability of the area. By their neutrality in the conflict, and by their commitment to many works of charity, schools and hospitals, the Christian population is the only “third party” in the conflict. It is often the only party maintaining a social link between the populations. It is open to both the Muslim and Jewish populations, and plays a role in mediation.

But more than that, the presence of Christians is evidence of the possibility of the coexistence of different religions in this part of the world, and that is why it is necessary to pay particular attention to their situation, to support them, and to ensure respect for their fundamental rights.

We therefore recommend that, as part of the United Nations’ monitoring of the situation in the Palestinian Territories, Christians should be the subject of specific examination, and that the international community should undertake to support their presence in the area, because their presence is essential to the establishment of lasting stability.

Thank you.