

Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Held online, via Zoom

12th November 2020

Present

John Mason MSP

Kirandeep Kaur – Sikh Sanjog

Alan Meldrum – Open Doors

Robin Downie – Interfaith Scotland

Trishna Singh – Sikh Sanjog

Jamie Spurway - Interfaith Scotland

Adam Mackie – John Mason’s office

Steve Begarnie – Open Doors

Margery Mackay (Unitarians in Scotland)

Lorraine McMahon - ACN

Evelyn Rae Liston – Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

Anne Edwards – Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

Lauren Holehouse - Evangelical Alliance

Oliver Lane - Universal Peace Federation and Dundee Faith and Belief

Alan Kay - Interfaith Scotland

Annemarie Clements - ACN

Brian Miller - Baptist Union of Scotland

Mirella Yandoli - Church of Scotland

Charlie Fox - Evangelical Alliance

Anthony Horan - Catholic Parliamentary Office

Rev. Malcolm MacLeod - Steadfast Global

Doug Flett - ICC

Rita Docherty

Ramandeep Kaur

Maureen Sier – Interfaith Scotland

Ephraim Borowski - SCoJeC

Lillian Murchison

Douglas Flett - ICC

Charandeep Singh

Charles Warren

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Murdo Fraser MSP

James Fraser - Release International

Sukjit Pooni

Kieran Turner - Evangelical Alliance

Arif Khan

Apologies

Philip Mendelsohn – Interfaith Glasgow

Charles Warren - University of St Andrews

Quorate

John Mason MSP, Murdo Fraser MSP and Jeremy Balfour MSP were present, making the meeting quorate.

Welcome

John Mason MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting, noting the current challenges we are all facing.

Approval of Previous Meeting's Minutes

John then asked the group to approve the minutes of the previous meeting on the hate crime bill. There were no changes needed and the minutes were adopted.

General Meeting

John began the general meeting describing the topic as the experiences of religious minorities in India – a topic which we had intended to cover before lockdown began but had been delayed.

Presentation from Kirndeeep Kaur of Sikh Sanjog

Kirndeeep led a presentation on the treatment of Sikhs in India. According to the last census, Sikhs make up only 1.72% of the population of India, so quite a minority. Story of the community takes us from humble beginnings to opulent kingdoms and from brutality to the struggle for justice. Established in the late 15th Century, the faith is monotheistic and focuses on equality. Fearful of the formation of a powerful religious movement, the early Sikhs faced torture and imprisonment at the ends of the ruling elite. Despite this they developed into a prosperous Sikh kingdom. However, this position came to an end with the impact of the British Empire. During partition, millions of Sikhs and Hindus migrated to India. The final death toll is believed to be over one million people, and there was an appalling number of rapes and kidnapping of women.

In 1984 the Indian army was ordered into the Golden Temple of Amritsar to deal with Sikh dissenters. The army without warning opened fire on thousands of pilgrims causing a bloodbath. In October of the same year Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. In response there was a planned genocide against Sikh people in Delhi. Thousands of Sikh men and boys were burned alive following support and arming by the Indian Government. Sikh women and girls were raped in front of family members. (The group were shown photographic examples of the violence.)

This was 1984 and since then there has not been justice. Of the over 3000 people arrested just 30 were convicted for the killing of Sikhs. Over 12,000 Sikhs were internally displaced, and many left India because they did not feel that it was safe for them to remain. The trauma has had intergenerational consequences. Many remain plagued with mental health issues. Calls for justice have been met with tokenistic and meaningless commissions.

Discrimination and violence against Sikhs continue in India. The Sikh diaspora are even subject to violence from the Indian state. In 2017 while in India for his wedding, a young man named Jagtar Singh Johal was dragged into a van by plain clothed officers and has been subject to torture and over 1000 days in jail without trial.

Presentation from Alan Meldrum of Open Doors

Alan began by commenting that he would be validating a lot of what Kirndeeep had presented. Open Doors represents the Christian faith wherever it faces persecution worldwide. They have great concern for the escalating human rights violations against minority religious communities in India. In particular the experiences of women Christians.

Justin Welby has been asserting that the right to freedom of belief is a fundamental Human Right that intersects with other rights including freedom of expression, association, and the right to a fair trial. India is a global leader, one of the most vibrant and growing economies in the world. It taught the world non-violence. It is planning to put a rocket into space. And yet is ranked as the tenth most dangerous place to be a Christian. Christians represent 2.5% of the population (64 million). Why are they persecuted? Because the nationalist BJP party believes that being Indian means being Hindu. Religious minorities are targeted, and the government is turning a blind eye against violence against other groups. There have been over 1200 deaths of Christians in the last few years. In its response to Covid, minority religions have been denied food support. Religious hate crime is a crime in India. But nevertheless, mob violence is common, and there is evidence it is orchestrated by police. Christian women are often particularly badly treated. A Jewish commentator said if you are a Christian woman you are like a canary down a mine in that what happens to you will later happen to others.

Open Doors is advocating 'We're Indians Too'. There has been extensive vandalism against Christian homes and churches. Families left have been left without shelter or access to water. Anti-conversion laws are misused creating a toxic environment. They have not been supported by the Indian courts once. International community should take note and make positive steps. It is worth emphasising that Sikhs and Muslims are in exactly the same position.

Our recommendations are: international monitoring and data collection; proactive steps to address an environment of hate and intolerance; the India Government to protect Christian and Muslim Dalits; the reform of discriminatory law to better protect women; and PESA laws to support minority groups must be implemented fairly across all cultures and traditions.

Action Points

To bring up the issue of persecution of minority religions with Lord Ahmed.

To raise the case of Jagtar Singh Johal with the relevant authorities. It was agreed that the group will send a letter to the Indian Consulate.

Other Competent Business

Maureen Sier of Interfaith Scotland made the group aware that it is currently Scottish Interfaith Week and the week helps people think through the issues of freedom of religion and belief.

She also expressed concern about a growing link between nationalism and religion in a number of countries including Myanmar, India, USA and others, suggesting this could be a topic for future meetings.

Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting is yet to be agreed.