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A BRIEF REPORT ON A RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONFERENCE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

By **Branko Bjelajac**

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The first regional conference of the Visegrád Group (V4) on religious freedom was held October 13, 2022, in Bratislava, Slovak Republic, under the title, “Religious Freedom: Contemporary Policies and Challenges in the World.” The organizer, newly established in February 2022, was the Slovak Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief—which is under the presidency of **Anna Záborská**. The Slovak Republic is this year’s chair of the regional conference of the Visegrád Group.¹

The gathering brought government representatives from Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Great Britain, and Slovenia, who shared their bilateral and multilateral activities in regard to religious freedom, as well as representatives from the various NGO’s: Set My People Free from Sweden, Open Doors from France, Aid to the Church in Need from Belgium and Slovak Republic, and Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe from Austria.

The Slovak Prime Minister **Eduard Heger** opened the conference and pointed out that Slovakia is a young democracy and still must learn what freedom is and how to live it. According to him, we still have a long way to go to democracy. He emphasized that living in freedom means living with dignity, respect, and courage. Heger also recalled the historical problems related to religious freedom in Slovakia during wartime Slovak State, when the Jewish Code was adopted in 1941 by which Jews were deprived of their human rights and sent to concentration camps. He also recalled the 40-year period of communism, in which Christians stood up to defend freedom, faith, and conscience, and suffered for years for these values.

¹ The Visegrád Group is a cultural and political alliance of four Central European countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

One of the plenary speakers, **Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako**, the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq, critically evaluated the poor state of religious freedom worldwide. He addressed the issues of persecuted Christians due to incompetent sectarian regimes, which make it difficult to foresee any future for their churches. Cardinal Sako shared that his church before the wars had 1.5 million members, but now it only has about a half million members. He claimed that different religions ought not to live merely in co-existence, which is another word for being just tolerant, but in collectivity, as living among each other. Sako argued for a flexible Christianity, which lives according to the principle of *aggiornamento* [appropriate adaptation of Church discipline to the needs and conditions of our times]. According to him, freedom of conscience means the possibility of choosing and changing religious beliefs, which people in Iraq do not respect. At the same time, there should be a guarantee of civil equality. According to Cardinal Sako, we can achieve this by separating state and religion. Since religion is a personal and private issue, the state ought not to interfere with a person's conscience. He stated that a secular constitution could help solve the problems of religious freedom in Iraq.

Another plenary speaker, Roman Catholic **Bishop Wilfred Anagbe**, from Makurdi, Nigeria, described the situation in his country as exceedingly difficult. Christians constantly deal with bloody attacks, primarily by the terrorist organization Boko Haram. Unlike Iraq, he said, Nigeria is not a sectarian or religious state, but a secular one. A large problem is the passive government which declines to intervene and protect local farmers and other groups, and which also has a share in the persecution that is ongoing. One of the frequent excuses from the government is to blame climate change and the needs of herders for grazing land. Once the farmers are pushed away (there are currently 1.7 million internally displaced people in Nigeria), they cannot return, as there are no land deeds and historical data to show ownership of the land. An additional reason to recognize this religious war is that these attacks are not provoked by the Christian population. Bishop Anagbe shared that in his diocese alone he had to close 58 local churches since 2017 as a direct result of people forced to move out.

The conference convener, Anna Záborská, in a closing statement emphasized the value of cooperation in which cooperation should inspire to build bridges and share common values. She also discussed how religious and cultural heritage creates our identity. She spoke about the activities of the Alliance for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IRFBA), which promotes freedom of

belief and religion for all. According to Záborská, the disrespect of religious freedom results in inequality between men and women, in abductions, forced marriages, and sexual slavery.

The present government representatives plan to arrange for a monthly conference call and encourage another regional conference on religious freedom in the next year.