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Bishops welcome EU pledge on religious rights

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

WARSAW, Poland -- A commission representing the European Union's Catholic bishops welcomed an EU commitment to support religious freedom worldwide and predicted "concrete measures" will be taken to implement the pledge.

"It isn't up to churches to suggest practical action," said Johanna Touzel, spokeswoman for the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community. "What we're calling for is a clear warning about the consequences of continued persecution.

"The Western world should be offering a framework for respecting fundamental rights, which local communities can implement democratically. Now that revolutionary changes are occurring in the Arab world, the West has a responsibility to set the rules of the game," she said.

Touzel's response followed the release Feb. 21 of a statement by the EU foreign ministers that reaffirmed a "strong commitment" to promote religious freedom and condemn violence against Christians and Muslims.

In a Feb. 24 interview with Catholic News Service, Touzel said the voices of church leaders and Christian politicians helped "change the orientation" of the foreign ministers.

"There's been a reluctance to mention Christians by officials in Britain and other countries who feared this risked a clash of civilizations by identifying Europe with Christianity," Touzel said. "But respect for fundamental rights is already a condition for EU aid, so I think we can be hopeful concrete steps will now be taken to uphold this in practice."

Calls for action to combat anti-Christian violence have mounted in the wake of recent events, including a Jan. 1 bombing that killed 23 Orthodox Christians in Alexandria, Egypt.

Foreign Ministers from Italy, France, Hungary and Poland demanded a "strong and clear political answer" in a January letter to the Catherine Ashton, the EU representative for foreign affairs and security policy. She told the European Parliament Jan. 19 the EU would seek "strong cross-regional support" on the issue at the United Nations Human Rights Council in March.

At a Jan. 31 summit, the EU foreign ministers declined proposals for protecting Christian minorities and referred only briefly to discrimination in a 21-page document.

However, in their Feb. 21 statement, they "firmly condemned" violence and terrorism "against Christians and their places of worship, Muslim pilgrims and other religious communities." They said religious people should "practice their religion and worship freely, individually or in community with others, without fear of intolerance and attacks."

Although the statement was welcomed as a "good step in the right direction" by the bishops, they also urged the EU to take "significant political action" and "help eradicate the stark sectarian divide, the war of cultures and religions, and the wave of religious cleansing."

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Meanwhile, a senior official from the 54-country Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe outlined plans to combat "Christianophobia" in a Feb. 17 speech to European church leaders, and welcomed the "five risks to religious freedom" outlined by Pope Benedict XVI in a Jan. 10 address to Rome diplomats.

"That the OSCE has established the office of representative for combating discrimination against Christians represents an achievement for the diplomacy of the Holy See and those governments which cleverly supported it", Massimo Introvigne, the security organization's representative for combating discrimination and intolerance, told the Council of Catholic Bishops of Europe and the non-Catholic Conference of European Churches in Belgrade.

"The time of words not followed up by actions has gone," he said. "There is a need, as the pope states, to adopt effective measures."

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