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European churches welcome EU move to link aid to religious freedom

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

Oxford, England — Churches in Europe have welcomed pledges by the European Union to make financial help for countries around the world conditional on their protection of religious freedom.

The Brussels-based Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, COMECE, said Tuesday that action was needed "given the systematic and increasing violations of freedom of religion by some governments and non-state actors."

It said the new EU guidelines provide "an operational set of tools to be used in relations with third countries ... designed to protect all individual believers and religious communities."

The Council of the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council adopted "Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief" Monday. Linking EU aid to protection of religious rights was one of 11 policy recommendations by COMECE in 2010.

The non-Catholic Conference of European Churches, which said its representatives had helped draft the guidelines, also welcomed the European Union taking steps to make "freedom of religion or belief ... a priority in its foreign policy."

"Churches will continue to monitor the implementation and evaluation of these guidelines to ensure they are used effectively to combat violations and bring the perpetrators to justice," the conference said.

Calls for tougher action to combat anti-religious violence and discrimination, especially against Christians, have mounted in the 785-seat European Parliament and other institutions.

In its guidelines, the EU said free exercise of the fundamental right to religious freedom "contributes to democracy, development, rule of law, peace and stability," whereas violations often constituted "early indicators of potential violence and conflicts."

It added that the EU was "impartial and not aligned with any specific religion or belief," but was concerned that religious rights abuses were now widespread and complex "in all parts of the world, including Europe," in violation of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international treaties.

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