

GREAT LAKES - 100430 Churches in the Great Lakes region commit to promoting human rights

Kinshasa, April 30, 2010 (CISA) - Church leaders from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda have made a "firm commitment to work together in promoting human dignity and fundamental human rights". According to Fides

This commitment is one of the main outcomes of a five-day workshop on human rights that took place in the DRC capital city Kinshasa, 13-17 April.

Hosted by the World Council of Churches (WCC) members in the DRC, the workshop was organized by the WCC in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation and the Protestant German aid agency Bread for the World, and was funded by the European Commission.

The participants at the workshop – some 45 heads of churches, leaders of ecumenical organizations, representatives of national and international NGOs and UN agencies – issued a Declaration of Commitment pledging to work together with human rights NGOs and to accompany their respective states "in the fight against corruption, impunity and poverty".

Bishop David Yemba Kekumba, from the United Methodist Church in the DRC, expressed satisfaction about the outcomes. "The workshop went very well", he said, "and participants had very good debates."

Yemba, who is a vice-president of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and chaired the church coordination committee which hosted the workshop, expects it to have a wider beneficial impact on the ecumenical landscape in the DRC.

According to the DRC Minister of Justice and Human Rights Luzolo Bambi, churches should become agents of awareness-raising and education on human rights. In a message read at the workshop by his chief of staff, the minister suggested that by playing such a role, churches can contribute to form true citizens.

"The Congolese people have been suffering for much too long from a series of human rights violations," the WCC general secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit stated in a written message to the workshop. "Despite significant efforts made by the government to improve the promotion and protection of human rights, the situation today, unfortunately, remains serious".

Tveit encouraged the churches in Congo, which are "among the strongest advocates for the promotion and protection of human rights," to continue their struggle in this regard: "We will carry the cross together, working faithfully together for a better future."

"The most remarkable feature of this workshop was the depth of commitment and enthusiasm shown by the heads of churches who attended it," said WCC programme executive for human rights Christina Papazoglou.

"Church leaders were supposed to participate the first two days only and appoint a proxy afterwards, but they decided to stay until the end, engaging in lively, even passionate discussions with every speaker, including those who addressed issues of a more technical nature", Papazoglou added.

"They did not back off from difficult issue either, like violence against women, among others. " As a result, in the Declaration of Commitment issued at the end of the workshop the heads of churches pledged to work in a coordinated manner on human rights issues. "This is a first", highlighted Papazoglou, "and we expect to follow up on this commitment in the coming months."

On the other hand, she said, "constructive synergies between the churches and human rights NGOs can be mutually beneficial, given the NGOs technical expertise and the churches' broad access to the grassroots level. Such cooperation can considerably enhance the promotion and protection of human rights in the region."

The workshop participants requested the support of the organizers to strengthen the capacity of churches with regard to human rights as well as in the areas of education for environmental protection, prevention of HIV and AIDS, advocacy and lobby.

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