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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF;  
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement\* submitted by the Commission of Churches on International Affairs of the  
World Council of Churches, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 January 2003]

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\* / This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

### Civil and Political rights including the question of Religious Intolerance

The Commission of Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) submits since its inception the WCC has expressed concern for the rightful, wholesome growth of freedom of religions, for protection of the life of spirit from oppression and authoritarian abuse. The first assembly of the WCC in its report, Church and the Disorder of Society, Amsterdam 1948 noted:

“Man is created and called to be a free being, responsible to God and his neighbour. Any tendencies in state and society depriving man of the possibility of acting responsibly are denial of God’s intentions for man and his work of salvation. A responsible society is one where freedom is the freedom of man who acknowledges responsibility to justice and public order and where those that hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it”.

The WCC over the years through its member churches in the regions has continued to work towards the fulfillment of the above goal. Despite extensive gains for religious liberty during the past century, recent intensification and ethno-centricism have imperiled and in some cases crushed religious freedom and liberty formerly achieved. The reports received by WCC from its members speak of increasing incidents of religious intolerance and violence resulting in flagrant violations of human rights. Individuals as well as groups have been subjected to persecution, discrimination and indiscriminate killings on grounds of religion, ethnicity and political conviction. The WCC has taken a firm and vigorous stand against such actions and has endeavoured through local and international actions to diffuse tension, promote reconciliation and inter religious harmony.

The Asian region has been the dwelling for major religions of the world, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. For centuries people practising these religions have lived side by side in peace and harmony. That situation now seems to be changing. In the last decade religion has emerged as a significant and sometimes dominant factor in intra state conflicts. It has been manipulated to promote narrow political and nationalist interests and objectives. Religious intolerance has grown almost universally and Asian societies are no exceptions. In this submission we want to draw the attention of the Commission to the growing environment of religious intolerance and violence in Indonesia, India and Pakistan that have claimed many lives. It is undercutting the multi-cultural, multi-religious and pluralistic base of societies in these countries. Intolerance has encouraged a new wave of ideologies that distort and seek to rewrite history and incite communal violence creating walls of separation and hatred between communities. The upsurge of religious extremism and intolerance has left many minority populations virtually defenceless.

a. Indonesia

The CCIA has monitored developments in Indonesia since the downfall of President Suharto in May 1998. Of particular concern are the developments in West Papua, Central and South Sulawesi and the Maluku. The religious violence in the Poso region, Central Sulawesi has intensified since May 2002, around the time the deadline for withdrawal of the armed forces from the region was due to expire. Ten Christian villages were bombed and razed to the ground, 30 people killed, 19 injured, and hundreds displaced and evacuated to safer places. Similar attacks took place in July and on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2002 at Mayumba village where 68 Christian houses were burnt and number of people killed as a result of bomb explosions. The attacks were carried out by Lashkar Jihad who entered the region from Java on the pretext of helping their Muslim co-religionists. The security forces were unable to arrest the perpetrators of these heinous crimes and bring them to justice before courts of law. In the Maluku Island the terror and violence unleashed in 1999 continues and has severely divided and brutalised the local Christian and Muslim communities. The conflict has its roots in local tensions, competing interests and access to resources. However, with the passage of time, it has acquired strong religious overtones. The involvement of Lashkar Jihad has led to an escalation of violence. It has devastated Christian communities throughout the region. In some places entire communities and villages have been wiped out. Horrific crimes like rape, torture and murder have been committed in the name of religion. The death toll is around 10,000 with over 300,000 people displaced. The ongoing violence has created despondency and fear amongst the people, who no longer have confidence in the ability of the Indonesian security forces to restore law and order and to ensure their safety and security. In some cases the security forces are actively involved in fanning the flames of violence in furtherance of their political and economic interests.

b. Pakistan

There has been an increase of religious intolerance and violence in Pakistan during the last year. The victims are religious minorities that include the Ahmadiyas, Hindus and Christians. Most victims belong to poor rural areas where security forces are unwilling and/or unable to take action against Islamic extremists groups responsible for these atrocities. Christian places of worship, hospitals, schools and other institutions have come under wanton attacks of violence and brutality that have resulted in killings of innocent civilians. On 25<sup>th</sup> September 2002 Islamic extremists shot dead seven staff of the Idara-e-Amn-o-Insaf (Committee for Justice and Peace) of the Karachi Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Pakistan. Till date none of the perpetrators of these heinous crimes have been detained and brought before the Courts of Law for trial.

In view of these increasing attacks on the Christian minority the World Council of Churches decided to send a pastoral delegation on a visit to Pakistan on November 2002. The report of the delegation on which these submissions are based is available on request.

The much abused blasphemy laws remain on the Statute Book. Many innocent Christians charged under these laws continue to languish in jails pending trial. Despite repeated

efforts to draw the attention of the government to the plight of victims charged under blasphemy laws no action has been taken to amend even the procedural part of the law to prevent its abuse. According to the recent report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Christians are not the only target of Islamic extremist groups but also Shiite Muslims including a large number of doctors who have lost their lives because of the growing religious violence and hatred in the country.

The government of Pakistan has done little to counter the present trend towards religious intolerance. On the contrary it has continued to pursue policies and practices that discriminate against religious minorities. This is evident from the fact that very few members of the religious minorities have been able to obtain jobs in government services. Even the few who are able to break through this wall of discrimination are victimised. The attention of this Commission is drawn to the case of Mr Mohan Lal Shahani, a Christian, who was appointed a judge of the Sind High Court on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1997. Despite exemplary performance he was not confirmed and his services were dispensed with as of 8<sup>th</sup> January 1998.

c. India

Till a few years ago India was known for its tolerance and secular polity however, in recent times it has witnessed an increase of its own brand of Hindu extremism represented by the Hindutva ideology. The practices and policies of the present government have undermined the country's historical commitment to multi religious, multi cultural, plural society. The violence against Dalits is on the increase. They are not only segregated in all spheres of social life: place of worship, education, housing and land ownership, use of common wells and roads but also subjected to arbitrary executions. Religious violence has also increased against Christians and Muslims. Despite statements by government officials that attacks against Christians, their places of worship, and clergy are isolated incidents it is clear that Hindu extremists are pursuing a clear agenda in the persecution of Christians. Of particular concern is the ongoing campaign of hate and discrimination promoted by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) against minorities and Dalits. The Gujarat carnage left thousands of Muslims dead, brutally killed at the hands of Hindu extremists, thousands more were made destitute and rendered homeless. These inhuman acts and atrocities were carried out with full impunity under the eyes of law enforcement agencies.

The World Council of Churches is deeply disturbed by these developments and has expressed its concern in letters addressed to the governments of Indonesia, Pakistan and India. It calls on this commission to urge the governments of these countries to seek means by which dialogue may be promoted between religious communities and their governments as well as between religious communities themselves.

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