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**CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE**

**Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

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

[30 January 2004]

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

Religious intolerance in specific Middle Eastern States

Serious concerns about the situation of religious minorities in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran

The war in Iraq has had important consequences not just in Iraq itself but elsewhere in the Middle East as well. Alongside positive outcomes there has also been the partial radicalisation of some sections of society in reaction against the so-called "war against terror". In this regard Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker / Society for Threatened Peoples is particularly concerned about the issue of religious freedom for non-Muslim minorities in the following states.

Saudi Arabia

In **Saudi Arabia** there is no freedom of religion for those who do not subscribe to the Wahabi version of Sunni Islam. No criticism of Islam is allowed, apostasy is a serious crime and the public expression of non-Islamic beliefs is illegal. Offences of this nature are punished by the religious police with particular severity.

Christian migrant workers in particular are subject to constantly increasing discrimination, most of all the Asian migrant workers who are not permitted to practice their religion under Sharia-based Saudi law and are subject to arrest, torture, execution, whippings and amputations.

Shiite Muslims, who constitute 7-10 per cent of the population, also face many restrictions on the public practice of their religion. Shiite religious seminaries are not allowed and in recent years numerous Shiite clerics have been arrested and sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment. There have even been executions of Shiites accused of blasphemy.

In this context Society for Threatened Peoples deeply regrets the fact that although the U.S. government has criticised Saudi Arabia in its annual report on the status of religious freedom it has nevertheless failed to include Saudi Arabia on its list of "Countries of Particular Concern" and despite these violations of religious freedom and human rights Saudi Arabia remains one of the USA's major trading partners.

Iraq

Society for Threatened Peoples finds it commendable that the transitional government in **Iraq** has made provision for the inclusion of representatives of most of the minority communities. Even the smaller minority groups such as the Yezidi religious community have been given a voice. Under present circumstances, however, non-Muslim minorities find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position.

Iraq has been and still is, more than any other country, the cradle and refuge of the most disparate of religions. Differences between the two branches of Islam (Sunni and Shiite) have allowed many other historic Middle Eastern sects and schismatic churches to survive. For example Assyrians and Babylonians live side by side with gnostic faiths such as the Mandaean baptist community.

There are some 15,000 Mandaean living in Iraq today. In the postwar period their shops and workshops, including goldsmiths' workshops in particular have been targeted by looters, above all in Baghdad. There have also been reports of acts of violence against Mandaean women in the period since April 2003.

Christians make up 3% of the Iraqi population. Since the war ended they have been regarded as fair targets for persecution: the cathedral of the Chaldean Catholic community in Basra has been occupied and in northern Iraq attacks against Christians have included the planting of bombs in front of Christian schools. In Mosul the mood of hostility is tangible and the traditional respect shown to religious and ethnic groups in the area has been undermined by acts of intimidation and violence. Their faith has made Christians targets for murder, kidnapping and theft of property and in many places Christian women are being forced to conform to Muslim dress codes.

So religious freedom is not being protected in post-war Iraq. It is essential for the new constitution to guarantee the internationally agreed basic right of all persons to freedom of religious worship and for non-Muslim minority religions to be provided with special protection by the international community.

Iran

99% of the population of **Iran** are Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

The country's largest non-Muslim minority are the Baha'i, with approximately 300,000 adherents. They have almost no rights in law and in their daily lives they face official discrimination, denial of property rights, denial of access to university education, restrictions on employment and prohibitions on the practice and study of their faith.

Baha'i marriages are not recognised in law, hence wives are accused of prostitution and the children of Baha'i couples are considered illegitimate and deprived of all rights of inheritance.

In addition to social discrimination the Baha'i in Iran have endured more than 20 years of the harshest repression on account of their faith. Since 1979 hundreds have been murdered. The constitution in fact grants Jews and Christians recognition as religious minorities and allows them generally to practise their faith without outside interference. However they are not allowed to take part in the election of representative bodies, they may not hold military office and they are subject to restrictions with regard to work, education and property rights.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Commission on Human Rights

- to condemn the religious violence directed at non-Muslim minorities in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran,

- to urge the transitional government in Iraq and the international community to provide non-Mulsim minority reigions with special protection,
- to call on the Saudi Arabian government to stop arrest, torture, execution, whippings and amputations of Chritian migrants and to grant religious freedom to Shiite Muslims,
- to urge the Iran government to end the social discrimination and harsh repression of the Baha'i on account of their faith.
