NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Where Egypt and D.C. intersect; persecution in India; and a note of thanks

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 25, 2013 All Things Catholic

I rarely dip into the political scene in Washington, partly because it's depressing and partly because many others cover it well. I'm making an exception this week because of D.C.'s connection to a drama unfolding in Egypt.

Egypt is one of the front lines in what I've come to call the "global war on Christians," meaning mounting anti-Christian violence in various corners of the world.

The latest symbol is Nadia Mohamed Ali and her seven children, all of whom have been sentenced to 15 years in prison by a court in Beni Suef, a city of 200,000 people located 75 miles south of Cairo. Technically, the charge is falsifying identity documents, but in reality, their crime is converting to Christianity.

Ali was raised a Christian, but converted to Islam in order to marry. When her husband died in 2004, she decided to return to her faith and urged her children to do the same. She and her children wanted to revert to Christian names and attempted to have them changed along with their religious affiliation on their registration documents. Public registry offices, however, typically make switching from Islam to Christianity cumbersome, though moving in the other direction is encouraged. In the end, a few sympathetic officials made the switch for Ali and her family, leading to the falsification charge.

Those officials, by the way, were also sentenced to five years in prison.

Here's what that has to do with Washington: Two members of Congress, Virginia Republican Frank Wolf and California Democrat Anna Eshoo, have introduced a bill to create a special envoy in the State Department to advocate for religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia (H.R. 301 [1]). The idea is that this official could mobilize the government to help victims such as Ali and to raise public awareness. The sponsors cite envoy positions created for Sudan and North Korea as precedents.

The tandem of Wolf and Eshoo demonstrates how concern for the global war on Christians cuts across the usual divides.

Wolf is a strong pro-lifer, given a 100 percent score by the National Right to Life Committee; Eshoo is pro-choice, rated 100 percent by the National Abortion Rights Action League. Wolf voted for the Defense of Marriage Act while Eshoo, a major gay rights supporter, opposed it. Wolf, a Presbyterian, has backed the U.S. bishops in opposition to contraception mandates as part of health care reform, and co-sponsored the "Respect for Rights of Conscience Act." Eshoo, a Chaldean Catholic who once worked at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, Calif., supports the mandates. It's not her first time jousting with the bishops. In 2004, she signed a letter from 48 Catholics in Congress complaining about withholding communion from pro-choice politicians.

I could go on, but you get the picture: In many ways, this is a political odd couple.

Yet on defending Christians at risk, they're in lockstep. Wolf has long been a leader on religious freedom,

recently sending a letter to 300 Protestant and Catholic leaders pleading with them to become more outspoken "on behalf of the persecuted church around the world." Eshoo is the only member of Congress of Assyrian descent and is co-founder of its "Religious Minorities in the Middle East" caucus. She's authored an amendment to the Foreign Relations Act insisting that "special attention should be paid to the welfare of Chaldo-Assyrians and other indigenous Christians in Iraq."

The list of co-sponsors during the last session reads like something a political science grad student might doodle as a lark, along the lines of "Which members of Congress could you never imagine agreeing on anything?" The group included 44 Republicans and 36 Democrats. They ranged from tea party darlings such as Tim Huelskamp of Kansas to lefties consistently rated among the "Top Ten" most liberal members of the chamber, such as Jan Schakowsky of Illinois and Jim McDermott of Washington.

Such a heterogeneous bunch suggests that defending Christians at risk has the potential to become a transcendent cause, like the defense of persecuted Soviet Jews or South African victims of apartheid in different eras. We're talking about a wave of violence that, according to one estimate, has left 11 Christians dead every hour throughout all of the last decade. This isn't a left-wing or right-wing issue, but as Aid to the Church in Need puts it, "a human rights disaster of epic proportions."

By the way, the fact that a Presbyterian and a Catholic are leading the charge also demonstrates the ecumenical potential of the issue. It's why the Vatican's leading ecumenical official, Cardinal Kurt Koch, believes that an "ecumenism of the martyrs" is the future of the push for Christian unity.

The Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops supported the Wolf/Eshoo bill the last time around, and is expected to do so again.

The bill easily passed the House during the last session, but was blocked in the Senate because of what Wolf says was opposition from State Department officials and Foreign Relations Committee chair John Kerry, now in line to become Secretary of State. Observers better versed in the intricacies of Washington than I am believe the same thing could happen again. (According to GovTrack.us [1], the bill has a 26 percent chance of getting past committee and only 7 percent of being enacted.)

Frankly, I'm not enough of a policy wonk to know whether creating a new envoy position is the best way to go, or whether existing resources could be better utilized. The skeptic in me knows that creating a new bureaucratic cubbyhole isn't likely to change the world, but the realist says it may beat the alternative, which is likely doing nothing.

I can at least make one observation with certainty: The Wolf/Eshoo bill creates the opportunity for a serious national debate about how the United States can play a more active role in addressing the global war on Christians, and it deserves all the political and media traction it can get.

* * *

Speaking of the global war on Christians, the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) this week issued its " Persecution Watch Yearly Report [2]." It catalogs anti-Christian violence and intimidation in India, for the most part fueled by Hindu radicalism. Their report focuses on evangelicals and Pentecostals and is thus not necessarily a comprehensive overview of the situation for all Christians.

EFI once again expressed alarm over "uninterrupted and increasing hostility against the Christian minority community." For 2012, the group recorded 131 acts of violence against Christians -- one attack every 2.7 days. Incidents included intimidation, harassment, false accusation, arrests and detention, vandalism and assault on churches, and direct physical attacks on individual believers.

The report also notes that many acts of violence and intimidation go unreported, so 131 is almost certainly not a complete total.

Here's a small piece of the big picture. In a village called Deopani in the state of Assam in June, Hindu extremists demolished three houses belonging to evangelical Christians named Bhageswarn Rabha, Rana Rabha and Motiram Rabha, as well as their place of worship. The attackers also cut down their vegetation and looted their grains while stealing their cattle and poultry. The Christians fled the area in fear.

In those cases when local police do step in, charges often are filed not against the radicals who instigated the violence, but rather against the Christians for allegedly engaging in proselytism.

Just to provide a sense of the daily drumbeat, here's the rundown in the EFI report for the month of November alone:

- On Nov. 1 in Pitlam, Nizamabad, Hindu extremists accused an evangelical Christian named Elish of forceful conversion while he was distributing Gospel tracts.
- On Nov. 7 in Ujjain, police arrested Pastor R.K. Badodiya after Hindu extremists from the Bajrang Dal who were shouting anti-Christian slogans barged into a prayer meeting Badodiya was leading, beat up the Christians gathered in the church, and accused Badodiya of forceful conversion.
- On Nov. 12, Hindu extremists beat up Pastor Abraham Koshy from the Indian Pentecostal Church, burned up Bibles kept in the church, and damaged its door and windows.
- On Nov. 20 in Chippagiri, Yellapura Taluk, extremists demolished the Blessing Youth Mission Church.
- On Nov. 23 in Kammadahalli, Hindu extremists accused Pastor Girish of forceful conversion, disrupted the dedication of a new prayer hall and installed a statue of a Hindu deity inside the hall.
- On Nov. 25 in Chindwada, extremists beat up Pastors Rajkumar and Nanaswor and accused them of forceful conversion.
- On Nov. 27 in Huzurabad, police arrested an evangelical Christian named Abraham after Hindu extremists shouted accusations of rape while he was distributing Gospel tracts.
- On Nov. 30 in Machewa village, Mahasamund, Hindu extremists attack four Christians, accusing them of forceful conversion and of arranging intercaste marriage for three newly converted girls from the Sahu community.
- Also on Nov. 30 in Boothpada, Ratlam, extremists assaulted Pastors Govind Meida and Sharad Pargi, seriously injuring the latter.

That's nine attacks in 30 days, right in line with the statistical average for the year. Perhaps if the special envoy position floated by Wolf and Eshoo gets off the ground, whoever lands it ought to take a hard look at India, too.

* * *

I've been away a couple of weeks, a stretch that brought a writing trip to Key West, Fla., completion of the manuscript for my forthcoming book on the global war on Christians, my 48th birthday, and the long-delayed return of the NHL season. As motives for gratitude go, I've therefore had a few.

There's one more I want to mention here. After I noted a couple weeks ago that we had lost my 98-year-old grandma, I received scores of emails, notes, calls and cards from "All Things Catholic" readers, most of which I

didn't have time to answer directly. Let me just say here how moving, and consoling, your response was for me and my family. We'll be forever grateful.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is **jallen@ncronline.org [3]**.]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/21/2015 - 06:53*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/where-egypt-and-dc-intersect-persecution-india-and-note-thanks

Links:
[1] http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hr301
[2] http://www.lapidomedia.com/sites/default/files/downloads/EFI-PersecutionWatchYrlyReport2012.pdf
[3] mailto:jallen@ncronline.org