

A Statement by the AIDLR Secretary General on Abuse of Power and Violence - and its consequences on racism and religious persecution -

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Since its inception in 1946, the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty (AIDLR) has stood up for human rights, freedom of conscience, and religious liberty for all people. The AIDLR assumed the task of gathering all international actors – such as religious leaders, politicians, diplomats, academia, civil society and others – to fight against the intolerance, hate, discrimination and fanaticism that may affects any citizen of the world and especially the vulnerable people.

The idea behind a human rights approach is to protect every single person independently of his or her “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”, recognizing that they have equal and inalienable rights; acknowledging this protection is not a privilege given by a state, but based on inherent human dignity, and on the need to promote his or her development free from fear and want. From the beginning of life to the end, all human beings, of all ethnicities, colors, religions, beliefs, and ages, are sacred beings that God loves. No race and no religion or belief must be regarded with a sense of superiority, because all people are created equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

The AIDLR Secretary-General condemns the cruelty of the American law-enforcement officer and his colleagues who did not intervene to the desperate call, “I can't breathe” of the black American citizen, George Floyd, and for ultimately causing his death. The AIDLR condemns the abuse of power and violence, either expressed as superiority and racism, or the rejection of pluralism and the imposition of uniformity that culminates in religious persecution. Racism and religious persecution are tenets built for tyranny, not for freedom. The AIDLR Secretary-General is concerned by the possible consequences that these crimes may generate, and wishes to speak up against the people who vandalize, hurt and riot, provoke street violence, destroy property and commit robbery; likewise, the AIDLR is also opposed to all those, who by manipulation, populism, hate speech and fake news, affect the dignity, life and peace of people and society. At the same time, the AIDLR expresses its appreciation for the defenders of law, order and life, human rights defenders, religious leaders and journalists, that fulfill their mission in a human, honest and responsible manner.

The AIDLR is also concerned that for reasons of fear, crises, pandemics, terrorism and political agenda, ‘national security’, ‘state of emergency laws’, and other laws, could be used in an abusive manner against *scapegoats*, “as a limiter for fundamental freedoms, or used as a multipurpose tool” (e.g. by surveillance, affecting the right to life, intimacy, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, religious liberty, freedom of expression, freedom of press). Often, the scapegoats are identified as dissidents and unpopular ethnic, racial, and religious minorities which come under national and global suspicion, prosecution, and false accusation.

In these troubled times, the AIDLR wishes to express its concern to the world of the risk of forgetting two keys lessons of history: (1) on the need for respect, and acceptance of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity as a solution against any abuse and persecution, and (2) to stand for the separation of church and state. Reflecting on the lesson of American history described below, the AIDLR Secretary-General warns the United States and the international community to take a stand against totalitarianism, in the form of promoting racial superiority and/or imposition of religious uniformity. The 17th Century religious intolerance - that caused the migration from Europe to the United States - was born from “the conviction that uniformity of

religion must exist in any given society in the interest of saving the souls of all citizens, and it rested on the belief that there was one true religion and that it was the duty of the civil authorities to impose it, forcibly if necessary”, and that “nonconformists could expect no mercy and might be executed as heretics, and meant majority religious groups who controlled political power punished dissenters in their midst. In some areas Catholics persecuted Protestants, in others Protestants persecuted Catholics and in still others Catholics and Protestants persecuted wayward coreligionists”¹. We cannot erase or ignore the historical record of severe abuses of religious freedom and freedom of conscience that took place when the Church was allied with the State, and when the “civil authorities” imposed a ‘common religion or belief’ as a result of the union of Church and State. The understanding of religious freedom is strongly based on the concept of Church-State separation, and the AIDLR opposes any law, policy or activity which discriminates against ethnic and religious minorities, and warns on the great danger of the union of Church and State which will result in widespread religious oppression, persecution and death against those who do not accept religious uniformity.

In periods of dictatorship, terrorism as well as instability, social tensions, conflicts, disasters, and epidemics, looking for scapegoats is historically common. The communist dictatorship, the rise of authoritarianism even in democratic countries, targeting vulnerable groups and a pushback against human rights can provide a *pretext* to adopt repressive measures. Not to repeat the history of horrors, it is imperative that we never forget the killing of Christians in Rome under Emperor Nero; “the infamous Inquisition and its tortures and persecution” against “heretics” Jews, Muslims, Waldensians, Protestants²; the crimes against Huguenots during the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in Paris; Stalin’s gulags; Hitler’s Holocaust and the Nazi-German annihilation of European Jewry; genocides and mass killing events in Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, Burundi; the atrocities in Syria against Yazidis; in Myanmar against the Rohingya; the killing of Muslims during their worship in the Christchurch mosque; the terrorist attacks at Easter in Sri Lanka when Catholics and other Christians lost their life, and there are many other instances; they were all killed for the sole ‘crime’ of being *different* in terms of race, religion or ideology. “For hundreds of millions around the globe, who suffer religious persecution and violence, simply because they look or believe differently, dictators, extremists, and governments, persecute, imprison and kill people of faith on a daily basis”, stated human rights advocate, Tina Ramirez. Reflecting on the racism issue, Wintley Phipps cries out his pain, the pain of millions of people: “With the weight of oppression upon their backs they cry, “I can’t breathe.” The knee on the neck also illustrates the establishment’s response to a people’s cry for help. Instead of comfort and relief, the cries are met with tactics designed to quell and silence resistance to the status quo”. And Phipps warns humanity: “The knee on the neck is also a macabre, *prescient warning of a future* many are resolved they must act swiftly to avoid [my emphasis]”. What can we do to avoid that ‘future’? Let’s start by raising our voices against hatred, hate speech, physical and emotional abuse, and by refusing to remain neutral!

The AIDLR Secretary General strongly condemns injustice, the misuse of authority and abuse of power, harassment, violence, systemic racism, religious and racial discrimination and persecution against the vulnerable, such as women and children, refugees, migrants, religious minorities and all in need, everywhere. The AIDLR believes that people should never have to live in fear of going out in public just because of the color of their skin, their ethnicity, or their religion or belief.

The Secretary General of the AIDLR strongly disapproves too the hypocrisy and double standards manifested by some political and religious leaders that generate lack of trust,

¹ Religion and the Founding of the American Republic, America as a Religious Refuge: The Seventeenth Century, Part 1, in <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>

² <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/inquisition>

indignation, criticism, and public disapproval in those they represent. Some leaders pursue a policy of neutrality that can sometimes be a proxy for a policy of non-commitment towards, and non-recognition of the ‘issue’; other leaders use the ‘tension’ to promote their agenda that has much to do with consolidating political or religious power inside their circle, marginalizing, prejudicing, discriminating or “attacking in direct or in more concealed or indirect forms” those who disagree with or bother them. The AIDLR asks citizens from all over the world to speak out against neutrality in the face of injustice and hatred, and to make a difference for those who are marginalized and betrayed by others. To find peaceful solutions for the evil of society, the AIDLR asks all actors – especially politicians and religious leaders - to identify and facilitate opportunities to mitigate tensions; and all places of worship, religious and civil society organizations must provide a forum for the voices of the victims that suffer harassment, discrimination, hatred, racism and religious persecution, because we want to live in peace and harmony together.

The AIDLR Secretary-General strongly believes the sentiments of Desmond Tutu who said: “If you are *neutral* in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” The AIDLR urges governments towards the fair and equal treatment of all people and to heal our broken communities with the empathy, love and compassion of Jesus, because, as Martin Luther King stated, “hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that”. “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love,” added Nelson Mandela.

Yes, every person matters!

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Secretary General