



ISHR NEWSLETTER

November 2018

IMPORTANT DATES

09 November

Anniversary of the fall
of the Berlin Wall

15 November

Day of the Imprisoned
Writer (PEN Int.)

16 November

International Day of
Tolerance

25 November

Int. Day for the
Elimination of Violence
against Women

CONTENTS

From the President	1
Mourning the death of human rights defender Sheikh Lewis.....	1
From the Sections	1
ISHR Albania / ISHR Germany	
<i>Combatting staggering poverty, corruption, and blood feuding</i>	1
ISHR Colombia	
<i>Venezuelans in crisis need help on both sides of the border</i>	2
ISHR Iraq	
<i>Conference with EU-MEPs on Iraqi minorities, discussing ISIS crimes with ICC Prosecutor in Nuremberg</i>	3
ISHR Spain	
<i>Start of 2nd annual Christmas Solidarity Food Bank campaign</i>	4
Current Developments	5
Pakistan	
<i>Perspective from Pakistan on Asia Bibi's acquittal</i>	3
ISHR Events	6
ISHR Georgia, Germany and Moldova represented at 'We Change' Conference in Berlin.....	6

MOURNING LOSS, CELEBRATING LIFE

In this issue, the ISHR community honors the life and contributions of late ISHR section leader and human rights defender Sheikh Lewis. While we mourn this loss, we celebrate the ISHR's thriving community who continue to strive for human rights in their home countries as Mr. Lewis did in his, such as our ISHR sections featured this month in Albania, Colombia, Iraq, Spain, and our partner in Pakistan.

"One person can make a difference, and everyone should try."
- John F. Kennedy



Venezuelan refugees sleeping on the streets of Cúcuta, Colombia. July 2018.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Mourning the death of human rights defender Sheikh Lewis



Professors Christine (l) and Thomas Schirrmacher (mid.) with Sheikh Lewis (r.)

We mourn the death of Sheikh Lewis, the President of the Gambian section of the ISHR. Our last photo shows Sheikh Lewis in front of the house in which Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn, when he visited us in Germany, as he had often done over the years. He helped political prisoners as a sharia court judge and peace moderator, and fought for the rights of women and children. As an influential Muslim in his country, he spoke out against preachers from Arab countries who favored a violent form of Islam, and he helped minors who were forced by such preachers to beg for money to escape and to return to their families, and provided refuge to those who could not in a large orphanage; at one point, it housed 258 children.

Lamin Fatty of the Child Protection Alliance paid this tribute to Skeikh Lewis in Gambia News Online: “An icon of human rights

has retired to eternal rest. We have lost a father, uncle, grandpa, mentor and a human rights giant. Mr. Lewis was a tireless advocate for inalienable rights of all people and for equality. He was brilliant, deeply principled, courageous and kind. His sickness silenced him and stole him from the bravest of the brave men this country has ever produced. Mr. Sheikh Lewis’s courage, willingness and determination has not only mentored many but confronted evil, defended the vulnerable and lived on ideal democracy and constitutional principles which made him a true icon of human rights. May his gentle soul rest in eternal peace”(<https://www.gambianewsonline.com/former-gambia-boxing-assoc-prexy-dies/>).

I asked Dr. Emmanuel Franklyne Ogbunwezeh, our advisor for affairs in Sub-Saharan Africa, who met Mr. Lewis frequently in our headquarters in Frankfurt, to share a few words in remembrance of Sheikh Lewis:

Eulogy by Dr. Emmanuel F. Ogbunwezeh, ISHR Regional Advisor for Sub-Saharan Africa

Regrettably, the head of the Gambian Section of the ISHR, Mr. Sheik Lewis, passed away in September.

Mr. Lewis was many things to many people. He was a dogged fighter for what he believed in. He brought this persistence to every aspect of his fight for human rights in Africa and in The Gambia in particular. Through projects in helping the children and youth of The Gambia, including his struggle to end the exploitation of children as street beggars by fundamentalist Islamic clerics, Mr. Lewis was tenacious in his determination to see change come. He is not a man to wait for others to do something. He went in himself to do all he deemed necessary, to attain his goals of human rights for all.

Many of his admirers in The Gambia viewed him as a kind personality, whose hatred of injustice kept him at odds with the authorities. He enriched our work in The Gambia as an advocate for the oppressed, and as a man, in whose gentle heart beats warmth of inclusion and respect for human rights.

Good night Mr. Lewis, you will be missed by the human rights community.

FROM THE SECTIONS

ISHR Albania / ISHR Germany

Combating staggering poverty, corruption, and blood feuding

The following is an excerpt from Katrin Bornmüller’s report about her visit to Albania in September. She describes the level of poverty she witnessed, as well as the activities of ISHR Albania and its President, Dr. Margarita Kola, in combatting corruption in the court system and in helping families affected by blood feuding, which is a deeply entrenched tradition ruining many lives in modern Albania.



A Roma girl of 13 with her baby in the shed in which 10 other people live.

The poverty of many people is terrifying. On the one hand, you can see expensive cars like Mercedes being driven around Tirana, and on the other hand, there are incredibly poor people searching through the dumpsters. More staggering still were the visits to Roma families, such as one family of twelve living in a single shed with no income, and a daughter of 13, who was already married with a baby (photo left). These families receive only 20€ from the government monthly.

Meanwhile, Dr. Kola has defended four clients in different courts, even in the face of judges who are frequently bribed to decide in favor of the delinquent party. She handles cases that nobody else dares to attempt, so the phone rings all day and into the night, and on weekends. She recently won a sensational trial that will go down in international law in her name. Dr. Kola was delighted that one of

her biggest enemies among the judges was forced to step down due to corruption charges.

We also visited families affected by the deadly tradition of blood feuding, in which if a man kills someone from another family, the family of the victim is obliged to kill a male over 18 belonging to the perpetrating family. A teacher, Liliana Luani, who has been caring for a mother and her 17 year old son who have been trapped in hiding in pitiful conditions for five years, due to the murder in a blood feud committed by her husband. Despite the fact that he completed his prison sentence, this punishment is not recognized in the context of a blood feud; therefore, he and their two sons over 18 were forced to flee to the mountains.

Liliana wrote a book on her investigation into blood feud victims in the regions of Tirana, Durres, Lezha, Skodra, Kukes, and Dibres, which affected 596 families. Unfortunately, now even women and children are killed in the feuds. Liliana created a campaign to ask companies to offer seminars for the victims, who are then brought there under police protection in skills such as cooking, sewing, and literacy. It is very shameful of the states in Europe that send Albanian refugees back to the country, out of ignorance of the gravity of the situation. In one case in Sweden, the young man was murdered upon being deported to Albania. Similarly, a refugee in France was deported and immediately had to take refuge in the mountains.



A group photo from the visit to Albania.

*Katrin Bornmüller, Deputy Chairwoman of the Board, ISHR Germany
President of ISHR Working-Group Wittlich*

ISHR Colombia

Venezuelans in crisis need help on both sides of the border

Silvia Osorio, President of ISHR Colombia, Cristian Rare, from New Generation Colombia, and Haydee Marin, Vice President of the ISHR Latin America Committee visited Cucuta, Colombia on the border with Táchira, Venezuela on October 12, 2018.

They visited the Colombian - Venezuelan border to speak with representatives of Venezuelan churches and civil society, and to evaluate the pressing needs of Venezuelan citizens who are fleeing Venezuela, and of the Venezuelans who remain in their home country.

A major problem on the border relates to the fact that people fleeing Venezuela only have the need to flee from misery and oppression on their minds, without a strategy to follow afterwards. You see men and women who come walking through the Colombian customs without knowing where go or what to do in exile. They're carrying a bag with their only belongings. You see women with their children without knowing where to go, looking for a helping hand.



Photo taken of Venezuelan migrants crossing the border into Colombia during ISHR Colombia's visit to Cúcuta

Colombian Catholic Churches and Protestants have turned up to help the refugees, but they can't keep up with their needs, as there are simply too many in need.

Venezuelans who possess passports can go to other countries, but those who do not have documents seek to cross borders by going through the mountains, looking to go to Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil by walking for days; many die from the cold in the mountains of Colombia. The Colombian authorities calculated that approximately 30.000 Venezuelans cross the border daily via the Simon Bolivar Bridge, which connects San Antonio de Tachira, Venezuela with the city of Cúcuta, Colombia, the majority of whom remain in Colombia.

The streets of Cúcuta are full of Venezuelans who travel around looking for work; in the evenings, you see thousands of people sleeping in the streets. In the parks and public spaces, it is very painful to see Venezuelan girls between twelve and fourteen years-old working as prostitutes. The news on the TV and newspapers is nothing compared to reality.

There is a humanitarian crisis inside Venezuela: No medicine, hungry children, no clothes, no shoes. School teachers are not able to get pencils and notebooks so the children can write. We managed to talk to several teachers who told us about the daily problems they experience, in order to help the students. Children do not have anything to eat at home and come hungry to school. The teachers look for people who can donate bread or fruit so that the children can eat something during the day.

International organizations are not allowed to donate to Venezuelan civil society, because the government of Nicolas Maduro does not admit wrongdoing and to accept help would prove otherwise. However, through friends, we managed to send 5000 books on alphabetization and mathematics, which were donated to ISHR Colombia, although they entered clandestinely. We are currently collecting children's clothing and school supplies to send to Venezuela.

*Haydee Marin, Vice President of the ISHR International Council
Coordinator of the ISHR Latin America Committee*

ISHR Iraq

Conference with EU-MEPs on Iraqi minorities, discussing ISIS crimes with ICC Prosecutor in Nuremberg

On October 3, Krmanj Othman, Director of ISHR Iraq, was invited by the German General Consulate in Kurdistan in Erbil on the occasion of German Unity Day. The following day, he performed a 55-minute interview on-air with well-known local radio station in northern Iraq (Kurdistan), Rudaw Radio, regarding Baha'is rights as a minority in the MENA region in general and in Yemen in particular. A second interview with the same station took place on October 16, this time on the topic of mass graves that were created by IS after massacring minorities on the Nineveh Plains.

In mid-October, the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) in collaboration with the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group of the European Parliament hosted a conference on "Minorities and Religious Diversity in Kurdistan and Iraq" from the 12-13. Professor Josef Weidenholzer, Vice President of the S&D group of the European Parliament, and Dr. Jaafar Eminki, Deputy Secretary of Kurdistan's Parliament were present at the conference, as well as AUK President, Ambassador John Menzies, who opened the event. He described Duhok as the most stable city in the Middle East and praised the willingness of the small native population of the Dohuk (aka Duhok) region to take in refugees.

The event was also attended by members of parliament and representatives of minority groups, including Christians, Ezidis (aka Yazidis or Yezidis), Mandeans and others. Deputy Secretary of Kurdistan's Parliament, Dr. Jaafar Eminki stated: "This is a very important topic to discuss. The subject of minorities is always an essential topic in Kurdistan Parliament and Government. In this region, the people decided on co-existence! There is no majority and minority anymore".

On October 13th, five panels took place throughout the day and over 150 guests were present. The panels discussed the religious diversity of Iraq and the future of religious minorities in the region under the shade of history. During the Christian minorities in Iraq panel, the political pressure and persecution of Iraqi Christians living in cities who were forced to abandon their native language for Arabic. “Nevertheless, they still do believe they are Arabs and have, therefore, kept their mother tongue Syriac as the main language of their religious rituals,” said Archimandrite Emanuel Youkhana of CAPNI, who was one of the panelists.



K. Al-Rasho, ISHR Germany (r.) with ICC Prosecutor, F. Bensouda (l.) at the Forum

One of the panels, titled “Ezidi after the Ferman” (note of the editor: ‘Ferman’ is a term used by Ezidis that means ‘extermination’), included Former Ezidi-Iraqi Member of Parliament Vian Dakhil, who highlighted the last genocidal massacre against Ezidi people by the Islamic State in 2014. She stated that “We are in continuous contact with the Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government to ensure the wellbeing of the Ezidi people in the conflict areas” during the panel. The final primary topic revolved around the questions if and how Europe can support religious freedom, tolerance and reconstruction in Iraq, and how Iraq can cooperate.

From October 19-20, Mr. Othman (Director, ISHR Iraq) and Mr. Al-Rasho (Director of Humanitarian Aid to Iraq, ISHR Germany) represented the ISHR at ‘Nuremberg Forum 2018’, an international conference organized by the Nuremberg Principles Academy in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Rome statute, which was the treaty which created the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague during a convention in Rome on July 17, 1998. The conference included different panels with experts in international law that took place within the historical court room 600 in Nuremberg, Germany. The conference provided the opportunity to discuss IS crimes in Iraq and the genocide case against Christian and Yazidis, including with ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda (see photo above) and arrange a potential meeting with her office in The Hague.

On the day after the Forum, Mr. Othman and Mr. Al-Rasho, conducted a meeting with the ‘Yezidische Gemeinde Offenbach am Main’ (Yazidi/Ezidi Community Offenbach) regarding the legal steps of genocide documentation and recognition. Around 25 local members participated (see photo right).



K. Al-Rasho (top left) and K. Othman (3rd from right, top row) with members of the ‘Yazidi Community Offenbach’

*Krmanj Othman
Director, ISHR Iraq*

ISHR Spain



Start of 2nd annual Christmas Solidarity Food Bank campaign

2018 is the second year of the Christmas Solidarity (Food Bank) campaign, organized by the Associacio de Joves Gitanos de Gràcia with the support of ISHR Spain in collaboration with Unió de Botigues de Gràcia Casc Antic. This year we have the support of a very special friend José Edmilson, a former football player of the Barcelona team (FC Barça) and his foundation, called the Edmilson Foundation.

BTBE TV was with us today to promote the campaign in the media and to record a publicity campaign in which Edmilson is the protagonist. Also part of this campaign is Radio Gracia, with whom we launched the activities, which will begin on November 15.

At each shop of Travesera de Gracia, Barcelona, a container will be placed in which food from donors can be collected. The campaign will continue until December 15, on which Associacio de Joves Gitanos de Gracia will organize the final collection of food and a series of creative activities for adults and children.

The purpose of this campaign is to awaken a sense of solidarity and compassion for the people in need in the neighborhood of Gràcia, which due to difficult economic social conditions cannot celebrate Christmas lunch with their families. If you want to make a child smile for the Christmas, join the Nadal Solidari 2018. Organize your friends, neighborhood, or your workplace and contact us.



Members of ISHR Spain and Associacio de Joves Gitanos de Gracia holding the campaign posters

Enerida Isuf
President, ISHR Spain

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Pakistan

Background to the case of Aasia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman recently acquitted of blasphemy

Michaela Koller, the advisor on religious freedom at ISHR Germany, provided the following overview of the now world-famous case:



Asia Noreen, also known as Asia Bibi.

After the spectacular acquittal of the Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi from the charge of blasphemy, not much has changed for her. Appeals for her murder, nationwide protests and a subsequent government agreement with Islamists on dispute settlement are currently preventing them from finding shelter abroad. Not even her family was able to see her during the first week after the acquittal, because she could not leave prison. Her husband, Ashiq Masih, said on November 5 in a phone conversation with ISHR Germany: "I have not been able to meet my wife yet, and not only because the streets are blocked by the protests. Since my face is known by the media, it remains dangerous for me to travel in the country." Like Asia herself, her family and all who stand in the way of her execution also stand in the crosshairs of violent Islamic extremists and are forced into hiding.

Asia Bibi has been behind bars since June 2009, and was sentenced to death in November 2010. The allegations of blasphemy arose while she was working in Sheikhpura (Punjab province). Working as a, she had brought drinking water for herself and the other field workers. After she drank from the cup, another worker who observed this complained, because the Muslims in the field could no longer drink from the cup; it had become 'impure' because Asia was a Christian. A dispute broke out, as a result of which she was accused of insulting the prophet Muhammad. According to Pakistani criminal law, this crime is worthy of death. However, the judges who gave the most recent verdict did not find any evidence of the charges.

Perspective from Pakistan: Aneeqa Anthony, lawyer and president of The Voice Society, and a partner of ISHR who defends the rights of women and minorities in Pakistan, explains the consequences of the case.

The government of Pakistan recently gave in to the demands of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and other radical Islamic organizations that created an alliance to oppose the acquittal verdict of Aasia Bibi, in order to end the mass protests instigated by the alliance. The government agreed not to oppose a review petition filed against the Supreme Court's judgment in Bibi's case, to release everyone detained in connection with the protests, and to take legal action regarding deaths that may have occurred during the protests. With millions of followers all over Pakistan, the power of the TLP also seems to exceed that of the government, demonstrated by the fact the government is apparently bending to the will of the radicals, the numbers of which are growing fast.

The Christians and all other minorities living in Pakistan had high hopes that the new president, Imran Khan (IK), would uphold his word and would deal with the fundamentalists with iron hands, because the members of his party (PTI) are highly educated, and could understand the situation that was created for Aasia and all other Christians/minorities in blasphemy cases. On October 31, right after the riots began, IK made a speech in which he called on everyone to remain calm, and stated that the Supreme Court has issued its verdict and the government supports it, as it is not illegal. But, two days later, they signed an agreement, leaving Christians as hopeless and helpless as always. It feels horrible to know that your home is not safe for you and your homeland does not belong to you.

Not only did her family suffer tremendously due to all the havoc that was created against Aasia, but the whole Christian community suffered as well. People living in Christian areas could not leave their homes, especially after the attempt of protesters to attack the Christian colony of Bahar, which has about 70-80,000 inhabitants. People were very scared, although the attack failed due to the intervention of police. In retribution, extremists burned many police vehicles and tortured police officials.

In my opinion, the deal will never go into effect, because the Supreme Court will not review its verdict; they have already studied each aspect of this case and haven't found any concrete evidence of Aasia's guilt. It is likely that the government is buying time to arrange for her to leave Pakistan. Her case was so high-profile that many countries are prepared to offer her asylum. As soon as the paperwork is completed, she and her family will leave the country.

However, what about the other Christian people who are suffering in jails under the same allegations as Aasia was? In Aasia's case, almost every major embassy in Pakistan aided her case and her family financially and morally. While it is good that Aasia represented the persecuted minorities of Pakistan, no embassy ever supported any other victim of blasphemy laws or supported them with a single penny, in spite of knowing that these families are at risk and can be killed at any time.

The agreement will never affect her departure but it would create more problems for the other blasphemy victims in Pakistan who are stuck in jails. Does anyone care about the people whose cases are not famous internationally but yet are still as dangerous as Aasia Bibi's? After all, the punishment of blasphemy is the same for everyone - death. Will they ever get any help? Or will they die because they are not famous?



Aasia Bibi's daughter Eisham shedding tears at conference in 2015.

Source: HazteOir.org. CC BY-SA 2.0

*Aneeqa Anthony
President of 'The Voice Society'*

ISHR EVENTS

ISHR Georgia, Germany & Moldova represented at 'We Change' Conference in Berlin



Maya Robinson (r.) presenting Human Rights Online at the conference in Berlin

At the end of October and beginning of November, 'WeChange', the Berlin-based online platform for civil society organizations held a conference for the people and organizations working together from Germany, the six Eastern Partnership countries, and Russia. Representatives from ISHR Georgia, ISHR Germany, and ISHR Moldova represented the International Society for Human Rights and the joint blog platform 'Human Rights Online' at the regional networking event.

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