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HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION CONCLUDES DEBATE ON RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

It Begins Discussion of Effects of Scientific and Technological Developments on Human Rights

The Commission on Human Rights, at its extended afternoon meeting today, concluded discussion on the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

The Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1981, and the Commission included the topic in its agenda at the request of the Assembly which requested it to consider which measures might be necessary to implement the Declaration. The Commission was also asked to consider ways and means of encouraging understanding, tolerance and respect for matters relating to freedom of religion or belief.

The Commission began debate of the topic this morning. For its discussion, it had before it a draft resolution (document E/CN.4/1983/L.68) which would have the Commission request its Sub-Commission on the prevention of discrimination to undertake a comprehensive and thorough study of the current dimensions of the problems of religious intolerance.

Speakers in the concluding debate were Ireland, Fiji, United States, Togo, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Libya, Switzerland, Peru, Denmark and Guatemala.

The representatives of the Holy See and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also spoke.

Statements were made by the representatives of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, Christian Democratic World Union, World Jewish Congress, Pax Christi, Baha'i International Community, and Pax Romana.

Also at the meeting the Commission began debate on the effects of scientific and technological developments on respect for human rights.

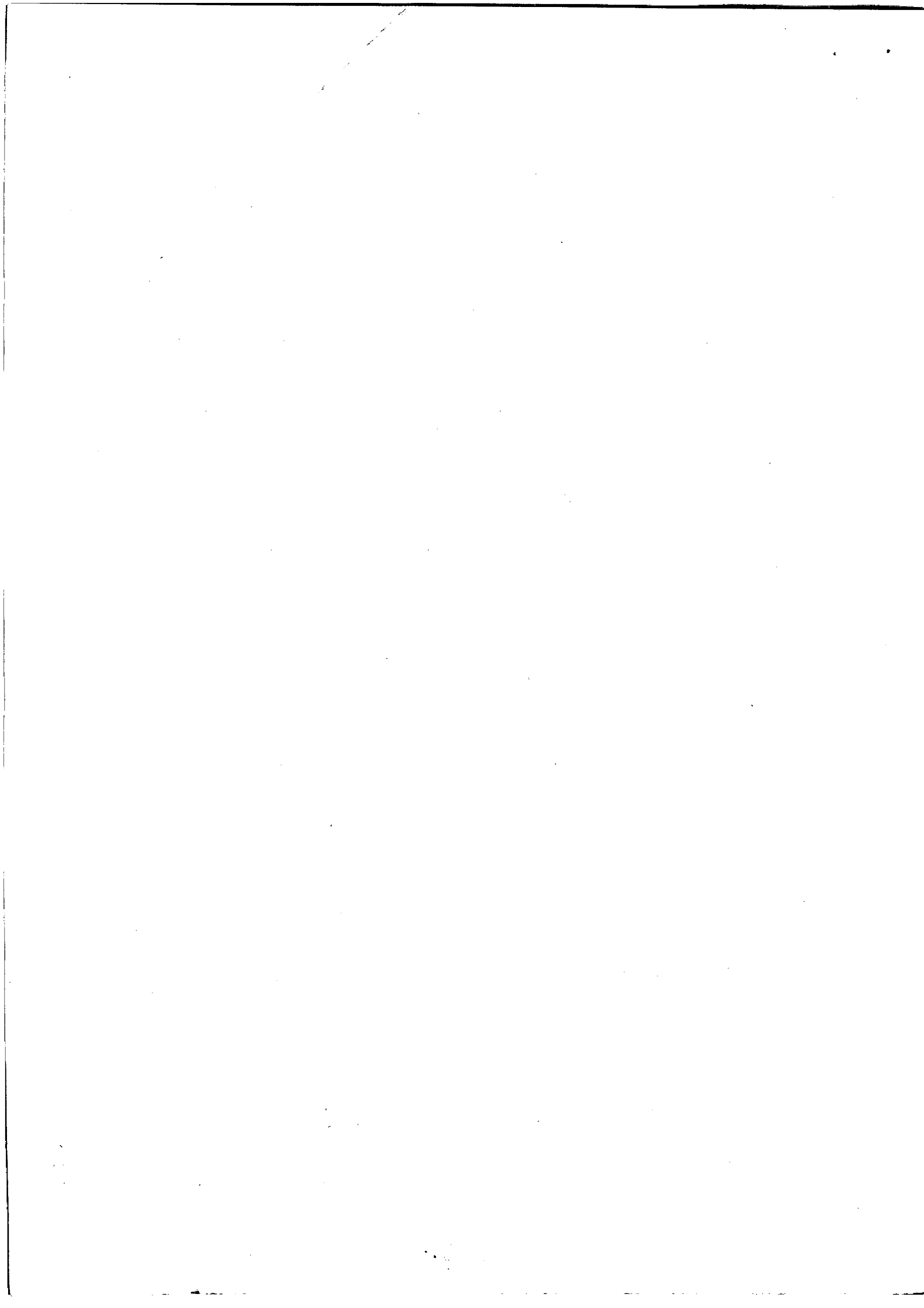
Speakers in the discussion were: the Netherlands, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Bulgaria, Argentina, Congo, Byelorussia, German Democratic Republic, and Viet Nam.

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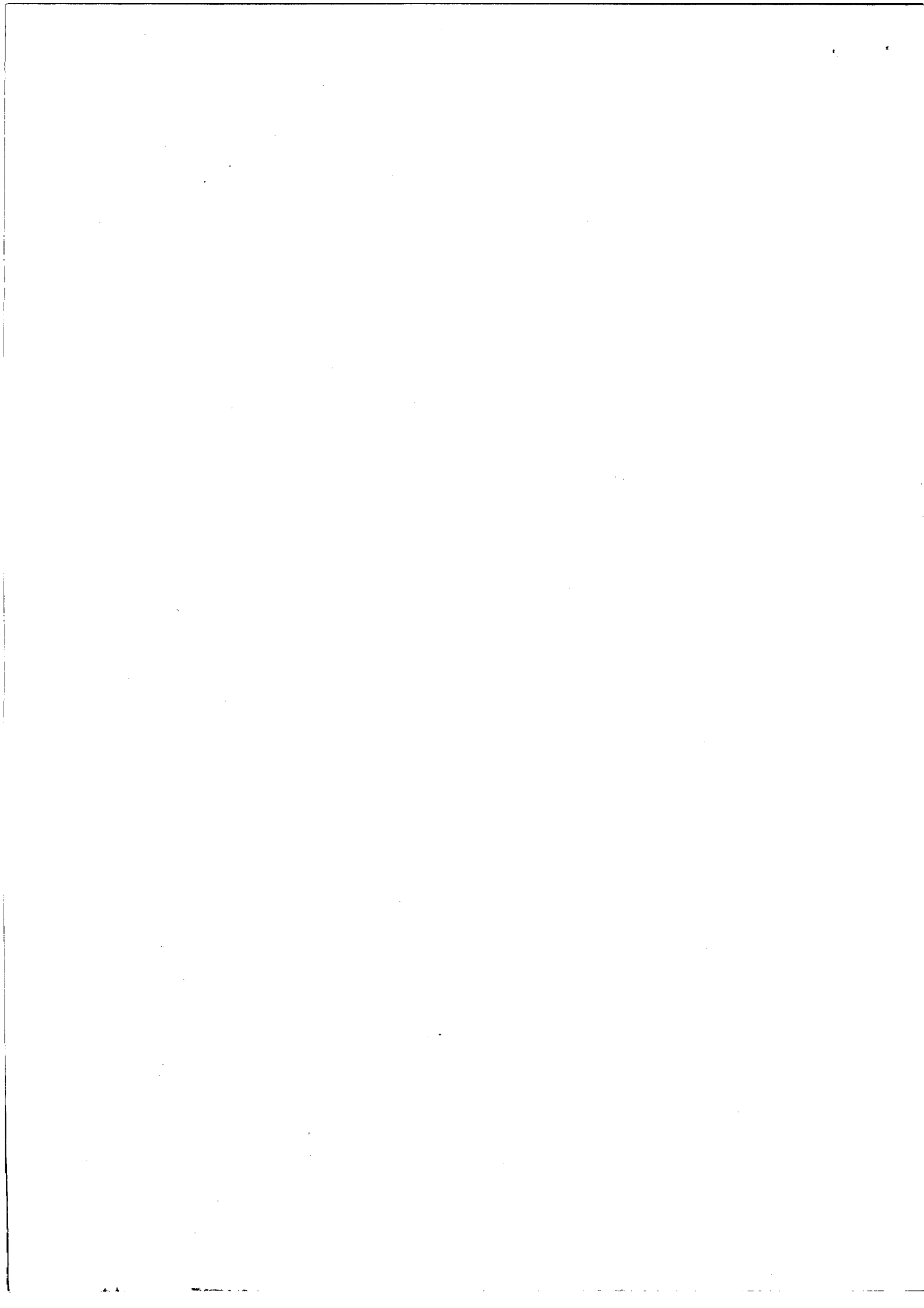
Thomas CONCEPCION, representative of the Christian Democratic World Union, said he came from a country which was called the Pearl of the Orient Seas, a country of 50 million people of which 40 million were Christians and 6 million Muslim brothers. From the time of imposition of martial law in 1972, his country, the Philippines, the young democracy died a brutal death. The so-called return to democratic constitutional system and respect for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms in 1981 had instead been marked by an escalation of gross violations of human and religious rights. The Commission, he urged, should move to stop the militarization and religious persecution in the Philippines and all over the world.

Robin GILBERT, representative of the World Jewish Congress, said his organization welcomed the continued attention given to this topic. The question of religious intolerance was one which had continuously occupied the attention of his organization since its creation, especially in the form of its violent expression in terms of acts of hatred and anti-Jewish terror. The World Jewish Congress continued its support for the efforts made in the framework of this agenda item to overcome the religious, and in fact racial, prejudices which intolerance in this field fostered. It urged the Commission to embark with determination on the work called for under the agenda item.

Adrien-Claude ZOLLER, representative of Pax Christi, said Pax Christi too attached the greatest importance to respect of religious freedom. As a Christian organization, it was particularly sensitive to the fundamental right of people to choose and to manifest their own religion and belief. That is why in the past it had never hesitated to take a public stand whenever it was of the opinion that the freedom of religion was being systematically violated in any part of the world. Thus it was very pleased with the adoption of the Declaration. It was sorry to declare, however, that there were countries such as Czechoslovakia which had voted in favour of the Declaration, but which had not changed their national legislation so as to fully guarantee this unconditional freedom for all their citizens. Pax Christi would urgently appeal to the Czechoslovakian Government to review its national legislation which provided for restrictions on the performance of religious activities.

Mahshid FATIO, representative of the Baha'i International Community, said the major stumbling block which stood in the way of universal tolerance in matters of religion was the fact that the religions of the world were generally viewed as entirely separate entities. They were identified by their differences, rather than by their similarities, and this inevitably meant that they were seen as being in conflict with one another. In the Baha'i view, there was no conflict at all between the different religions of the world, for all religion was essentially one. It was the voice of one God speaking to one humanity. The elimination of all forms of divisive prejudice was a fundamental tenet of Baha'i belief. It condemned intolerance or discrimination of any kind, and firmly upheld the right of every man and woman freely to have and to practise the religion or belief of his or her choice, which included of course the right not to believe. The Baha'is welcomed the proposals made in the draft resolution now before the Commission. They were an important first step in the Commission's efforts to implement the provisions of the Declaration.

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Ms. Maria Elena QUINTEROS, representative of Pax Romana, said Pax Romana was most highly interested in the topic. Respect for fundamental human rights, especially religious tolerance and the recognition of God as the Supreme Being, was the most solid basis on which to base the creation of any society. The Declaration was a most important instrument, to be used to foster the conscience of mankind regarding religious tolerance in a world where too many Governments did precious little to guarantee the full enjoyment of this basic right.

Norma CONTRERAS (Guatemala) said that if there was freedom of religion in any country it was in her country, Guatemala. At this moment more than a million Guatemala people were attending the mass officiated by his Holiness the Pope. Members of the Church as well as Government officials and authorities had made all the necessary preparations for this historical event. In Guatemala there has been freedom of religion for more than a hundred years and everyone had the right to practise a religion of his choice, and had the freedom to manifest his religion or beliefs individually or collectively.

Rights of Reply

Ovadia SOFFER (Israel), speaking in right of reply in the discussion on this topic, said there was apparently no limit to the lies and vicious remarks of the Syrian representative. It was not merely ironic, but downright sickening, that the representative of a country which blatantly violated the fundamental precepts of the Geneva Convention and many other international humanitarian norms, had the nerve to didactically preach before this Commission. The Syrian regime, he said, had contravened international law by refusing the identification of the bodies of Israeli soldiers Syria claimed to have buried. The suffering of the families of such missing soldiers was too deep to be expressed in words.

Mohammad MAHALLATI (Iran) said religious intolerance was one of the pressing problems of the times. The need for having a clear-cut definition of religious minorities was one of the most important aspects of this problem. In this connection, Iran did not believe that the Baha'is were a religious minority. They were a political group in Iran's view, and there was no United Nations document where one could see the definition of the Baha'is as a religious group. It was not for the Netherlands to proclaim the Baha'is in Iran as a religious group. That was the business of the Iranian Government, he stressed.

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