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1999 State Department report lists religious-freedom abuses

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Violations of religious liberty, including religious persecution, are not confined to one country, religion or nationality, according to the U.S. State Department's 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

"Throughout the world, Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and other believers continue to suffer for their faith," the report states.

The lengthy country-by-country analysis of human rights issues was released Feb. 25. The report focuses on democracy, human rights, religious liberty and labor.

Harold Koh, assistant secretary of state for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, noted a growing U.S. emphasis on human rights. In 1977, the State Department's first human rights report ran only 137 pages and covered only a fraction of the world's countries. The latest report covers 194 countries and totals 6,000 pages of typescript.

"Too much of the world's population still lives in countries in which religious freedom is restricted or prohibited," the report's introduction states. "Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes remain determined to control religious belief and practice."

The report notes that some governments are hostile to minority religions while others tolerate, and thus encourage, persecution and discrimination. Some countries favor certain religions and disfavor others, and some democratic states have "indiscriminately identified minority religions as dangerous 'sects' or 'cults,'" the report states.

Among the religious-freedom abuses cited in the report:

-- In Burma, the government has imprisoned Buddhist monks who promote human and political rights. Security forces have destroyed and looted churches, mosques and Buddhist monasteries and have used coercive measures to induce Christians to convert to Buddhism.

-- China has continued to restrict religious freedom and intensified controls on some unregistered churches. Unapproved groups, including Protestants and Catholics, experienced varying degrees of interference, repression and persecution.

In Xinjiang, the government reportedly detained tens of thousands of Falun Gong members in outdoor stadiums and forced them to sign statements disavowing the new religious movement before releasing them.

In Tibet, the government intensified its "patriotic education campaign" designed to increase pressures on Tibetan Buddhists, control monasteries and expel supporters of the Dalai Lama.

-- In Iran, Baha'is and other religious minorities are targeted by conservative judicial and security authorities. In February and March, 13 Jews were arrested on suspicion of espionage on behalf of Israel.

-- In Iraq, the government "has conducted a campaign of murder, summary execution and protracted arbitrary arrest against the religious leaders and adherents of the Shi'a Muslim population," the report states.

-- In Sudan, discrimination and violence against religious minorities has continued. "Eyewitnesses reported aerial bombardments of Christians, Muslims, and animists in the Nuba Mountains," the report states.

Among other countries cited for religious-freedom violations in the report are Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

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Baptist men from Texas, North Carolina go to Africa

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Three volunteers with Texas Baptist Men and a group of North Carolina Baptists traveled to Mozambique to provide disaster relief for flood victims in the wake of Cyclone Eline and more than three weeks of torrential rain. A second volunteer team was slated to leave for Mozambique on March 9.

Continuing rains delayed the team's entry into Mozambique 18 hours but allowed the volunteers to replace a faulty water pump on one of the five vehicles in their caravan, said team leader Dick Talley, who reported to Dallas by satellite phone.

"It gave us time to test the water purifiers," said Talley, logistics coordinator for Texas Baptist Men. The Texans built two purifiers on-site in South Africa from locally available components and shipped one ready-made unit from the United States, he said. The two locally produced units are capable of purifying at least eight gallons of water per minute.

The floods in Mozambique killed at least 400 people, drove more than one million people from their homes and left about 100,000 stranded on rooftops and treetops. International media reported the story of one woman who gave birth while in a tree.

Local officials fear the refugees are at risk for diseases such as cholera, malaria and meningitis.

The Texas Baptist men hoped to help prevent the spread of those water-borne diseases by delivering and operating three water purifiers. They also assembled three field kitchens to provide emergency food service and were training representatives of the South African Baptist Union in their operation.

The Texans are working with Baptist Men from North Carolina on the project. The North Carolina Baptist Men will lead in "mud-out" efforts, reclaiming homes and other buildings.

A North Carolina Baptist donor made an initial \$20,000 gift to help the volunteers purchase food in South Africa for transport into Mozambique.

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Texas moral-concerns agency looks back on 50-year history

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Three past directors of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the agency's current director reflected on five decades of addressing moral concerns at a 50th anniversary celebration Feb. 28-29.

"Remembrance is a special gift from God, and remembrance is a discipline to which we submit with profit," Foy Valentine, who served as commission director from 1953 to 1960, said at this year's annual conference at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas.

Valentine related anecdotes from his years directing the commission, including facing opposition when the CLC included the subject of race relations in a series of pamphlets, "What It Means to be a Christian."

But he also recalled those who stood in support of the commission and its prophetic calling, including Forrest Feezor, executive secretary of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and E.S. James, editor of the Baptist Standard, whom Valentine described as "a tower of strength" and "the soul of integrity."

In the future, Valentine said, he hopes the CLC will not only speak prophetically but also help all Christians recognize their prophetic calling.

"We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers," he said.

Jimmy Allen, who served as CLC director from 1960 to 1967, described taking a prayer retreat after T. B. Maston, renowned professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, asked him to consider directing the Texas Baptist social-justice agency. It was a struggle, Allen recalled, because he had become "infested with the virus of careerism."

"After spending three days out there I died to the idea of a career and arose to the idea of a cause," he said.

Allen remembered how the commission spoke to the issues of its day, sponsoring a meeting on race at Southwestern Seminary in the early 1960s. He also said the CLC sometimes was ahead of its time, offering a conference on biomedical ethics in 1965.

Looking to the future, Allen called on the agency to take advantage of the "spirituality surge" in society to awaken an ethical understanding and to "move into the vacuum" of social justice leadership among Baptists.

James Dunn, who was director of the commission from 1967 to 1980, praised the CLC for remaining committed to historic Baptist principles of soul freedom and religious liberty and for being at the forefront of applied Christianity.

Phil Strickland, who joined the commission staff in 1967 and became its director in 1980, said he expects the commission to wrestle with emerging issues in the future, including:

-- Genetic engineering. "With the ability to remove and insert genes, we will face enormous ethical decisions related to the gift and, perhaps, the curse of genetic power."

-- Family life. Only 51 percent of children live in a household with two parents, and average parents spend 40 minutes a week playing with their children. "Parents are increasingly choosing work and consumption over their children."

-- Technology. "We will be tempted to equate technical, mechanical progress with human fulfillment."

-- Environment. Pollution, the difficulties presented for sustainable agriculture and overpopulation all pose a threat. "We will increasingly discover that our call to care for creation is urgent, indeed."

Strickland said he hopes the commission will retain its educational and prophetic roles, particularly in speaking to issues of economic justice.

"While we give our dollars for world hunger -- which we should do -- we endure policies and politics that continue to focus greater wealth into the hands of those who need nothing and away from the hands of those who need everything. And perhaps only the church has the moral power to bring about change," he said.

"We have a great challenge to speak truth from the biblical call for justice, not from the claustrophobic posture of Baptist political correctness, be it the correctness of the left or the right."

He also stressed the importance of standing fast in support of religious liberty and separation of church and state.

"I hope that we are good protectors of religious liberty, for without that we will find it difficult to introduce people to the One who is still able to draw out the unclean spirits of our day. And to be protectors, we will have to resist the temptation of being seduced by government suitors who offer us riches."

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Restrictive religion law nears passage in Bulgaria

SOFIA, Bulgaria (ABP) -- Forty-four religious groups and some constitutional scholars in Bulgaria are opposing a draft law that would grant special status to the Orthodox Church.

The bill, approved in a first reading by the Bulgarian National Assembly in February, would create a two-tiered system of state recognition of religious groups. Only the Orthodox Church would be granted full religious freedom and be afforded a "special place" in Bulgarian law.

Evangelicals and others who would lose religious rights under the law prefer provisions of old Communist-era law to the current proposal, said Theo Angelov, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation.

Supporters of the bill include former Communists, the Orthodox Church establishment and Bulgarian nationalists. Many see the Orthodox Church as the only authentic Bulgarian religion. "To speak against sects and for the Orthodox is very popular," Angelov said.

The law would give power to local authorities to determine where a church building could be located and impose fines for religious activities for unregistered groups.

While no date has been scheduled, a vote on final approval is expected soon.

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-- European Baptist Press Service

Congregational nurse a new kind of minister

By Sherri Brown

PEACHTREE CITY, Ga. (ABP) -- He was 91 years old when the doctors told him they had discovered a malignancy. The family was scheduled to meet with the doctor to discuss options. Knowing the meeting would be difficult they asked their minister to accompany the family for the consultation.

Ruth McCommon, wearing her lab coat and nursing pins, agreed.

McCommon is a new kind of minister: a congregational nurse. She is known throughout her church -- First Baptist Church in Peachtree City, Ga. -- as the lady with the lab coat.

"People stop me in the hall and say, 'The doctor said this. What do you think about it?'" she says. Her job is simply to be a bridge between faith and health.

When she makes hospital or nursing-home visits, her conversations are a mixture of medical jargon and spiritual guidance. When someone is sent to hospice, she can help him or her understand what to expect.

When a young mother is at a Bible study and finds herself sick, her friends take her to McCommon. When someone is dying, she is often the first minister family members call.

"I'm a minister," she is quick to say. "I'm not a nurse who works in a church."

Her qualifications for ministry came early in life and hard. Her third child died at four months from SIDS. Her husband died at 40 after five years of fighting cancer. At 38 she found herself a widow with two teenage daughters: one was a diabetic, the other suffered from epilepsy. When her children were raised, she finished her nursing education, went to seminary and headed for the mission field in Africa. While serving there she contracted both malaria and hepatitis C -- both diseases that she still must deal with.

"I learned early what sustains me," she says. "Compassion drives me to do what I do."

"Ruth is able to do things I can't do, things I don't know how to do," says Steve Bingham, senior pastor at McCommon's church.

"Some pastors feel threatened when someone ministers to 'their' people," Bingham admits. "My main concern is what are we doing for that person? Are they getting the support they need?"

"A congregational nurse can do things way beyond what I can do," he says. "I hug their necks, read Scripture and pray. But Ruth goes way beyond that," Bingham says. "She enhances our ministry."

In 1983, a chaplain in a Lutheran hospital in Chicago and his daughter, a nurse, conceived the idea of a "parish nurse." Word quickly spread of the spiritual-medical position, and other groups began the program that originated in a hospital. In 1995 Georgia Baptist Health Care System began developing the program.

Currently six congregational nurses work in Georgia churches sized small to large. GBHCS provides supervision and training for nurses, as well as organizational guidance for churches.

"It's a church/hospital partnership," says Jean Holley, director of congregational health for health-care system. Holley supervises the nurses, providing emergency medical consultations, as well as ongoing education and mentoring.

"I help the church know how to organize," she says. "I work with committees to deal with the nuts and bolts of organization, as well as the legal issues."

Holley also maintains a resume file, screening possible candidates to ensure they are professionally competent, as well as mentally and spiritually mature.

"We offer qualified nurses, but the church makes the final decisions. It's easier since many times a pastor or personnel committee isn't always able to judge professional [medical] competency," she explains.

The nurses typically are hired as part-time ministers, from 16-24 hours a week, and earn a salary comparable to the community norm for professional nurses, says Holley.

All congregational nurses take clinical-pastoral education as part of their training and all are required to take the congregational-nurse preparation course offered by the Georgia Baptist College of Nursing every July.

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-- Sherri Brown is a staff writer in the Georgia Baptist Convention communications department.

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