

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
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Text of a statement made in the House of Commons on February 22, by the Prime Minister, on religious persecution.

During the past few weeks, Mr. Speaker, this House and the country as a whole have watched with deepening concern what appears to be a systematic campaign of religious persecution in all the satellite states of Eastern Europe, but particularly in Hungary where within a short space of time the heads of three branches of the Christian church, the Roman Catholic, the Calvinist and the Lutheran, have either been sentenced to severe punishment or driven into exile. More recent persecutions in Bulgaria seem to be following the same pattern.

2. The Government of Canada has already indicated in the most positive terms and in language clear beyond all possibility of mistake, its abhorrence of this systematic persecution. In a statement on New Year's Day I said that the increasingly brutal persecutions of religious leaders in countries behind the iron curtain have shocked all civilized people. These views were reiterated and strengthened on February 2 by the Secretary of State for External Affairs. In the light of more recent developments, I now wish to re-affirm the position of the Canadian Government.

3. Immediately after the arrest of Cardinal Mindszenty, Primate of Hungary, the Canadian Government as a signatory of the Peace Treaty, asked our diplomatic representatives in a number of European capitals and Washington to secure all the available information and to report any steps that might be anticipated on the part of the governments to which they were accredited. Careful study was given also to official intelligence from other sources and to press reports.

4. This was followed, as the House will recall from the statement made on February 2 by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, by a communication to the Hungarian Government through the Hungarian Minister in Washington, protesting strongly against a policy of repression and religious persecution which appeared to destroy religious freedom in Hungary and appeared also to violate obligations to secure the enjoyment of human rights, including freedom of religious worship, to which Hungary was pledged under the Treaty of Peace of 1947.

5. In this message, particular reference was made to the arrest not only of Cardinal Mindszenty, but also of the Senior Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Hungary, and to the flight into exile, under force of persecution, of the Senior Bishop of the Calvinist Church in Hungary.

6. It seemed clear from these incidents that all religious faiths were involved and that a general attack was being launched on the fundamental freedoms of human society. Fresh emphasis was given to the repressive character of these arrests by the conditions under which the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty was conducted. It can hardly be said that these proceedings bear any resemblance to what we understand by a "fair trial". From official sources in which we have confidence, we learn, for example, the following facts about the conduct of this case.

7. The trial which involved seven persons and four different charges, including capital charges, was concluded in three days. No witnesses were called for the defence. The Counsel for the prosecution made no attempt to establish his case but confined himself for the most part to enlarging on the political fairness of the trial. The counsel for the defence put no case for the defence and did not contest easily refutable statements made by the Counsel for the prosecution; and the material evidence consisted of statements taken outside the court before the trial. It may be added that no representatives of non-Communist governments were permitted to attend the trial. We are informed also that the representative of the Government of Australia attempted to visit Budapest for this purpose, but though a visa was promised on six occasions, it was not forthcoming.

8. Meanwhile the government is continuing to seek the views of like minded governments, signatory to the Treaty, on the character and desirability of any further action that may be taken jointly or independently. It has been suggested, for example, that the Treaty of Peace be invoked. Unfortunately, the procedures which are immediately available under the Treaty of Peace all depend for their effectiveness on the cooperation of the Soviet Government. Since the U.S.S.R. not only supports but even encourages governments which it can influence in their hostility to religion, it is not likely to give the other signatories to the Peace Treaties much assistance in putting a halt to religious persecution in Eastern Europe. It may be, however, that the signatories to the Treaties, even without the support of the Soviet Union, could through joint representation based on these provisions of these Treaties have some influence upon the governments which are responsible for these acts.

9. Provision is also made in the Treaty for a procedure leading to the establishment of a Commission of three to act in regard to any dispute arising out of the execution or interpretation of the Treaty. The majority decision of this Commission would be binding on the parties to the dispute.

10. If this procedure were used, the obstruction of the U.S.S.R. to action under it could not become effective until efforts were made to give effect to the decisions of the Commission.

11. A further possibility that has received some public notice is that the matter be referred to the United Nations; because it would seem obvious that the spirit of repression and persecution that pervades the events under review is clearly not in keeping with the Charter of the United Nations or the Declaration of Human Rights.

12. In any case it is the view of the government that a state which fails to carry out its Treaty obligations in letter and spirit, cannot expect to be supported in its application for admission to the United Nations; and indeed might expect formally to be condemned by the world organization.

13. But, Mr. Speaker, in examining these or any other suggestions that may be made the government's course will be guided by considerations that are more significant than tactics or gestures. While giving the fullest expression to our profound abhorrence of religious persecution, however it may be disguised, we shall seek to take only such action as appears to offer a reasonable prospect of promoting the principles in which we believe and at the same time of ameliorating the situation with which we are faced in the Communist countries.

14. The events in Hungary have, as hon. members know, been followed by similar action on the part of the Bulgarian Government. On February 10 that Government issued its indictment of 15 Protestant leaders in that country, charging them with espionage, and other crimes.

15. The Government has instructed the Canadian Charge d'Affaires in Prague to apply for visas to visit Hungary and Roumania in order that he may make inquiries on the spot and report to the government. Canada is not a signatory to the Bulgarian Treaty, but in any joint action that may be considered advisable, this country would find no difficulty in associating itself with such action. The principles of religious freedom and fundamental human rights are not confined to the articles of a Peace Treaty.

16. The clear and common sense conclusion, Mr. Speaker, is that the cases of each church, each Bishop, or each group of religious leaders, are horrifying incidents in what appears to be a Grand Design, a calculated policy of persecution aimed not perhaps at the immediate extermination of the Christian Communions, but at their ultimate subjugation and servitude. By its nature and its dogma Marxist Communism must secure the total obedience of its subjects and cannot tolerate the free speculations of the human spirit and conscience.

17. A plain recital of a few only of the incidents in this process reveals the pattern of persecution which is swiftly being drawn over the unhappy Christians of these lands. We are already familiar with the fate in Hungary of leaders of three different churches and I have mentioned the indictments on February 10, by the Bulgarian Government of 15 Protestant leaders in that country. It is noteworthy that while these clergymen, all members of the United Evangelical Church in Bulgaria, were apparently arrested some months ago, no indictment was made until this time.

18. In Poland some 26 priests have been detained and 8 arrested for having read a pastoral letter from their bishop, in which the anti-religious actions of government officials was severely attacked.

19. In Czechoslovakia towards the end of last year two members of the Greek Catholic Church were tried for alleged espionage activities, and early this month a new campaign was started against the Church.

20. In Roumania in December, 1948, the Roumanian Uniate Church, a branch of the Roman Catholic Church, was practically extinguished by government decree and its property confiscated.

21. It cannot be expected, I am sorry to say, that the tale is ended. From the Baltic to the frontiers of Greece the ceaseless pressure to impose a total Communist pattern goes forward. The middle way of life, the only way broad enough to contain in peace and tolerance all creeds and all faiths, is being steadily cast aside and nowhere is this clearer than in the realm of religious belief. There is no quick or simple solution: the problem is too vast and too many-sided. Old in essence, it is here new in form and it has the ruthlessness of new things.

22. The government will continue to use whatever means are available to support every effort to assert the principles of religious and political liberty and to restore their practice.