

Religious discrimination charged in Costa Rica

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--A Costa Rican human rights group has filed a complaint to the United Nations alleging serious religious discrimination in that Central American country.

"Religious discrimination exists in Costa Rica and as a consequence violates the human rights of many of its citizens," said the complaint filed by the Costa Rican Commission on Human Rights (CODEHU).

The Commission said the discrimination originates with the Costa Rican constitution which establishes "the Catholic Religion, Apostolic and Roman" as the state religion and requires the government to contribute towards its maintenance.

In spite of a provision in the constitution which permits free religious expression if it does not oppose moral norms or common good customs, the constitution has been seen as generating discrimination, the group charged.

The accusation lodged with the United Nations charged that Costa Rican law, which allows the teaching of religion in public schools, only permits those who have graduated from certain centers of higher education to teach.

According to the law, only teachers who have completed studies in the Normal Superior School or the Institute of Religious Teaching and obtained certification from the (Roman Catholic) Episcopal Conference are permitted to teach religious classes.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee is waiting word from Costa Rica that it has adopted concrete measures to assure that there will be no further discrimination in the exercise of religious education.

Miguel Hernandez, legal advisor to CODEHU, said that he is hoping for a change in attitude which will allow access to religious teaching distinct from Catholicism.

Hernandez said that the situation in Costa Rica was brought to the attention of the United Nations in 1990, but as of this time there has been no change.

Evangelical leaders in Costa Rica have complained that their churches have to confront multiple obstacles to overcome the privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church.

The Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance recently complained that the Catholic church does not have to provide sanitary facilities in its churches, enjoys exoneration from paying taxes, and does not have to give account of its income as do the other religious groups in the country.

Fernando Naranjo, Minister of Foreign Relations said he is working on a statement concerning the situation of the church in Costa Rica to present to the United Nations. That statement was due to be delivered before August 2.

Naranjo said that the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights recently presented observations on the situation in Costa Rica which were favorable to the Catholic Church.

He said that the complaints do not put Costa Rica in danger of sanctions by international organizations.

"We have argued that our constitution establishes the Catholic religion as the state religion, and that gives it special rights," Naranjo said.

He said he has not heard any other charges or complaints of religious discrimination.

However, CODEHU said, the United Nations has not accepted the three responses of the Costa Rican government to the charges, and has asked for a fourth response to be presented in August.

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