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Observing International Day for Freedom of Faith/ Religion On the Martyrdom Day of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru (24th November)

Respected Mr Ban Ki-moon,

The Right to Freedom of Religion is a well-accepted statute in this day and age. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations proclaimed, in its Article 18, the Right to Freedom of Religion. In 1950, the Constitution of India, in its Article 25, conferred the Right to Freedom of Religion to all citizens.

However, four centuries ago, in 1675, this Right and Freedom were highlighted and established by Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru. He made the ultimate sacrifice of his life for protecting the rights of Hindus, who were being forcibly converted to Islam. The only choice offered to them was: conversion or death.

The fact that the Pandits (the highest in the hierarchy of castes in Hinduism) came to the Guru all the way from Kashmir to Sri Anandpur Sahib, approx 500 kms away, seeking his help, points to the Guru's benevolent disposition towards the oppressed, irrespective of their religion. The Guru declared that if the Emperor could convert him, all the others would convert too.

The Guru practised what he preached: Frighten not; Fear not (page 1427, Guru Granth Sahib, the Eternal, Word Guru of Sikhs). Through his deep conviction and unparalleled courage, he upheld the freedom and right of everyone to practice one's own Faith.

The Guru's martyrdom is the only of its kind in the entire history of mankind, in that:

The Guru sacrificed his life for a people who professed a religion other than his own. Rather, this was the religion, whose symbols his predecessor, Guru Nanak, the founder Sikhism, had refused to wear. And now, he was protecting the right of the Hindus to wear their symbols, with his life. His cause was for humanity.

The Guru volunteered to make the ultimate sacrifice of his life; he was not asked or forced to appear before the then Emperor. He headed, on foot, with three followers – Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Sati Das and Bhai Dyal Das, to the Emperor at Delhi about 300 kms away, with no means of communication, given the times to which he belonged. This indicates the importance he attached to the issue of Freedom of Religion.

The Guru chose martyrdom in spite of the fact that he was a great warrior. In fact, his name is the title (Tegh Bahadur – brave wielder of sword) his father, Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru, bestowed upon him for his performance in the battles he fought against oppression, injustice. The Guru pit unarmed individual against the might of an Emperor, and put across the utter failure/ helplessness of even an army at the hands of a man of God in this regard.

The Guru's companions were tortured and martyred in front of him to weaken, frighten him so he may give up his Faith and convert to Islam. But the Guru was a man of God!

The exceptional nature of this ultimate sacrifice for humankind by Guru Tegh Bahadur and his companions needs to be shared with all, the world over. This shall advance understanding and promote peaceful co-existence amongst all religions across the globe.

It would be most befitting for the United Nations to mark and observe the martyrdom day of Guru Tegh Bahadur (24th November) as the International Day for Freedom of Faith/ Religion.

Kindly realize this noble task for the sake of brotherhood of mankind.

With best regards,

Yours sincerely,

(Birendra Kaur, Settler)

(Gudrun Inger, Member)