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Public Statement

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Western Europe: Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch Condemn Attacks on Jews and Arabs

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are gravely concerned by the sharp increase in Western Europe of violent attacks on persons and property prompted by intolerance of religious, racial, cultural, and national differences. In particular, the two international human rights organizations strongly condemn the wave of racist attacks against Arabs and anti-Semitic attacks against Jews, and call on West European governments to redouble their efforts to combat racism in all its forms and to bring to justice suspected perpetrators of hate crimes.

The recent increase in anti-Semitic attacks has unfolded in the wake of the Middle East crisis. They follow a general rise in racist and xenophobic violence in Western Europe, particularly against Arabs and certain ethnic and religious minorities, which spiked sharply in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks in the United States.

Recent anti-Semitic violence has included the posting of threatening hate mail, vandalizing of synagogues and cemeteries, and verbal abuse and physical assaults on Jews. The following examples highlight the rise in anti-Semitic violence in a number of West European countries:

In France, hostility toward Jews has led to a particularly serious wave of attacks. The French police recorded 395 anti-Semitic incidents between 29 March and 17 April, 63 percent of which involved anti-Semitic graffiti. Between 1 January and 2 April, 34 "serious anti-Semitic actions" were recorded, referring to attacks on Jewish persons or property, including synagogues and cemeteries. In March and April, several synagogues, in Lyon, Montpellier, Garges-les-Gonesses (Val d'Oise) and Strasbourg were vandalized, while the synagogue in Marseille was burned to the ground. In Paris, a crowd threw stones at a vehicle transporting pupils of a Jewish school, and the vehicle's windows were broken. The authorities are now investigating these attacks.

In the UK, at least 48 attacks on Jews were reported in April, compared with 12 in March, seven in February, 13 in January and five in December. Some of the assaults resulted in the hospitalization of victims with serious injuries. Reportedly, the victims were mainly orthodox and Hassidic Jews. In the April attack on a London synagogue, a swastika was scrawled on the lectern.

In Belgium, synagogues in Brussels, and Antwerp were firebombed in April; the facade of a synagogue in Charleroi, southwest Belgium, was sprayed with bullets. A Jewish bookshop and delicatessen in Brussels were destroyed by fire. Criminal investigations have been opened into these incidents, as well as into a physical assault on the Chief Rabbi of Brussels in December 2001.

In April, synagogues were attacked in Berlin and Herford in western Germany. In the same month in Berlin, a young Jewish woman was reportedly attacked in the underground rail system because

she was wearing a pendant of a star of David. Two Orthodox Jews were attacked and slightly injured by a group of people on a shopping street after visiting a synagogue.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both have monitored racist and xenophobic violence in Western Europe, including against Arabs and Muslims in the wake of the 11 September attacks in the United States. The international human rights organizations condemn these attacks, which have included verbal abuse, physical assaults and attacks on mosques -- and express alarm that they continue. In an attack in Brussels on 7 May, a Moroccan immigrant couple was shot dead and two of their children wounded by an elderly Belgian neighbour, reportedly expressing racist views.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch welcome the 25 April statement by the European Union's Justice and Home Affairs Council condemning "the racist acts perpetrated in various places in the EU in recent weeks". The Council urged joint EU action to combat discrimination and racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic violence, and to raise public awareness. In its statement, the Council also stated that preventive action should be taken against all forms of intolerance aimed at persons of the Jewish or Muslim faith or any other faith. Earlier in April, the interior ministers of France, the UK, Germany, Spain and Belgium issued a joint declaration against racism and anti-Semitism.

Government and political leaders in various countries have not only condemned the attacks, but some have also taken measures to provide protection to Jewish cultural and religious centres. In France over 1,100 extra police have been deployed to protect synagogues. In addition, authorities have opened judicial investigations and in some instances, convicted perpetrators of racist violence. The Belgian government stated on 1 April that it would expedite bringing to justice the perpetrators of such attacks and take all measures to ensure the security of places of worship. The police in London have stepped up their presence in Jewish areas and the Attorney General has promised a crackdown on racially motivated hate crimes.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch urge all West European governments to take immediate and effective measures to prevent racist and anti-Semitic violence; and to vigorously investigate, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators of such violence. We also call on governments to make public the measures they are taking to combat racist and anti-Semitic violence, and to report to the public periodically the results of these efforts.

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