

Kenya Christians and Muslims debate hijab in schools

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April 7, 2011

Nairobi, Kenya, April 7 (ENInews)--Muslim leaders in Kenya are calling for government action on Christian schools that have banned students from wearing hijab, the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim girls and women. Church leaders have defended the ban, saying head teachers have the right to determine dress code in the schools, according to a denomination's religious traditions, discipline and philosophies.

"The problem has been with us for some time. In our private schools, we do not encourage or allow hijab. We insist the children have to be children just like the others. These are our laid-down procedures," Roman Archbishop Boniface Lele of Mombasa told ENInews on 6 April, six days after the Muslim leaders issued the demand in the coastal city.

The leaders alleged some children had been expelled from school over their dress and called for their re-admission. Their demands are based on the provisions of a new national constitution, adopted in August, 2010, that grants the right to education to all children. The Muslim leaders said they also want the traditional dress allowed in schools countrywide.

In an interview with ENInews, Sheikh Juma Ngao, the Kenya Muslim National Advisory Council (KMNAC) national chairman said denying the hijab was an affront to the rights of Muslim followers and an action that could trigger mass withdrawal of Muslims from the schools.

"Our teachings require women to cover themselves whether in schools or work. This is not happening in the Christian schools. We feel this is discrimination against Muslim children," he said on 6 April. Churches sponsor and own many schools, most of which were started by missionaries in the 19th century.

For example, out of 15,000 public primary schools, the Roman Catholic Church sponsors 5,301 and owns 325. Of 3,560 secondary schools, the church sponsors 1,731 secondary schools and owns 163. The schools admit children of all backgrounds. "We would want to have dialogue, but it has not been easy with the Muslim leaders on this matter and others," said Lele.

Anglican Bishop of Mombasa Julius Kalu said he feels Muslims are forcing acceptance of the headscarf. "It is a very sensitive matter now. The Muslims are taking advantage of the new constitution to make demands," said Kalu, adding that two faiths were deeply engaged in the matter.

Kenya's Muslim community owns a few schools, according to Ngao, but followers send their children to church-sponsored ones because they know the government pays the teachers there. "We pay taxes and by doing so, we also believe we pay the teachers. That's why we take our children there," he said.

Mike O'Maera, an official from Elimu Yetu (Our Education), a coalition of civil society groups, observed that churches set up the schools to provide education to all children regardless of faith or background. "We urge them to recognize this, and the right to self expression and association for everyone. Self-expression enables children to mature and religion should not interfere with it," he said. O'Maera, a Catholic, said, adding that allowing hijab would strengthen interfaith co-existence.