

**TARGET's Breakthrough:
Islam outlaws the genital mutilation of girls!
Scholar conference in Cairo concludes with a groundbreaking outcome
Cairo/Hamburg, Nov. 24, 2006**

For two days, November 22nd and 23rd, the most respected international scholars of Islam and medical doctors discussed the sensitive topic of genital mutilation of girls and Islam's position regarding this issue at the Azhar University in Cairo.

Among the scholars were the Grand Sheik of Azhar, Prof. Tantawi, the Grand Mufti of Al Azhar, Prof. Ali Goma'a, the Egyptian Minister of Religion, Prof. Zakzouk and Sheik Qaradawi from Qatar, along with scholars of Islam from Europe, Asia and Africa. Other participants included Mrs. Moushira Khatab, a representative sent by Mrs. Mubarak, the wife of the president, along with Rüdiger Nehberg and Annette Weber for TARGET as the initiators of the conference. Grand Mufti Prof. Ali Goma'a, the highest judge for Islamic law, sponsored the conference.

The sensational result: "The mutilation of female genitals violates the highest values of Islam and as such is a punishable crime." In other words: genital mutilation of girls and women is forbidden under Islam!

This ruling is unprecedented in the history of the religion. It is the most important precondition for a real chance at ending this tradition. This offers hope for millions of girls in the 33 predominantly Islamic countries affected. For currently around 8,000 girls are still being mutilated every single day, an average of one every eleven seconds. 150 million women are affected worldwide (UN).

The Grand Mufti had suggested the place and participants. They could not have been better chosen. The Azhar is considered the "Mecca of Scholars". It is the most highly respected theological educational institution for Islam, and the oldest and largest university in the world. Responsible parties in the countries where female genital mutilation is still being practiced had asked repeatedly: what does Azhar say? The Grand Mufti is the highest judicial authority who can give binding legal opinions. His decisions are valid worldwide and provide guidance to all Muslims.

To understand it better: This conference is comparable to the Pope and his curia in the Vatican calling a conference with an organisation for the rights of Muslims regarding a topic desired by that organisation, assuming sponsorship, and resulting in a clear ruling.

Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, welcomed the conference and provided it with financial support. "The opinion statement that is to be given by one of the most respected theological educational institutions in the Islamic world cannot be assessed highly enough for its religious-political significance and the positive results it will have on the inviolability of young girls and women."

During the two-day conference, the key issue was the clarification of the question: Is there a binding demand made by the Prophet in the holy writings that calls for the genital mutilation of girls? The scholars present responded to this question. There is a hadith (something the Prophet said, did or tolerated that was written down following his death), from which a sunna ("ideal conduct based on the teachings and practices of the Prophet") has thus far been derived. According to this hadith, "slight" genital mutilation is a desirable practice. The hadiths are divided into categories of credibility: absolutely believable, less credible and weak (meaning less reliably transmitted) writings.

The discussion was remarkably open. The theologians were soon in agreement that this particular hadith must be considered "weak", or qualified as an unreliable transmission. The question remained to be clarified if this meant that "slight" genital mutilation should then really be evaluated as bodily harm. In general it is made light of and compared to male circumcision. "In case of doubt", the Qur'an advises: "ask the scientists!" This is why five medical doctors were invited to participate, experts from Egypt, Ethiopia, and Germany. Prof. Kentenich from the DRK Hospital in Berlin spoke. The sponsor Prof. Ali Goma'a and Sheik Qaradawi from Qatar in particular had placed great importance on the doctors' assessments. For many Muslims this man from the gulf country is considered a "walking work of reference regarding Islam".

Dr. Lukman, gynaecologist and surgeon from Addis Abeba, compared the removal of the clitoris with the removal of the glans for a man, and pharaonic circumcision with the amputation of the whole penis. Prof. Kentenich from Berlin listed the untold epiphenomena that accompany genital mutilation. This list included lifelong pain and trauma, and even death from blood loss and shock. The Egyptian doctor spoke of the theft of the female centre of sensation, the soul and dignity of woman. TARGET showed a 2-minute film that acoustically and optically did not sugar-coat the gruesomeness of this crime. There has never been a gathering like this before.

Imam Tarafa Baghajati from Austria clearly presented Muslims women's right to a sexuality that is fulfilled without limitations. "More even than for a man, for she must bear the results, namely pregnancy." Moushira Khatab demanded "a clear statement by the Azhar," expressing the desire in our hearts as well.

After two days of discussion, the delegates withdrew to deliberate. This waiting period was almost unbearable for us, Rüdiger Nehberg and Annette Weber from TARGET. On November 23rd, at 4:12 pm local time, Prof. Muhammad Shama, confidant to the Grand Mufti, announced the verdict. It has the status of a fatwa, a binding legal opinion and is sensational.

The fatwa states: genital mutilation is outlawed by Islam!!! We can hardly grasp the dimensions of the result of this conference. As such, the main justification for female genital mutilation no longer exists. This will save thousands of girls from having to endure this gruesome ritual!!!

Now this decision must be brought to people's attention. This task, even more than the Azhar Conference, for which we introduced the 36-hour workday, will require tremendous energy over the next two years. We are ready!

Comments from the delegates following the conference:

Sheik Abkar from Chad: "I am not ashamed to admit that I was not aware of the extent of the crime. I will use all my power to oppose this practice. TARGET has found one of its strongest allies in me. The conference was a 200% success."

Imam Diallo from Mali reports that he was even relieved of his office as grand mufti a few years ago when he dared to speak out against this practice. He had to remain in police protection for two weeks. "Help me to make this decision known throughout my country. I entreat the religious leaders of all twenty West African countries to participate."

Minister of Religion from Egypt, Prof. Mohmoud Hamdi Zakzouk, to journalists: "The two Germans have won our trust over the last six years."

Surgeon Lukman from Ethiopia: "The success of this conference has given my life the highest sense of gratification."

The Grand Mufti's entry in the TARGET guestbook:

In the name of Allah, the gracious and merciful!

I want to thank the German TARGET organisation for its genuine efforts to solve social problems and their contribution to this "international Sharia conference", which took place in Cairo on the 1st and 2nd of the 11th month of 1427, which corresponds to the 22nd and 23rd of November 2006.

The scholars and medical doctors have passed clear and unmistakable judgement against practices that mutilate the female body, in particular so-called "circumcision". We wish this organisation continuing success!

Ali Goma'a
Grand Mufti Al Azhar
Cairo, November 24, 2006

Medals of Honour 2006

It is both an honour and a pleasure to award the following persons the silver TARGET medal of honour to express our thanks for their excellent cooperation and dedication. We would also like to express thanks on behalf of the girls and women for the part these persons played in the resolution of Al Azhar.

The medal depicts the Azhar mosque of Cairo and verse 4 of sura 95 from the Koran: "That of the goodliest fabric WE have created man."

Grand Mufti Prof. Ali Goma'a, Egypt, for the great trust he placed in us, his impressive way of thinking and his assumption of the sponsorship for the Azhar Conference. Without his wisdom, this resolution could never have taken place.

Sheik Hissein Hassan Abkar, Chad, for his dedicated speech at Azhar and his decision to continue to fight against genital mutilation with us in Chad.

Dr. Yusuf Lukman, Ethiopia, for his impressive speech as a gynaecologist and a doctor who deals with female genital mutilation on a daily basis.

Grand Sheik Prof. Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Egypt, for his participation, trust in, and endorsement of the resolution.

Prof. Muhammad Shama, Egypt. He is both the confidant of the Mufti and the Minister of Religion. His wisdom and advice are invaluable. He led the conference. We consider him a great friend.

Minister of Religion Prof. Mahmoud Hamdi Zakzouk, Egypt. He was the first high-ranking Muslim who placed complete trust in us and created further contacts. Without his trust, the conference could never have happened. We owe him a very special thank you.

Imam Mohammadou Diallo, Mali, for his courage – despite being relieved of his office and receiving death threats – in continuing to fight for the rights of women.

Imam Tarafa Baghajati, Austria, for his refreshing speech defending the rights of women under Islam.

Imam Adnan Ibrahim, Austria, for his clear standpoint regarding Islam and the rights of women, as represented by Imam Tarafa Baghajati.

Prof. Heribert Kantenich, Germany, for his convincing speech at Azhar about the gruesomeness of the suffering caused by female genital mutilation.

Ali Mekla Dabala for his efforts on the Horn of Africa, his creativity, diplomacy, and work as the director of our “mobile clinic” project in Ethiopia.

Hans-Georg and Henning Cramer, Delbrück, with their accounting office.

Klaus and Rosemarie Denart, Hamburg, with their Globetrotter Ausrüstung company.

Evelyn and Jochen Querbach with their advertising office.

**Rüdiger Nehberg und Annette Weber:
“Caravan of Hope”**

Together with Islam against the pain and the silence

It came out on the day of the Azhar Conference, and represents the high point of our work up to now.

Since at times Rüdiger's perspective as a man, and at times Annette's as a woman was needed, we wrote the book together. We hope it will provide information, give you courage, and show different perspectives.

From the jacket text:

Female genital mutilation – a crime that exceeds the power of the imagination. When **existing German organisations expressed their refusal to consider a strategy of cooperation with Islam**, Rüdiger Nehberg and Annette Weber decide to found their own human rights organisation TARGET along with the **“Pro-Islamic Alliance against Female Genital Mutilation”** in 2000.

Rüdiger Nehberg is familiar with Islam from his travels. Twice he was saved by Muslim hosts who used their bodies as a living shield to protect him during attacks. “This gave me a strong sense of humility, trust and respect for Islam. Since then, I feel a responsibility.”

He sets a “caravan of hope” in motion, and the unthinkable occurred: sultans, grand muftis and ministers open their hearts and doors, break their vows of silence, allow conferences, conclude tribal resolutions, declare the practice of genital mutilation of girls as incompatible with the ethics of Islam and a sin. The Grand Mufti of Mauritania allows Rüdiger Nehberg to carry his fatwa on flags with camels to the nomads in the desert.

The book tells of the crime itself, of the tears of fury and helplessness, of creative rebellion and the systematic implementation of a vision. It takes the reader to the sites of action for Rüdiger Nehberg and Annette Weber in the desert, into the residences of the sultans and grand muftis, and to the hearts of the women affected. **It culminates in the unprecedented conference of Al-Azhar.**

The book gives the reader goose pimples and hope. But in particular, it provides an image of Islam that is different than that imposed upon it by terrorists and the zeitgeist of the world.

Malik Verlag, 370 pages, lots of photos, ISBN 3890293220, 19.95 EUR.

Annette Weber und Rüdiger Nehberg – Honorary Citizens of the Afar people

Astonishment and honour during the TARGET scholar conference from Al-Azhar in Cairo! Sheik Darassa from the highest counsel for Islamic affairs for the Afar people (Ethiopia) awards us, Annette and Rüdiger, “honorary citizenship of the Afar people” in the name of his Sultan, Ali Mirah Hanfary.

In the certificate, the Sultan honours:

“The TARGET conference in Assayta in 2002, organised by Annette and Rüdiger, that was the first and decisive impetus to end the patrimonial, destructive practice of female genital mutilation,

The support of two girls from the Afar people and their families to ensure a more hopeful future.

TARGET's support of the Afar in the form of the "mobile TARGET clinic."

The special aspect of this honour: "This is the first time in the history of our tribe that this has been done."

So we will be returning "home" the next time we visit the Afar. How nice.

Project visit in Farasdege

"Sustainability"

Self-created laws are one thing. Holding fast to them is another thing entirely. What has been considered right for 5,000 years cannot simply be changed in a day. This is why trust is good, but verification is better.

Our doctor Stephanie Mittmann reports that in some Afar areas in the Danakil Desert genital mutilation is still taking place despite the binding tribal resolution reached at the TARGET Desert Conference of 2002. For us, this is the impulse to clearly state the facts.

"We sent the mobile clinic as a thank you for your resolution to stop mutilation. Now it is your turn to keep your promise," Rüdiger stipulates at our project visit to Farasdege in June.

Sheik Darassa from the highest counsel for Islamic affairs, who was key to the success of the first TARGET Desert Conference 2002, had come along to provide us with support to the best of his ability. He called the inhabitants of Farasdege together and made it clear to them that "any person who mutilates sins against tribal law, against the girls, against God."

For this was not clear to the mutilators and the inhabitants of Farasdege. This was due to the failure of some clan leaders to pass on the resolution due to their personal stance on the issue.

And again the dam breaks, again we experience, as at the desert conferences, spontaneous agreement and relief regarding the decision. Four mutilators jump up. They swear before God and their people gathered here to never castrate a girl again. "Or may HE punish me with the most severe measures!"

Sheik Darassa evaluates the vows as believable: "They did not promise you, but Allah."

Darassa will continue to travel for TARGET in future to his people, who live widely spread throughout the desert.

Our mobile TARGET clinic will continue its work in the desert. The trust of the Afar in TARGET, following initial scepticism, is extensive. The mobile medical station is one of the main tenants of our work to prevent the genital mutilation of the Afar girls.

Unfortunately our doctor Stephanie is seriously ill. At present she is represented by a female Ethiopian colleague. We hope to be able to “banish” Stephanie into the desert again soon.

Sponsored child Amina

Amina is a child we sponsor. She is one of the girls who we met in the course of research in the Danakil Desert of Ethiopia, right at the beginning of our TARGET work in 2001. When we saw her, she was sitting utterly still with a very serious look on her face, kneading a cloth on her lap. She did not speak a word.

“She was circumcised three months ago. She lost the ability to speak from the shock,” explains someone. This in turn renders us speechless.

Amina’s fate truly moves us. We decide that we must help her by providing her with an education and financial support for her family. A few euros a month. The condition: Amina must be allowed to go to school every day.

We see the girl again at TARGET’s First Desert Conference in 2002. She is a member of the Afar tribe, the first large group to outlaw genital mutilation and adopt the new law into their tribal code of law (see newsletter 2002). Her parents agree to our school idea. Amina can take her best friend along with her. We also assume her sponsorship.

And the miracle occurs: Amina slowly begins to talk again, and she and her best friend are soon first and second in their class. Both love school!

In 2006 the girls have learned all the village school has to offer them. We help Amina move. She and her friend now live in Addis Abeba in the care of a religious family. For the first time these desert children experience running water, cleanliness, regular meals. Both attend school and learn English. In order to catch up on missed material, the girls receive extra help. The parents of both children have recognised that the only chance for a better future, both for the girls and for their families, is an education. Everyone, including our project manager in Ethiopia, reports that both girls have adjusted quite well, are studying hard and are happy.

This “mini project” could provide the impetus for individual initiative: anyone travelling to poor countries could take the opportunity to look for a child to sponsor and try to imagine what kind of assistance is necessary and would make sense. Then find a trustworthy person who can keep an eye on everything, return to the place from time to time yourself – and you will have your own little project that may also convince friends to do the same. A little “investment in the future”.

We would very much enjoy being able to report on just such a project initiated by one of our supporters in the next newsletter.

Mauritania

Mauritania forbids female genital mutilation!

It was one of his first acts in office. In August of last year when he assumed office, President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall declared the prohibition of and punishment for female genital mutilation with decree number 13 on the 5th of December.

Three years ago TARGET was able to bring about the final rejection of the practice from a religious standpoint with its Second Desert Conference under the direction of the Grand Mufti from Mauritania, Hamden Ould Tah. The president at the time, Taya, could not bring himself to follow this religious recommendation. Now his successor has followed through.

On March 14, upon invitation from the president, Rüdiger was able to report on our Mauritanian “caravan of hope” for Hamden Ould Tah, talk about the topic of genital mutilation, and express our joy and thankfulness for the decree (see Newsletter 2005).

Grand Mufti Hamden Ould Tah assured us that the resolution would be announced in all mosques as soon as possible.

Article 12 of the decree reads:

“Whoever damages the genital organs of a female child through infibulation, anaesthesia or other methods, or simply has the intention of doing so, shall be punished with imprisonment of three years and a fine of 160,000 to 300,000 ougiyas (300 ougiya = 1 euro).

The prison term is extended to four years if the guilty party is a member of the medical fraternity or is another type of medically trained personnel.”

Thank you Ely Ould Mohamed Vall!

Pilot project “seamstresses”

“Now we are out of work,” complain the seven mutilators to Rüdiger during his visit to the president. They want to speak to him and hope for assistance.

“What else can you do besides circumcision?” “Sew, cook, tailor, clean...” come the answers.

For TARGET, inspiration to try out a mini project: the founding of a seamstress cooperative.

Two hand-driven sewing machines, ten bolts of cloth and other diverse accessories form the basic equipment, the seed capital. An experienced tailor teaches the women how to cut out the fabric, manufacture clothing, and care for the machine.

A contract sets out the rules. The women are all equal. Anyone who continues to perform circumcisions is immediately excluded without being replaced. A judge ensures clarity.

After a few weeks, he reports the good news: "Sales are flourishing. The women want to open a small shop."

We have our fingers crossed.