

Criminal charges brought against two religious circumcisers for the first time

Charge: grievous bodily harm inflicted on at least 2000 babies and small children

(Vienna, 29 November 2012) – Charges are being brought against the community rabbi and mohel of the Jewish Religious Community in Vienna. The rabbi has stated himself that for religious reasons he has performed operations, where there was no medical indication, on the genitals of over 1000 male babies. The second accused is a general practitioner who runs a circumcision centre in Vienna specializing in ritual Islamic circumcision. He is also the president of the Islamic Religious Community in Vienna. On his website, he proudly presents photos of circumcised children. The doctor also faces charges by the disciplinary commission of the Chamber of Doctors. In addition, the rabbi will be charged for violating medical law.

Circumcision is a severe trauma for children

“Removal of the penis foreskin is a surgical operation that violates the physical integrity of the patient. In cases where there are no medical reasons, it constitutes deliberate grievous bodily harm,” explains lawyer Anja Oberkofler. Even today, the operation is often carried out without anaesthetic and is extremely painful: babies have no protective mechanism and because of the shock, often fall into a momentary coma. The circumcision ritual is often performed on little boys 6 to 8 years old, without any explanation and frequently also without any anaesthetic; this causes severe trauma. The foreskin is the most sensitive part of the penis and thus highly erogenous tissue. When it is removed, the glans becomes covered by a layer of hard skin. This can result in the loss of sexual sensitivity and a limited ability to achieve orgasm, as testified by many of those affected. Possible complications of the operation include bleeding or mutilation, which can occur in 2 to 10 per cent of cases, according to current medical information.

Religiously-motivated bodily harm is not *per se* exempt from punishment

Another reason for the charge is that an operation with such grave consequences requires the consent of the person concerned. This does not occur in the case of babies and children. As lawyer Oberkofler stated, “It is incomprehensible why religious approval to inflict grievous bodily harm should be exempt from punishment.” Austria has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which contains a regulation on punishment for the circumcision of children due to religious reasons. The right to protection of bodily integrity is also anchored in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. “The child’s fundamental right to physical integrity cannot be annulled by arguing for the religious freedom of the parents in how they bring up their children. This freedom ends where grievous bodily harm inflicted on their child begins”, stated Oberkofler.

Criminal charge brought by victims of abuse and circumcision

The charge is being brought by Sepp Rothwangl, who was subjected to childhood sexual abuse by a member of the church. “Nowadays I see it as my duty to ensure that children should not suffer physical and emotional harm because of religious privileges that go unpunished.” Rothwangl has also been instrumental in organizing the Campaign against Church Privileges; signatures are currently being collected for this campaign. “I am totally against special rights for religious communities, because they should not be allowed to mutilate children’s sexual organs in the name of religion without being punished,” stated Rothwangl. “This is where civil society and the rule of law must intervene.” For this reason, the Campaign against Church Privileges also supports bringing the current criminal charges.

Afflicted persons break their silence

The second person bringing charges is Cahit Kaya, who was circumcised as a child according to Islamic ritual. “I would have liked to have had the freedom myself to decide whether to be

circumcised or not”, says Kaya today. “But without my consent, without any information and without any preparation on the part of the doctor or my parents, I was circumcised in a state hospital in Vorarlberg. Many Muslims suffer a great deal from the sexual consequences of their circumcision and are ashamed to have been a victim of this operation. If they do indeed talk about it, it’s only within their very closest circle of friends. This silence finally has to be broken.”

www.kirchen-privilegien.at

www.beschneidungsdebatte.info

For press enquiries: Campaign against Church Privileges (Initiative gegen Kirchenprivilegien)