



Brussels, 26 January 2011

*Dear High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton
Cc: Foreign Minister of France Michèle Alliot-Marie, Foreign Minister of Hungary Janos Martonyi, Foreign Minister of Italy Franco Frattini, and Foreign Minister of Poland Radoslaw Sikorski,*

The past twelve months have been a particularly dark period for many religious minorities and groups around the world. In Iraq and Egypt, heinous blasts were targeted against local Christian communities; in Nigeria, waves of sectarian violence made the lives of Muslims and Christians intolerable; and in Iran the authorities continued their systematic persecution of Bahai's and other minority groups. The example of Pakistan shows that religious minorities were not the only targets of extremists: the moderate Muslim Governor Salmaan Taseer was brutally murdered on 4 January 2011 by one of his bodyguards because of his courageous stance to repeal the notorious blasphemy laws in his country. While these and other incidents occurred in different geographical contexts, there is a striking similarity between them: they were furious attempts to destroy cultural and religious diversity, and hostile reflections of neglecting the human dignity of the other.

According to the American think-tank the Pew Forum, 70 % of the world's population live in countries with high governmental restrictions on religious freedom and/or where societal hostilities against religious minorities are symptomatic. When restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are in place and responses to tackle these violations are inadequate, a vicious circle emerges. Misinformation in media and education material, as well as discriminatory policies and laws fuel prejudices and may in extreme cases result in mob attacks and violence. In many cases, the government fails to redress religious freedom violations due to systemic incapacity or political unwillingness, resulting in a culture of impunity and eventually, a culture of prevailing prejudices.

International legal covenants and regional conventions recognise the importance of protecting freedom of religion or belief, given that belief, whatever shape it takes, is vital for personal identity and social belonging for all individuals, regardless of their religious or philosophical background. However, religious freedom is not only a moral or legal obligation, but also a strategic choice to be considered by policymakers. It is crucial to peace and stability in society,

and the lack thereof can result in violations of related human rights, such as freedom of expression, association and assembly, and right to justice and fair trial.

We welcome the increased interest in freedom of religion or belief expressed by EU member states during the past years, in particular the adoption of Council conclusions on freedom of religion or belief (16/11/09), the establishment of a taskforce on religious freedom within the Council working group on human rights (COHOM), and the adoption of an EU Action Plan on religious freedom. However, more can be done. **It is a necessity for the EU to step up its strategic thinking on freedom of religion or belief and improve its analysis and understanding about the role of religion in contemporary societies.**

We, organisations working for freedom of religion or belief for all, would like to draw your attention to a set of guiding principles in EU's endeavour to promote religious freedom:

- Violations of freedom of religion or belief can be the result of state restrictions, societal hostilities, or a mutually-reinforcing combination of both. When the EU identifies ways to address religious persecution, there is a need to analyse the dynamic of various stakeholders involved. Not only religious minorities fall victim for religious persecution or discrimination – the picture is broader, threatening pluralistic, democratic and moderate voices in society.
- In this regard, freedom of religion or belief may not be compartmentalised or detached from the broader context of democracy and human rights promotion, but the causes and consequences of the vicious circle described above need to be rightfully addressed. **The EU needs to address root causes of religious persecution such as biased education systems and media reporting** through e.g. sharing of good practice on media codes of conduct and promoting minority engagement in the development of educational curricula. Furthermore, **the EU should systematically address legislation which restricts free worship and religious organisation, in Europe and beyond**, and work for the respect of international religious freedom standards.
- **The EU should do more to address cycles of communal violence and impunity.** The EU needs capacity to monitor and analyse developments in third countries and identify mechanisms to promote early warning. Coordination between the headquarters and delegation levels needs to be ensured. Cycles of violence and impunity will continue to impact religious groups, in particular minorities, until they enjoy a much greater level of access to justice. Programmes for **enhancing the rule of law** in third countries, including training for police and judiciary, is necessary. Furthermore, the EU should give its **support to means and initiatives to prevent religiously-motivated hatred or violent conflict** and to advance religious reconciliation through intra-religious, intercultural and -religious dialogue. In this process the EU needs to pay attention to inclusiveness and fair participation, enabling more vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, ethnic minorities, and disabled, to be present.
- In relation to the EU's future policy on freedom of religion or belief, it is necessary that the **process is open, transparent and inclusive**, involving interested civil society organisations, NGOs, academic experts, and representatives of religious groups, representing both European and third countries. Dialogue with non-governmental stakeholders has to take place at all levels – the headquarters, capitals and delegations. We call for regular, meaningful exchange of views

in the form of brainstorming meetings, invitations to COHOM or European External Action Service (EEAS) training sessions, and annual conferences on the matter. For instance, the EU could organise an event for the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief.

The EU should also:

- Ensure that religious freedom concerns are **systematically raised at every political and human rights dialogue or consultation** with a third country, including high level summits, and share outcomes with non-governmental stakeholders, where appropriate. The EU should swiftly react to violations of religious freedom through public statements, diplomatic demarches or other appropriate means;
- **Improve coordinated use of existing EU human rights tools** in the promotion of religious freedom, in particular taking into account the EU Guidelines on human rights defenders (including the role of community leaders and other religious actors in defending human rights), on torture, and on death penalty;
- Appoint an **EU Special Representative covering freedom of religion or belief**;
- Establish a **permanent capacity within the Human Rights and Democracy directorate** of the EEAS, to undertake monitoring, research, coordination, mainstreaming and reporting tasks pertaining to religious freedom, and produce an annual report on the situation of religious freedom in the world;
- Ensure **coordination** on religious freedom matters between COHOM and other thematic and geographical **Council working groups**;
- Ensure a high level of **expertise in religious freedom** within the EEAS and **provide regular trainings** on religious freedom for EEAS' staff, in Brussels and elsewhere;
- Continue to **exchange views on best practices** and draw examples from EU member state initiatives, such as the UK toolkit on religious freedom. In this regard, develop a joint EU **checklist on religious freedom** for the use of headquarters and delegations, evaluate and, if necessary, revise the list of countries of particular concern on an annual basis;
- Ensure **funding**, allowing for flexible modalities in difficult environments, for projects promoting conflict prevention and transformation, inter-religious reconciliation and respect for religious diversity and freedom. The future of the human rights and democracy instrument (EIDHR), with a strong religious freedom component, should be guaranteed in the next financial perspectives post-2013.

We also support efforts to establish an advising capacity within the EEAS (the Department of Global and Multilateral issues or the Unit of Strategic planning), responsible for the analysis of broader matters pertaining to the role of religion, culture and identity in contemporary globalised societies and international relations. This advising capacity should not replace, nor limit, EU endeavours to promote religious freedom, but should indeed be seen as an additional, necessary mechanism to ensure a timely and strategic input for future EU policy-making.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this timely and pressing matter and remain at your disposal for future exchange of views. We wish you successful deliberations within the Foreign Affairs Council on the 31 January.

Yours sincerely,

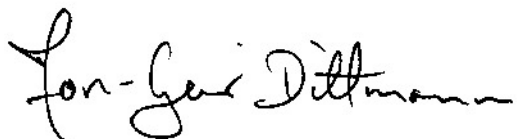


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- Baha'i International Community (BIC)
- European Evangelical Alliance (EEA)
- Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)
- Open Doors International
- Que Me

Co-signing organisations:



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