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UN (23.10.2015) – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, on Thursday called on all Governments represented at the UN General Assembly “to respect religious practices by children and their families and support families in fulfilling their role in providing an enabling environment for the realisation of the rights of the child.”

“Every individual child is a rights holder in his or her own capacity as recognised in Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,” Mr. Bielefeldt recalled during the presentation of his special report* on the rights of the child and his or her parents in the area of freedom of religion or belief.

“Violations of freedom of religion or belief often affect the rights of children and their parents,” he said. “Children, typically girls, from religious minorities for example, are abducted and forcibly converted to another religion through forced early marriage.”

The rights expert also urged religious communities across the world to ensure respect for the freedom of religion or belief of children within their teaching and community practices, bearing in mind the status of the child as a rights holder.

“Religious community leaders should support the elimination of harmful practices inflicted on children, including by publicly challenging problematic religious justifications for such practices whenever they occur,” he said.

With regard to possible conflicts, the Special Rapporteur stressed the need for due diligence by the State when dealing with conflicting human rights concerns, ensuring non-discriminatory family laws and the settlement of family-related conflicts, and combating harmful practices.

“While in many situations of violations the rights of the child and the rights of his or her parents may be affected in conjunction, it is not always the case,” Mr. Bielefeldt noted. “The interests of parents and children are not necessarily identical, including in the area of freedom of religion or belief”.

The expert highlighted that parents or legal guardians have the right and duty to direct the child in the exercise of his or her freedom of religion or belief. “Such direction should be given in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child in order to facilitate a more and more active role of the child in exercising his or her freedom of religion or belief, thus paying respect to the child as a rights holder from early on,” he said.

“Parents are also not obliged to provide a religiously ‘neutral’ upbringing in the name of the child’s right to an ‘open future,’” he added. “The rights of parents to freedom of religion or belief include their rights to educate their children according to their own conviction and to introduce their children to religious initiation rites.”

In his report, the Special Rapporteur discusses issues related to religious socialization; religious instruction within the family; participation in religious community life; religious education in schools; the voluntary display of religious symbols in schools; respect for the evolving capacities of the maturing child; and non-discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.

Footnote:

(*) Check the Special Rapporteur's report to the General Assembly (A/70/286): <http://bit.ly/1RdK8D6>

Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt (Germany) assumed his mandate in August 2010. Mr. Bielefeldt is Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Politics at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. From 2003 to 2009, he was Director of Germany's National Human Rights Institution. The Special Rapporteur's research interests include various interdisciplinary facets of human rights theory and practice, with a focus on freedom of religion or belief. He was the first human rights expert that conducted an official country visit to Cyprus in the March/April 2012.

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