

Call to make freedom of religion a foreign policy priority

Ekklesia (27.10.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2iYA0x9> – The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief has launched a new report to mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day (27 October 2017).

Entitled 'Article 18: From rhetoric to reality', it highlights the current rhetoric of the observance of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and underlines practical measures that can and should be taken by the UK Government to turn this rhetoric to reality, to protect the millions who are vulnerable to violence, discrimination and disadvantage as a result of its abuse.

In the Foreword to the report Dr Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, (FoRB) says "This report comes at a time when acts of intolerance involving religion or belief are on the rise globally... occurring in most continents and in many different cultures – from the potential crimes against humanity being committed against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and genocide against vulnerable Iraqi religious groups such as Yazidis, Shabak, Shi'a Muslims and Christians to the banning of religious groups including Jehovah's Witnesses.

"There is no one type of perpetrator or victim. Groups that face persecution in one country may be the persecutors in others. Perpetrators may also be State or non-State actors, and from the latter, mob violence is frequently used to enforce religious or social norms. Despite global commitments to promote and to protect freedom of religion or belief, the scale of violations remains enormous, with almost 80 per cent

of the world's population living in countries with 'high' or 'very high' levels of restrictions and/or hostilities towards certain beliefs."

He concludes "This report explores the importance of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief for Government Ministers and officials including for preventing violent extremism and promoting the sustainable development goals, and provides recommendations and best practice for pursuing this right. I urge the UK and other Governments to give serious consideration to implementing what is laid out in this report."

The report urges that Freedom of Religion or Belief is made a political priority for the Foreign Secretary and a strategic priority for both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development.

The full list of recommendations:

- 1) Identify FoRB as a Political Priority of the Foreign Secretary, and establish a FoRB programming funding stream within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- 2) Identify FoRB as a strategic priority in the Department for International Development's work
- 3) Resource the International Investigative Team into ISIL's Crimes and ensure that the evidence collated is used to bring ISIL Perpetrators to justice in line with international law
- 4) Support Parliamentarians and Institutional Partners Globally to Advance FoRB
- 5) Ensure that aid is channelled to organisations and

programmes that support and demonstrate a clear understanding of FoRB

6) Increase religious and FoRB 'literacy' among Embassy staff and civil servants

7) Undertake a baseline evaluation of the extent, quality and impact of FoRB in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in order to mainstream FoRB throughout work streams

8) Develop and share understanding of key FoRB issues, in conflict situations and facilitate peace-building

9) Revise the FCO Magna Carta Human Rights and Democracy Fund to support longer-term civil society-led projects and make available smaller grants to fund small projects advancing FoRB

10) Recognise religious persecution within the UNHCR vulnerability criteria

11) Establish a cross-Governmental programme to support pro-FoRB messaging and narratives on and offline.

12) Integrate the FCO's recognition of FoRB's role within PVE measures across UK Government and then share this best practice internationally

13) Work with local civil society, including faith and belief-based organisations, to implement conflict reduction programming between religious or belief communities.

14) Convene an expert group to scope initiating an international FoRB Convention

Commenting on the report, Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK and President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, said, “2017 has been a disastrous year for freedom of religion and belief around much of the globe. With ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, attacks on the Rohingya in Myanmar, and active use of blasphemy sentences in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and elsewhere, urgent action is needed to ensure people’s human rights are upheld.

“This report, with its careful documentation of the state of human rights and clear recommendations as to how the Foreign and Commonwealth Office can work better to ensure freedom of religion and belief, is a welcome contribution at a time that such action is sadly needed more than ever.”

Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights says, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Read the full report [here](#)

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