

EU: Open letter from the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) to the Presidents of the European Council, European Parliament and the European Commission regarding the continued mandate of European Special Envoy

EPRID (22.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2nu0AY5> –

Mr Donald Tusk, *President of the European Council*

Mr Jean-Claude Juncker, *President of the European Commission*

Dr Federica Mogherini, *High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission*

Mr Neven Mimica, *Commissioner on International Cooperation and Development*

Re: The continuation and strengthening of the European Union mandate of Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Dear Sirs and Madam, EPRID is a diverse network of civil society organisations including religious and non-religious (nonconfessional) associations operating at the European level. The objective of EPRID is to collectively promote freedom of religion or belief in the world as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international human rights instruments. Its membership comprises the organisations identified in its website at: <http://www.eprid.eu/members/>

At its recently held annual general meeting, the members of EPRID unanimously resolved to express support for the continuation of the mandate of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. EPRID expresses that support by way of this open letter.

Each of the members of EPRID have had association with the current Special Envoy and have been impressed by Dr Ján Figel's considerable achievements in his efforts to promote the principles of FoRB in several regions of the world all in a relatively short time.

Indeed, in the current international climate of persecution and diminution of the basic freedoms of religion, belief and expression, the continuation of an informed and articulate voice on behalf of Europe is necessary. However, EPRID members

are concerned that the true potential of the mandate has been constrained by:

- limitations in resources;
- institutional connection and authority;
- the shortness of the period of the mandate.

EPRID is conscious that the mandate is a new one and thus without precedent within the European Union. It is with this recent creation of the role in mind that EPRID couples its recommendation for continuation with other recommendations and observations on how the mandate may be optimised to achieve its purposes. None of the matters raised by way of recommendation are intended to delay the renewal of the mandate. We hope that the points made in this letter might form part of the EU's considerations in how the role could meaningfully grow. EPRID notes, for example, the EU considerable potential influence in the area of FoRB upon trading partners. This may be a matter that could form part of the brief to the Special Envoy.

EPRID's recommendations and observations are the following.

First, a clear and workable EU Strategy on FoRB with respect to third countries must be developed in consultation with both the Special Envoy and civil society. This strategy should then inform the role of the mandate holder. With such a strategy in place, the Special Envoy could more readily prioritise the issues and third countries.

Secondly, given the importance of the mandate, it is equally important that the person appointed is both in possession of and seen to be vested with real institutional credibility and power. We propose that this person should be given a double hat and placed both within the European Commission, but also within the EEAS, in a position made directly responsible to the cabinet of the High Representative/Vice-President. In this respect, consideration could be given to the following improvements: the title of the office might be changed to that of 'EU Special Representative on Freedom of Religion or Belief'; and, the functions of the office might be formally connected with the EU's responsibilities under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. We find that it is important that this position is grounded in both institutions as there are implications of this work for, amongst others, DG development, DG Near and DG Trade. It will be through appropriate normative and structural connection with the other priority areas of the EU that the mandate will succeed in supporting work done in humanitarian aid, refugees and dealing with conflict in the Middle East.

Thirdly, if the mandate is to be successfully performed, there must be adequate allocations of budget and staffing. The allocations must take account of the needs for liaison with internal EU institutions and policy areas, the training and support of EU delegations tasked with the promotion of FoRB, the implementation of the EU Guidelines on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief and continued dialogue with civil society. Without adequate allocation of resources, the mandate has the potential to fail over time or, possibly worse, for it to lapse into window dressing and tokenism at a time when real action is required of the EU.

Fourthly, and for similar reasons, it is also important that the mandate be for ongoing periods of three or four years, so that each appointee has sufficient time to implement projects in accordance with EU priorities.

EPRID thanks the leaders of the EU institutions for their attention to the matters raised in this letter. If there is any matter that requires elaboration or explanation, EPRID and its constitutive members are ready to discuss those matters either in writing or in meetings.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Penelope Faulkner – Que Me: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

Dr Susan Kerr – Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Mr Christel Ngnambi – European Evangelical Alliance EPRID Board of Coordinators

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