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WORLD : The FoRB Int'l Ministerial Conference in London, a great mass

The FoRB International Ministerial Conference in London, a great mass

HRWF (12.08.2022) – On the 5th and 6th July, the UK-Government hosted the first in-person International Ministerial Conference on this topic since 2019 (the US held the two first ministerial conferences in 2018 and 2019). The official events were organized at the Queen Elizabeth II Center in London where only a number of NGOs were granted full access while

others had only limited or no access.

The Ministerial Conference brought together government members, officials, faith and belief leaders and civil society organisations from over 100 countries and international organizations to act in promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities around the world. More than 700 delegates participated in the official events and around a hundred fringe sessions were organized, according to the moderator of the opening ceremony.

The purpose of the conference, coordinated by MP Fiona Bruce, UK Special Envoy on FoRB, and the FCDO team (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), was to identify what is working in different countries as regards FoRB, explore where and how we can apply new lessons and approaches and inspire the next generation to champion and defend FoRB for everyone all around the world.

A day after the conference, the UK government organized a meeting with some relevant stakeholders, for a “Strategic Discussion on Next Steps”, to cover scene-setting reflections and practical steps after the Ministerial.

The strategic discussion on the next steps meeting counted among the respondents Mervyn Thomas (Chair of the UK FoRB Forum), Lord Alton of Liverpool (Vice-Chair of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on International FoRB), Greg Mitchell (Chair of the US International Religious Freedom Roundtable Secretariat), Nadine Maenza (former Chair of US Commission on International Religious Freedom), Jos Douma (Netherlands Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief) Sam Brownback (former US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom), Chris Seiple from the Institute of Global Engagement, and Jim Shannon (Co-Chair of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on International FoRB). Other subjects

discussed were “Civil Society, Parliamentarians and Academics”, “FoRB and the Media” and “Funding FoRB”.

Opening ceremony

The opening plenary titled “FoRB, a right for everyone everywhere” started with a choir made up of about 30 refugees of many faiths from a wide range of countries. There were video addresses by Prince Charles and then Prime Minister Boris Johnson. There were also speeches by Lord Ahmad, former Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on FoRB and now Minister for Human Rights, by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury since 2013 and other representatives of various faiths as well as humanism. The concluding speech was held by Mary Elizabeth Truss, a candidate to the succession of Boris Johnson and a Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs since 2021 and a Minister for Women and Equalities since 2019.

Discussion panels

Discussion panels with the participation of scholars and practitioners on the ground covered three main issues related to FoRB: prevention, protection and promotion.

The section devoted to the prevention of the degradation of FoRB was divided in four sessions: FoRB in times of conflict and insecurity – Civil society as a driver for change – FoRB and the media – Early warning prevention.

The part on the protection of FoRB was divided into three sessions: Protecting cultural and religious heritage – Inspiring Parliamentarians – Declaration on Humanity.

The section on the promotion of FoRB covered the following issues: Innovation Hub: FoRB in the Future – Engaging the next generation – FoRB in education – Promoting FoRB in the face of global challenges – Promoting FoRB in the digital world.

All these panels were of very high quality and a source of inspiration both for country delegates and civil society organizations.

The closing plenary panel discussion was titled “Reflections and the way forward.”

Statements by states’ delegates

Soothing statements – 3 to 5 minutes each – were made by representatives of about 40 states to praise their national policies concerning the protection and the promotion of FoRB at home and abroad.[i] Their self-praising declarations could have been more effectively replaced by sessions privileging public and private interactions between NGOs and state delegates.

A few international institutions such as the UN Alliance of

Civilizations, Council of Europe, European Union also made statements. Strange though it may be, it is to be noted that the OSCE/ ODIHR was absent from this part of the Ministerial and was given an event at the Civil Society limited area.

Instrumentalisation of the Ministerial by States self-praising their policies

A few examples of the self-promotion and political instrumentalization by some of the 40 participating states[ii].

H.E. Ambassador of France, Jean-Christophe Peaucelle, Advisor for Religious Affairs, limited himself to a brief and very general speech recalling the fundamental principles of freedom of conscience and belief as enshrined in the French constitution and rooted in the *laïcité*. His statement did not go beyond a simple statement praising France for defending religious freedom at home and abroad but he avoided quite a number of controversial issues, such as the law on separatism obviously targeting Muslims and the anti-cult policies stigmatizing minority religious and belief groups for over two decades.

Ambassador of Greece to the UK, H.E. Mr Ioannis Raptakis reaffirmed his commitment to combating anti-Semitism and stressed Greece's full respect for the rights of Muslims, pointing out that his country had more mosques than any other European country, which is not proven. He also condemned the transformation of the status of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to an active mosque in Istanbul. And he reaffirmed his full

support for the Ecumenical Patriarchate which has been strangled for decades by the Turkish authorities. In the background of this intervention, the permanent issues of tension with Turkey, a country with a Muslim majority and a secular enemy of Greece, loomed large.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, H.E. Péter Szigjártó praised the country's Christian roots, thanks to which it had been able to resist several invasions and retain its identity. The defence of Catholic Christianity was at the centre of his speech. In ten years, 3,000 Catholic churches have been built in the Hungarian-populated regions of Central Europe and the number of Catholic schools has doubled, he said. Hungary's two priorities are the fight against the persecution of Christians in the world and aggressive secularism. An aid programme, "Hungary Helps", has been financed for 500,000 persecuted Christians in the world, including their resettlement in their countries of origin from which they had to flee. Apart from the sole defense of Christians, he avoided explaining why some minority groups cannot fully enjoy freedom of religion or belief and are discriminated against.

Finland's State Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, H.E. Johanna Sumuvuori focused on the intersection between religious freedom and LGBT, violence against women and reproductive rights. She also stressed that Finland defends religious freedom in the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the UN. However, she avoided addressing attempts to criminalise the freedom of expression of a Christian Finnish MP on a controversial issue which led to a trial that the politician finally won.

Complaints of NGOs and recommendations

The registration for the access to the Queen Elizabeth II Center was denied, without any convincing reasons, to many NGOs who had applied for it. Others got the privilege to have full access to the events held on the ground-floor. A third group of NGOs were parked on the first floor of the building without any authorization to join the attendees of the discussion panels and official country delegations; public or private interaction between the representatives of these NGOs was impossible.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) which had not applied for registration at the Ministerial was told about a number of common recriminations from NGOs:

“We never got an answer when we tried to apply.”

“We wonder why some NGOs were registered while other were not. What are the real reasons hidden between such discrimination?”

“I know a case where a local faith leader whose name was proposed only few days before the conference got full access to all the events of the Ministerial while I was left outside although I had applied three weeks in advance. When I tried to go to the ground-floor to talk with some officials and panelists, I was not allowed to get in although 80% of the seats were empty.”

“It was weird to see that some of the participants were limited to the ground and first floors, while others like me had access to the upper levels where you could meet with officials. You could not see the criteria that were used to discriminate that way, and in fact, there was no reason for this. It would have been much better to have everyone with the same access, in an all-inclusive way.”

In conclusion, while the Ministerial was a big success in terms of content, a lot more needed to be done at the organizational level, in terms of transparency and equal opportunities for all.

Unfortunate was also the decision to organize a program of side events for NGOs on the same two days as the Ministerial at another prestigious location, the British Parliament. They could have been held before or as a follow up of the Ministerial and civil society organizations would have maximized their participation. One can wonder about the reasons for a choice of overlapping agendas. The publicity about this parallel conference for NGOs, which was open to all without any distinction or restriction, was also a success as members of the Parliament attended, chaired or sponsored the events, and here interacted with all civil society organizations.

It is to be hoped that the criticisms and problematic issues raised by grassroots activists will be heard and taken into account for the next Ministerial, whoever will organize it.

Overall, the great mass for freedom of religion or belief

driven by the UK and US governments to ensure that this vital human right be raised, exposed and protected was a very important step in moving the political momentum in the right direction.

[i] Watch the over 60 videos of those statements at <https://vimeo.com/user169814059>

[ii] Order of the list of the videos on Vimeo: United Nations (Alliance of Civilizations) – The United States of America – The Swiss Confederation – The State of Israel – The Republic of Uzbekistan – The Republic of Slovenia – The Republic of Sierra Leone – The Republic of Serbia – The Republic of Poland – The Republic of Malta – The Republic of Madagascar – The Republic of Lithuania – The Republic of Latvia – The Republic of Kazakhstan – The Republic of Finland – The Republic of Cyprus – The Republic of Croatia – The Republic of Costa Rica – The Republic of Colombia – The Republic of Cameroun – The Republic of Austria – The Republic of Armenia – The Republic of Albania – The People’s Republic of Bangladesh – The Lebanese Republic – The Kingdom of the Netherlands – The Kingdom of Thailand – The Kingdom of Norway – The Kingdom of Denmark – The Kingdom of Bahrain – The Italian Republic – Hellenic Republic – The French Republic – The Federative Republic of Brazil – The Federal Republic of Nigeria – The Co-operative Republic of Guyana – The Commonwealth of Australia – The Arab Republic of Egypt – Taiwan -Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM) – Slovak Republic – Romania – Hungary – European Union – Council of Europe – Canada.

Further reading about FORB in the World on HRWF website

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