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## **WORLD: UN States must redouble efforts against religious intolerance**

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**WORLD: UN States must redouble efforts against intolerance based on religion or belief**

***Türk calls on States to combat “the weaponization of religious differences for political purposes”. Statement by Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at urgent debate at the UN Human Rights Council on 11 July 2023.***

*By Volker Türk*

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United Nations (12.07.2023) – Beyond words, human beings communicate through symbols. A ring marks our commitment to marry. A coloured light signals us to stop or go. Religious symbols go much deeper. A crescent, a star, a cross, a seated figure: for some, these might mean little, but for millions of people they have deep significance as the repository and incarnation of an immense history, a far-reaching system of values, a foundation of collective community and belonging, and the essence of their identity and core beliefs.

The abuse or destruction of the manifestations of our innermost beliefs can polarise societies and aggravate tensions.

This Urgent Debate is prompted by recent incidents of burning of the Quran, which is the core of faith for well over a billion people. These and other incidents appear to have been manufactured to express contempt and inflame anger; to drive wedges between people; and to provoke, transforming differences of perspective into hatred and, perhaps, violence.

So the first point I want to make here is this: setting aside for a moment the question of what the law states is permissible or not, and irrespective of one’s own religious beliefs or lack of belief, people need to act **with respect for others**. All others.

SETTING ASIDE FOR A MOMENT THE QUESTION OF WHAT THE LAW STATES IS PERMISSIBLE OR NOT, AND IRRESPECTIVE OF ONE'S OWN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OR LACK OF BELIEF, PEOPLE NEED TO ACT WITH RESPECT FOR OTHERS. ALL OTHERS

Only in this way can sustained dialogue become possible. Only in this way can we have conduct among human beings that enables us to address, together, the challenges we face.

Yet the vandalism of religious sites and the destructions of icons, texts that are sacred to their believers, and religious items, have been used to insult and provoke people for centuries. To me, it is clear that speech and inflammatory acts against Muslims; Islamophobia; anti-Semitism; and actions and speech that target Christians – or minority groups such as Ahmadis, Bahá'ís or Yazidis – are manifestations of utter disrespect. They are offensive, irresponsible and wrong.

It is important to recall the immense benefit of diversity for all societies. All people have an equal right to believe, or not to believe: this is fundamental to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that unites us. We need to promote interfaith harmony and mutual respect, in the interest of all communities.

Political and religious leaders have a particularly crucial role to play in speaking out clearly, firmly and immediately against disrespect and intolerance – not only of their own communities, but of any group subjected to attack. They should also make it clear that violence cannot be justified by prior provocation, whether real or perceived.

ALSO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT VIOLENCE CANNOT BE JUSTIFIED BY PRIOR PROVOCATION, WHETHER REAL OR PERCEIVED

Mr President,

These are complex areas. The limitation of any kind of speech or expression must, as a fundamental principle, remain an

exception – particularly since laws limiting speech are often misused by those in power, including to stifle debate on critical issues.

But on the other hand, an act of speech, in the specific circumstances in which it occurs, can constitute incitement to action on the part of others – in some cases, very violent and discriminatory action. In recent years, numerous acts of violence, terror attacks and mass atrocities have targeted people on account of their religious beliefs, including inside their places of worship.

International law is clear on these kinds of incitement. Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states: States parties must, without exception, prohibit “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”.

To understand better how this must be applied, in 2011, my Office organised a series of regional workshops that led to the Rabat Plan of Action. This provides a six-step threshold regarding context, speaker, intent, content, and extent and likelihood of harm, to help demarcate free speech from incitement to violence.

Ultimately, the application of Article 20 of the ICCPR is a matter for national law-makers and courts to determine in a particular case. They need to do so in a manner that is consistent with the guardrails that international human rights law provides. Any national restrictions to the overriding right to freedom of opinion and expression must be formulated so that their sole purpose and outcome is to protect individuals – rather than to shield religious doctrine from critical review.

My second point is this: **advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to violence, discrimination and hostility should be**

**prohibited in every State.**

Mr President,

While they may not be deemed to incite violence, other forms of expression can amount to **hate speech**, if they use pejorative or bigoted language towards a person or group on the basis of their sex, belief, race, migration status, sexual orientation or any other factor inherent to their person or identity, seeking to diminish their dignity and demean their value in the eyes of others.

I'd like to elaborate: dehumanizing women and denying their equality with men; verbally abusing Muslim women and girls who wear a headscarf; sneering at people with disabilities; making false claims that migrants or people of specific ethnicities are more likely to engage in crime; or smearing LGBTIQ+ people: all such hate speech is similar, in that it stems from the baseline notion that some people are less deserving of respect as human beings.

Powered by the tidal forces of social media, and in a context of increasing international and national discord and polarisation, hate speech of every kind is rising, everywhere. It is harmful to individuals, and it damages the social cohesion necessary to the sound functioning of all societies.

My third point, then: **hate speech needs to be addressed, in all societies, through dialogue, education, awareness raising, inter-faith and inter-community engagement** and other public policy tools. It needs to be actively countered by all responsible authorities, figures of influence, and the private sector.

The **UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech** is the UN response to address this phenomenon and to support States to counter it.

Effective prevention strategies by national authorities and

others can identify and address the underlying causes of hate speech. I encourage States to redouble their efforts to implement the action plan to combat intolerance based on religion or belief that was set out in Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and via the Istanbul process. As I highlighted in my related report earlier this year, teaching materials, and peer-to-peer learning, should promote respect for pluralism and diversity in the field of religion or belief. Exchanges of lessons learned and promising practices should continue to be promoted, including with the support of our Faith for Rights Framework.

Mr President,

Many societies are struggling with this weaponization of religious differences for political purposes. We must not allow ourselves to be reeled in and become instrumentalised by these merchants of chaos for political gain – these provocateurs who deliberately seekways to divide us.

I am immensely sympathetic to the millions of people who are offended and outraged by acts that target their deepest values and beliefs.

My overriding goal today is to acknowledge the profound enrichment of all of us that is brought about by our diversity, understandings of human existence, and our thoughts and beliefs. Our societies – all our societies, whatever their religious and cultural backgrounds – must strive to become magnets for respect, dialogue and cooperation among different peoples, as has been achieved by multiple civilisations in the past.

To promote international peace and security; a rich, safe and respectful social fabric; as well as economies and societies that can benefit fully from the contributions of all their members, we must commit to advancing greater tolerance; greater respect; and greater recognition of the **importance and**

**value of our differences.**

In the media. Online. In businesses. In schools. In government. In the police. And both outside and within places of worship. The best way to push back against hate speech is with more dialogue, more conversations, more building of common understanding and more acts that manifest our conviction that we are all equal.

That all of us have rights, including the right to hold different beliefs, to adopt different ways of living, and to have and share different opinions.

I trust this Council will be able to discuss these complex issues in the spirit of unity, constructive engagement, mutual respect and deep reflection that they deserve.

Thank you

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