Survivors of Religious Persecution: The Call for Religious Freedom

November 20, 2019 • 11:00-12:30
UN Headquarters Conference Room 12

Concept Note

Summary

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirmed that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” and specified that “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.” Later this right became part of international law in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which further specified that “no one shall be subject to coercion that would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice,” emphasized that the “freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others,” and prescribed that parents have the freedom to “ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”

Despite this robust understanding and protection of the right to religious freedom in international law, however, we have been witnessing across the globe various, severe, routine acts of intolerance, discrimination, persecution and even genocide against religious believers on account of the beliefs they hold. There has been a steady rise in acts of violent anti-Semitism. Muslims have had to endure growing intolerance, discrimination, and even persecution by some States out of islamophobia. The Yazidis, as no one needs to be reminded, suffered a genocidal attack. Hindus, Buddhists, Samaritans, Sikhs and believers of other religions are objects of discrimination and persecution in various contexts. In various places, atheists, too, have endured systematic discrimination and persecution in violation of their right freely to believe that there is no God and to order their life according to that conviction.

Christians, however, according to a heralded 2017 study released by Notre Dame’s Center for Ethics and Culture, Georgetown University’s Religious Freedom Research Project and the Religious Freedom Institute, are the world’s “most widely targeted religious community, suffering terrible persecution globally,” even though in various quarters this persecution is not given adequate attention. This event will be an opportunity for those in the international community to hear from eye witnesses and survivors of anti-Christian persecution in three different countries.

In response to these growing challenges, there is need for a new era for advocacy and protection for religious freedom. Indeed, because of the attacks the world has witnessed in recent years against
various groups of religious believers, the protection of the right to religious freedom must be one of the most urgent responsibilities of the international community. The protection given must extend beyond merely preventing the intended or actual annihilation of religious minorities. It must include examining and addressing the root causes of discrimination and persecution against them and spur the vigorous defence and protection of the rights enshrined in the UDHR and the ICCPR.

The international community has begun to act on this urgent responsibility. On April 2, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 73/285 condemning “all terrorist attacks against places of worship that are motivated by religious hatred, including Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and Christianophobia.” On May 28, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 73/296, proclaiming August 22 as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, to honor victims and survivors who often remain forgotten. It reaffirmed that freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of association are interdependent, interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and stressed the role that these rights can play in the fight against all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief. It also emphasized that States, regional organizations, national human rights institutions, non-governmental organizations, religious bodies, the media and civil society as a whole have an important role to play in promoting tolerance and respect for religious and cultural diversity and in the universal promotion and protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. And on September 12, Secretary-General António Guterres launched the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites, in which the Secretary-General affirms that “people everywhere must be allowed to observer and practice their faith in peace,” adding, “When people are attacked because of their religion or beliefs, all of society is diminished.”

This event will provide an occasion to keep up the focus on translating verbal commitments into action. It will hear from representatives of States, leaders in the fight to defend religious freedom and protect religious believers from violence on account of their living out their faith, as well as hear from survivors of anti-religious violence about what they believe must be done at the grass roots level to prevent and redress it.

Invited Speakers

- Msgr. Fredrik Hansen, Chargé d’affairs, a.i., Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations
- Invited Permanent Representatives
- Mr. George Marlin, Chairman, Aid to the Church in Need USA
- Sister Ghazia Akbar, FSP, from Pakistan.
- Father Neville Fernando, TOR, from Sri Lanka
- Father Romeo Saniel, OMI, Vicariate of Jolo, Philippines.

RSVP

If you would like to reserve a spot (both delegates with UN badges as well as those from outside the UN) please RSVP at holyseemission.org/rsvp20November2019 by November 17. Inscription may be closed before November 17 if the event reaches its capacity, so interested parties are encouraged to register early.