

NO PENALTY FOR APOSTASY

Protecting each individual's freedom to follow their conscience.



VIRTUAL| 1 March 2021 Jubilee Campaign kicks off the second week of the Human Rights Council session highlighting the importance of protecting each individual's freedom to follow their conscience and not to be punished for apostasy - leaving a religion or belief.

Moderated by the Ambassador Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief for the Netherlands, the panel included both religious freedom experts and witness speakers.



"Legalising apostasy is the litmus test for religious freedom." - Ambassador Jos Douma



Opening Remarks

Executive Ann Buwalda opened the side-event by noting the commendable step Sudan took in repealing their apostasy law and called on other nations to do the same.

"In effect, Sudan has set an example that the repeal of apostasy laws is possible, and we would love to applaud Sudan; and, as in fact necessary, call for all nations to exhibit this commitment for human rights and we ask

that all nations take a view to do so."

Executive Director Buwalda also raised that at the same time, several countries across the world continue to adopt and strictly implement laws that restrict the rights of individuals to freely adopt the religion of one's choice or none at all.

Read Ann Buwalda's Full
Remarks

Watch Ann Buwalda's
Remarks

Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

The UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed made a clear case for the fundamental nature of freedom of conscience.



"International law is crystal clear: freedom of conscience is protected. Accordingly, everyone has the right to change their religion or belief or be free from any religion or belief."

He mentioned how about a dozen states still maintain, death penalty for apostasy; or use capital punishment provided in their jurisdictions for blasphemy. He also highlighted how in addition, a lot more countries, penalise conversion to a religion of a minority community with various criminal and civil rights restrictions.

"A lot more [countries] penalise conversion to a religion of a minority community with prison sentences or other negative civil law consequences or impose severe discrimination in access to essential social and economic services, or condemn the convert to a life of second-class citizenship, or indeed, as in the case of a few countries, strip them or deny them of citizenship."

He noted that all the countries that provide the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy are members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and called on these states to, "learn from their fellow member states, like Sudan who have recently abolished anti-apostasy laws, or from other OIC states who do not penalise apostasy." He also made a rallying call to the international community to not allow such laws:

"..the international community must not accept these laws. It is perhaps high time the existence of these laws is deemed inconsistent with membership of the Human Rights Council or at least, election to its bureau."

He also noted that apostasy laws are not only a problem in OIC states and made mention of a number of other countries who are adopting anti-conversion laws which, "also amount to a flagrant violation of international law."

Read the Special Rapporteur's Full
Remarks

USCIRF Chair Gayle Manchin

USCIRF Commissioner Gayle Manchin shared how USCIRF has consistently called on countries to repeal laws that criminalize apostasy, as they are inconsistent with international human rights standards.



"The fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief includes the right to change one's faith to another or to have no faith at all."

The Commissioner referenced USCIRF's report from 2019 on ["Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa"](#) and the several countries which still have apostasy or anti-conversion laws in the books. She also highlighted several individual cases from Iran and Saudi Arabia. USCIRF Chair Manchin welcomed Sudan's repeal and shared how USCIRF is encouraged by this recent development and urged all countries to "repeal laws that criminalize apostasy and to free those detained or convicted for apostasy and related crimes."

Read the Commissioner's Full Remarks

Witness Speakers and Advocates on the Ground

The witness speakers and advocates represented the countries Iran, Sudan, Mauritania and India.



Mariam Ibraheem

Mariam Ibraheem, herself a survivor of apostasy laws in Sudan shared about the importance of the repeal but also existing issues in Sudan.

Cheikh Mkhaitir

Cheikh - a survivor of the apostasy law in Mauritania- shared his personal story but also an outcry that individuals are still penalised for their beliefs in the 21st Century.



"I am not here to define apostasy and blasphemy, neither am I here to speak about the danger of the continuity of this type of crimes that takes away the basic human rights of a person, but I am here to remind you that it is a shame on humanity, that we even have to discuss these issues in the 21st Century.

The countries that still practice laws of apostasy and blasphemy – in spite of the UN conventions that they signed - would not continue to

violate the conventions unless they were sure that all those agreements and conventions are on paper only.

*And, they will continue to be on paper only, and people will continue suffering in prisons and even the gallows, **unless** - some real mechanism pushes these countries to adhere to the conventions they have signed, irrespective of the country's status in international economics. Only if we cease from double standards, and the using of international agreements and conventions as a tool for blackmail rather than a mechanism to guarantee the human right of freedom of belief and opinion."*

Read Cheikh's full statement



Tehmina Arora

Tehmina Arora, Director of Advocacy for ADF International in India, shared about the situation there, with anti-conversion laws being introduced in several states. She shared how nine states in India now regulate religious conversions. These news laws have led to Christians and Muslims being arrested and falsely accused under the law.



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"You are no longer innocent until proven guilty, you are guilty unless you prove your innocence" - Tehmina Arora, in regards to Uttar Pradesh anti-conversion laws

8:56 AM · Mar 1, 2021 · Twitter Web App

Ladan Nouri

Ladan from Iran shared her personal story of detention in Iran but also raised how the penalisation for apostasy in Iran extends much wider than only prison. "If it were only prison" - she says, and continues to share about how as a Christian from a Muslim background the Iranian government strips individuals from all civil rights, hindering her right to work, to get a livelihood, forcing Christian converts with no choice but to return to Islam or leave the country.



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"I am one of those Christians from a Muslim background in Iran who, according to the government, should not exist. I was suddenly face to face with persecution, and I spent 36 days in solitary confinement" - Ladan, Iranian survivor of apostasy laws



According to the government she should not exist.

Watch the whole webinar event



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