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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 May 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.

The Imposition of Capital Punishment for Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Religious Offenses

Currently, there are 12 nations that maintain the death penalty for apostasy and/or blasphemy: Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The states which mandate the death penalty for both are Mauritania, though Saudi Arabia and Iran equate criticism or questioning of Islam [blasphemy] as apostasy and likewise persons executed for blasphemy can also be apostates.¹

It is important to note that in many of the nations in which the death penalty is prescribed for apostasy and blasphemy, while this sentence is handed out and prisoners are placed on death row, the execution is rarely, if ever, carried out. Often, legal codification of capital punishment for apostasy and blasphemy often emboldens state and non-state actors to commit extrajudicial killings of alleged blasphemers and apostates.

Noteworthy Recent Cases

Nigeria

In March 2020, Kano State authorities arrested 22-year-old Islamic gospel singer Yahaya-Sharif Aminu on accusations of blasphemy after audio recordings were released in which the singer “praised an imam [...] to the extent it elevated him above the Prophet Muhammad”. A court in Kano State convicted Sharif-Aminu of blasphemy and sentenced him to death by hanging in August 2020.² Thanks to the intervention of attorney Kola Alapinni, a court of appeals overturned the death sentence and ordered a retrial.³

In May 2022, a mob stoned to death and subsequently set on fire Deborah Yakubu Samuel, a student of Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto. In a WhatsApp group between classmates, when Muslim students asked Deborah how she was able to pass her school tests and she replied that she received the help of Jesus, the classmates accused Deborah of committing blasphemy and demanded that she retract her statement. The following day, while walking across campus, a group of male students viciously killed Deborah, and videos of the incident depicted the assailants yelling “Allahu Akbar”.⁴

Pakistan

Numerous Pakistani individuals are currently sitting on death row for allegedly committing blasphemy: a university lecturer Junaid Hafiz⁵, who had allegedly posted derogatory remarks about the Prophet on social media [sentenced 2019]; Asif Pervaiz⁶, whose employer accused him of sending blasphemous text messages [sentenced 2020]; school principal Salma Tanveer⁷, who had reportedly committed blasphemy by distributing her own theological writings under the Prophet’s words and name [sentenced 2021]; Bashir Mastan⁸, who had posted a video in which he

¹ Humanists UK, [“Success! Sudan abolishes death penalty for apostasy”](#), 14 July 2020.

² USCIRF, [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#).

³ Jubilee Campaign, [“#HRC49 Protecting Life: Repealing the Death Penalty for Apostasy and Blasphemy”](#) [timestamp 34:44], YouTube, 30 March 2022.

⁴ The Guardian, [“Female student in Nigeria beaten to death over ‘blasphemy’”](#), 12 May 2022.

⁵ BBC News, [“Junaid Hafeez: Academic sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan”](#), 21 December 2019.

⁶ Church in Chains, [Asif Pervaiz](#), 10 February 2022.

⁷ Agenzia Fides, [“ASIA/PAKISTAN – Muslim woman sentenced to death for blasphemy”](#), 29 September 2021.

⁸ Dawn, [“Man gets death sentence for blasphemy”](#), 24 December 2021.

claimed to be a prophet [sentenced 2021]; Zafar Bhatti⁹, who was charged with sending blasphemous text messages to an Islamic cleric despite lack of any evidence whatsoever [sentenced 2022]; Aneeqa Ateeq¹⁰, who allegedly posted blasphemous statements on WhatsApp after being provoked to engage in a religious debate [sentenced 2022]; and Wasim Abbas¹¹, who was anonymously accused of making insulting remarks about the Prophet [sentenced 2022].

Moreover, there are many regrettable incidents in which Pakistani individuals have been murdered on allegations of committing blasphemy. In July 2020, while on trial for blasphemy in Peshawar, Ahmadi Muslim man Tahir Ahmad Nasim was shot and killed by a teenager who had entered the court room.¹² In July 2021, Muhammad Waqas was beaten and killed by a police constable who was angered over Waqas' previous acquittal for blasphemy.¹³ In December 2021, Sri Lankan national Priyantha Diyawadana was killed by a radical Muslim mob after rumors spread that Diyawadana removed posters of Quranic verses from his workplace's walls.¹⁴ In February 2022, mentally unstable Mushtaq Ahmed was killed by a mob of 300 Muslims after a mosque custodian reported he had witnessed Ahmed burning a copy of the Qur'an.¹⁵ In March 2022, theological teacher Safoora Bibi was killed by a female colleague and two students after one of the students had a dream of the Prophet telling her to kill Bibi for committing blasphemy.¹⁶

Iran

In late April 2021, it was reported that the Revolutionary Court of Arak City, Markazi Province, had convicted two Iranian men – Yousef Mehrad and Seyyed Sadrollah – of blasphemy and "insulting the prophet" and sentenced them to death, though there have been few details revealed regarding their cases and charges.¹⁷

Iraq

In March 2022, 20-year-old Christian convert woman Maria Iman Sami Maghdid was murdered by a Muslim family member – believed to be her uncle – after she had posted a video on social media website TikTok in which she expressed her newfound faith by singing Christian songs. One month prior to her death, Maria was gifted a Bible from a member of a Bible study group, after which she made the decision to leave Islam and follow Christianity.¹⁸

Somalia

In August 2021, an al-Shabaab militant court in Galgaduud sentenced 83-year-old man Hassan Tohow Fidow to death for allegedly committing blasphemy and insulting the prophet. Upon delivering the sentence, the judge asserted that "anyone who insults the Prophet Muhammad or Allah will face a punishment of death".¹⁹

⁹ Church in Chains, [Zafar Bhatti](#), 11 March 2022.

¹⁰ Haroon Janjua, ["Pakistan: 'WhatsApp blasphemy' death sentence reinforces dangerous trend"](#), DW, 21 January 2022.

¹¹ The Hindu, ["Pakistani man sentenced to death in blasphemy case"](#), 24 February 2022.

¹² Emma Graham-Harrison, ["He was such a kind soul": daughter's fight for US man killed at Pakistan blasphemy trial"](#), *The Guardian*, 30 August 2020.

¹³ David Averre, ["Man cleared of committing blasphemy in Pakistan is hacked to death 'by policeman who refused to believe he was innocent'"](#), *Daily Mail*, 3 July 2021.

¹⁴ Mubasher Bukhari & Asif Shahzad, ["Lynching of Sri Lankan manager by Pakistani mob was anti-Islam, court says"](#), *Reuters*, 19 April 2022.

¹⁵ Ayaz Gul, ["Mob Kills Alleged Blasphemer in Pakistan"](#), *Voice of America*, 13 February 2022.

¹⁶ Al Jazeera, ["Pakistani teacher killed for alleged blasphemy: Police"](#), 30 March 2022.

¹⁷ Iran Human Rights Monitor, ["Two Iranians sentenced to death for 'Insulting Prophet'"](#), 24 April 2021.

¹⁸ Asia News, ["Maria, 20, killed in Erbil by relatives for converting to Christianity"](#), 9 March 2022.

¹⁹ Horn Observer, ["Al-Shabaab executes old Man for alleged Blasphemy"](#), 5 August 2021.

Recommendations

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution on Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions urges nations to “ensure the effective protection to the right to life of all persons, to conduct, when required by obligations under international law, prompt, exhaustive and impartial investigations into all killings, including those targeted at specific groups of persons, such as [...] killings of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities”. We recommend that more specific language be inserted into the resolution regarding the need to eliminate the death penalty – and extrajudicial killings committed by both state and non-state actors – for non-violent ‘crimes’ such as apostasy and blasphemy. Such language could be modeled after the following additions to the pre-existing resolution on extrajudicial killings:

The General Assembly,

Recognizes that the retention of the death penalty for non-violent conduct such as apostasy or blasphemy emboldens state and non-state actors to perpetrate extrajudicial killings against individuals who change religions or express certain religious beliefs.

Affirms that under no circumstances can the death penalty ever be applied as sanction against non-violent conduct, such as apostasy or blasphemy;

Encourages States to adopt the guidance provided by the Beirut Declaration on Faith for Rights and its 18 commitments to mobilize faith-based actors to promote the human rights framework and combat violence towards individuals on the grounds of their choice or expression of religion or belief;

Emphasizes that, to prevent extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, motivated by religion, States should take effective measures to repeal laws which provide for the death penalty for religious offence and which criminalize conversion and expression of religion or belief; (A/HRC/40/58)

Welcomes the call of the Special Rapporteur for research and advocacy on the death penalty to focus on how existing capital offences such as apostasy and blasphemy laws target specific minorities.

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution on a Moratorium on the use of the death penalty notes that “...persons belonging to religious or ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented among those sentenced to the death penalty...” We recommend the following language to be inserted into the resolution, calling on all states to:

Ensure that the death penalty is never imposed as a sanction for exercising a fundamental freedom, including the right to adopt or leave a religion or belief and the right to practice or express a new religion or belief;

Ensure that the death penalty is never imposed as a sanction for apostasy and blasphemy.
