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## **U.N. quashes religious expression... again**

Becket Fund (19.12.2009 / HRWF Int. (20.12.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Today the United Nations adopted a resolution that empowers governments to punish its own citizens for expressing their religious beliefs and speaking out against a particular faith. In a vote of 80 in favor, 61 against, and 42 countries abstaining, the concept of 'defamation of religion' received yet another nod of approval from the U.N. General Assembly. This vote attempts to solidify into international law a concept that restricts basic human rights.

While the resolution that passed today is non-binding, its menace is exacerbated by concurrent negotiations taking place at the Ad Hoc Committee in Geneva where Pakistan, on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Nigeria, on behalf of the Africa Group, have proposed a binding treaty amendment to the ICERD, an existing international treaty on racism. Specifically, the amendment would outlaw 'defamation of religion,' providing legitimacy for domestic blasphemy laws used to muzzle religious minorities.

"When people are dying around the world for their beliefs, it is unfortunate that the largest international body in the world signs off on a concept that legitimates the suppression of conscience," said Bennett Graham, United Nations representative for the Becket Fund. "We must remember that human rights do not belong to the theory, the poem, or the sermon; rather, human rights belong to the teacher, the poet, and the preacher."

In a [letter](#) sent to UN ambassadors, International Law Director Angela C. Wu, stated, "the concept of penalizing 'defamation of religions' violates the very foundations of the human rights tradition by protecting ideas rather than the persons who hold the ideas."

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and a broad-based coalition of over 100 NGOs representing several religious and non-religious groups from more than 20 countries have issued a [Common Statement](#) protesting the resolution and making it clear that United Nations resolutions on the 'defamation of religion' are incompatible with fundamental freedoms of individuals to freely exercise and peacefully express their religious beliefs.

The Becket Fund has been a leading advocate against the resolutions and "defamation of religions" concept, and has delivered several interventions before the Human Rights Council and issued a brief on this topic as well as having testified before various governmental bodies, non-governmental bodies and the press.

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## **UN denies status to Christian charity after China objects**

UN Watch (27.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.07.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – UN Watch, the Geneva-based human rights monitoring group, condemned the U.N.'s decision today to reject an international Christian charity as a non-governmental organization (NGO), a form of observer status, after it refused Beijing demands to disclose the addresses of its Chinese members, and "concerns" by Russia, Egypt, Cuba, Pakistan, and Sudan about its "ability to contribute" to the world body.

Despite a U.S. initiative to keep the application open, the Dynamic Christian World Mission Foundation—a group registered in Korea and California that promotes Christianity through educational projects in Russia, Japan and Kyrgyzstan—lost today by a vote of 23 to 22 at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the U.N. organ that oversees NGO participation at the UN Human Rights Council, in the last week of a month-long session in Geneva.

Today's vote is a setback for religious freedom, and could set a dangerous precedent at the U.N. for repressive regimes to launch frivolous objections, or demand sensitive information, in order to subvert and obstruct the important work of civil society organizations in the areas of religion, education, and human rights.

Earlier in the year, the Christian group particularly angered China when it cited the lack of religious freedom in that country as the reason it would not divulge names and addresses of its Chinese members.

Those voting to reject the missionary group included Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, India, Indonesia, China, Ivory Coast, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Pakistan, and Venezuela.

Countries voting to support its application included the U.S., Brazil, Greece, Guatemala, Canada, El Salvador, Estonia, France, Germany, Japan, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, and Portugal.

However, UN Watch welcomed two other votes initiated by Western states today that saw ECOSOC overrule earlier rejections by a lower committee that is dominated by anti-democratic governments, and grant accreditation to two NGOs that met all of the official criteria.

By a vote of 25 to 12, with 13 abstentions, the U.N. accredited the Brazilian Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Association. Those voting no included Algeria, Belarus, China, Indonesia, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.

Egypt, an observer state on the 54-member body, suggested that the aim of the NGO and the countries supporting its application was "to make homosexuality universal," and complained of "double standards" against Muslim charities that were rejected for ties to terrorism. In response, Brazil said the gay group merely represented a constituency of human beings.

Similarly, by a vote of 30 to 9, with 8 abstentions, the U.N. today also accredited the Democracy Coalition Project (DCP), a Washington-based organization founded by George Soros' Open Society Institute. Those voting against included China, Russia, Sudan, Venezuela, Belarus, Bolivia, Malaysia, and Mozambique. China and Russia said the group "attacked countries specifically" and had "a political agenda."

UN Watch has relied on certain DCP reports in scoring countries based on their U.N. voting records and positions taken.

Finally, UN Watch raised concerns about the procedure behind ECOSOC's decision today to slap a one-year suspension on the Arab Commission for Human Rights, a group that frequently pillories Israel, but which angered Algeria with a June 2008 speech to the UN Human Rights Council that denounced that country's numerous human rights violations and its attempts to cover them up at U.N. committees.

Algeria immediately launched a formal complaint, saying that Rachid Mesli, the human rights lawyer who read the speech, was a terrorist convicted by his country in 1999. (That trial was heavily criticized by Amnesty International, and Mesli was granted refugee status in Switzerland.) Algeria also invoked procedural objections.

In January, when the Algerian complaint came before the initial committee vote, 18 of the 19 countries voted to uphold it, with only the U.S. abstaining. The U.K., according to Inner City Press, subsequently criticized the punishment of the NGO as "heavy-handed." However, no Western countries spoke out today, and the suspension was adopted by consensus.

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## **Liberals and Democrats urge Barroso to take action against UN initiative**

ALDE (15.04.2009) / HRWF Int. (15.04.2009) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – On March 27th, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations adopted Resolution 10/22 on "Combating Defamation of Religions". The resolution expresses concern over growing intolerance and xenophobia, in particular islamophobia and calls on governments to criminalize religious blasphemy.

Sophie in 't Veld (Netherlands, D66) calls on the Commission President Barroso to firmly condemn any limitation of the freedom of speech and to take action against the UN initiative:

"Barroso should use his forthcoming annual meeting with religious leaders to make a joint public statement in support of full and unrestricted freedom of speech. The European Commission, as the custodian of the Treaties, has a special responsibility on this issue.

Freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are fundamental rights, the cornerstone of democracy. But these freedoms are individual rights. The exercise of the freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience fully depends on the freedom of expression. Criticism of religious, political or other views should not be subject to any restrictions. That would be contrary to our democratic values. The European Union must stand tall for fundamental freedoms."

You will find attached a letter that was co-signed by ALDE-members Renate Weber, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, Sarah Ludford, Lena Ek, Johannes Lebeck, Alexander Alvaro, Silvana Koch-Mehrin and Jules Maaten attached to this press release.

## **UN body OKs call to curb religious criticism**

Frank Jordans

AP (27.03.2009) / HRWF (01.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) – The U.N.'s top human-rights body approved a proposal by Muslims

nations Thursday urging passage of laws around the world to protect religion from criticism.

The proposal put forward by Pakistan on behalf of Islamic countries — with the backing of Belarus and Venezuela — had drawn strong criticism from free-speech campaigners and liberal democracies.

A simple majority of 23 members of the 47-nation Human Rights Council voted in favor of the resolution. Eleven nations, mostly Western, opposed the resolution, and 13 countries abstained.

The resolution urges states to provide "protection against acts of hatred, discrimination, intimidation and coercion resulting from defamation of religions and incitement to religious hatred in general."

"Defamation of religions is the cause that leads to incitement to hatred, discrimination and violence toward their followers," Pakistan's ambassador Zamir Akram said.

"It is important to deal with the cause, rather than with the effects alone," he said.

Muslim nations have argued that religions, in particular Islam, must be shielded from criticism in the media and other areas of public life. They cited cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as an example of unacceptable free speech.

"Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism," the resolution said.

Opponents of the resolution included Canada, all European Union countries, Switzerland, Ukraine and Chile.

"It is individuals who have rights and not religions," Canadian diplomat Terry Cormier said.

India, which normally votes along with the council's majority of developing nations, abstained in protest at the fact that Islam was the only religion specifically named as deserving protection.

India's Ambassador Gopinathan Achamkulangare said the resolution "inappropriately" linked religious criticism to racism.

The council is dominated by Muslim and African countries. Its resolutions are not binding, but are meant to act as recommendations for U.N. member states on issues of human rights.

Earlier, a coalition of more than 100 secular and faith groups had called on governments to oppose the resolution, warning that it could lead to accusations of defamation among different faiths.

The United States did not vote on the resolution because it is not a member of the council. The Bush administration announced it was virtually giving up on the body and would participate in debates only if absolutely necessary because of the Geneva body's anti-Israel statements and its failure to act on abuses in Sudan and elsewhere.

U.S. diplomats resumed their observer role in the council after President Barack Obama took office, though it is unclear whether Washington will stand for one of the 18 council seats up for election in May.

Esther Brimmer, Obama's nominee for the job of Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizational Affairs, told a Senate hearing Tuesday that the council was a "major disappointment, diverted from its mission by states with some of the worst human rights records."

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