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SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

INTERNATIONAL DAY TO COMMEMORATE VICTIMS OF ACTS OF VIOLENCE BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF
22 August 2025
GENEVA

Urgent action required to end violence on the basis of religion or belief: UN experts

On the International Day to commemorate victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, a group of UN Human Rights Experts* noted with great regret that marginalisation, incitement, violence, including killings, on this basis remain, disturbingly widespread. In the context of increasing global polarization, including on the basis of religion or belief, is leading to increased State and non-State violations, including in the most extreme forms, amounting to international crimes such as crimes against humanity, war crimes, and even genocide.

Denial of freedom of religion or belief engenders grave acts of violence across the world, in every region without execption. It may also take the form of imposing an extreme interpretation of religion upon others, or of forbidding the exercise of religious practices or rituals which are often running in parallel with violations of other rights, including in the form of religious and gender persecution. Gender inequality, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, can be intertwined with denials of freedom of religion or belief. Women and girls from religion or belief minority communities are at great risk for violence associated with the confluence of their religion or belief and gender.

Religious nationalism, the endorsement and promotion of a specific religion as part of a national identity, too often leads to violence against persons belonging to a different religion or belief. We urge States to treat, both in law and in practice, all religions on an equal footing and to avoid promoting the rights of those belonging to a specific religion or belief, or holding one religious identity, as more legitimate than others

Stereotypes and harmful narratives associated with religions and beliefs contribute to intersectional marginalisation and violence against migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), minorities, and Indigenous Peoples, among others. These include the endangering of the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous communities, such as through their displacement and destruction of their places of worship. In some parts of the world practitioners of traditional religions, similarly, find themselves subjected to criminalisation, marginalisation, destruction of temples, and

violence resulting from accusations of witchcraft or demonism. Those belonging to some religions and beliefs are unjustly profiled and stigmatized as associated with terrorism, violent extremism, espionage or national security concerns.

The lives of people on the move, including those fleeing religious persecution, are increasingly precarious in the current global political context. Reports of violence, including forced displacement, on the basis of religion or belief, and religiously motivated violence within displacement camps, remain frequent. Individuals seeking international protection from religious persecution, increasingly face forcible repatriation or long-term detention, often in unsanitary and dangerous conditions.

Transnational repression of religion or belief minorities, including under the guise of counter-terrorism operations, represents a further threat to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, the right to life, the prohibition of enforced disappearance, and the principle of non-refoulement.

Criminalization of religion or belief, along with that of conscientious objection to military service, constitutes coercion prohibited under international human rights law. Coercion of this kind, aimed at forcing the victim to change their religion or belief, or which denies their religion, conscience and conviction, often results in pain or suffering that may meet the thresholds of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Outside of places of deprivation of liberty, denial or disruption of burial rites and unchecked vandalism and attacks on places of burial – of which reports remain common – can also cause such emotional anguish among the family and friends of the deceased as to reach this threshold.

It is seriously alarming that, in several States, acts understood as 'apostasy' and 'blasphemy' remain not only criminalised, but punishable by the death penalty. As has been established by the UN Human Rights Committee, this punishment is to be reserved only for the most serious crimes – involving intentional killing – and then only in the most exceptional circumstances and under the strictest limitations. The exercise of the fundamental human right to have, adopt, or change one's religion or belief can in no way be interpreted as reaching this threshold.

Criminal bans on 'apostasy' and 'blasphemy' also serve to legitimise and even encourage vigilante acts of violence, including killings, and explicit incitement thereto, by non-State actors against religious or belief minorities, or those perceived to be such. Honour killings, allegedly based on intersections of religious and morality laws, are relied on to justify violence, and violations of the rights of women and girls. Inaction or even complicity by State authorities is often reported in conjunction with such attacks. Considering this ongoing trend, the framing of anti-blasphemy laws as 'hate speech' protection is particularly unhelpful. States are called upon to fully repeal *de facto* or *de jure* anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws and bring hate-speech legislation in line with international standards, thereby protecting manifestations of thought, conscience, religion or belief, along with freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association and other rights.

The right to life, the right to dignity and the prohibition of torture or ill-treatment, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and the right to

participate in cultural life are regularly inter-related, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. They must be assured to everyone, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, or migratory status. All States are called upon to live up to their international obligations in this respect: to take effective and urgent action to recognise, respect, and protect freedom of religion or belief; to refrain from criminalisation and violence on the basis of religion or belief; and to end impunity for acts of discriminatory violence by non-State actors.

ENDS

The experts:

- **Nazila Ghanea**, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief;
- **Alexandra Xanthaki,** Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights;
- **Alice Jill Edwards,** Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
- **Morris Tidball-Binz,** Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions;
- **Claudia Flores (Chair), Ivana Krstić (Vice-Chair), Dorothy Estrada Tanck, Haina Lu, and Laura Nyirinkindi**, Working group on discrimination against women and girls;
- **Mai Sato**, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran ;
- **Ben Saul,** Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism;
- **Richard Bennett,** Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan ;
- **Reem Alsalem,** Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences;
- **Paula Gaviria Betancur**, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons;
- **Nicolas Levrat**, Special Rapporteur on minority issues

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Country-specific observations and recommendations by the UN human rights mechanisms, including the special procedures, the treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review, can be found on the Universal Human Rights Index https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/

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