

Sixth Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

Item 3

Review, Rationalization and Improvement of the Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

JOINT ORAL STATEMENT

submitted by International Association for Religious Freedom -

together with Anglican Consultative Council; Baha'i International Community; Conscience and Peace Tax International; Dominicans for Justice and Peace; Franciscans International; Interfaith International; International Federation of Social Workers; International Federation of University Women; Institute for Planetary Synthesis; PanPacific and South East Asia Women's Association International; Susila Dharma International; World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women; Worldwide Organization for Women.

Mr President, the above-named fourteen NGOs express their strong conviction about the importance of this mandate. Over 21 years, it has proved itself to be the most specific and effective instrument in promoting the implementation of the principles of the 1981 Declaration. In the absence of any legally binding convention on freedom of religion or belief, it is the strengthening and improvement of this mandate which is the present priority and which should be the outcome of the current assessment.

The admirably complete analysis, given in the report of the Special Rapporteur to this session, already points to the need to follow up more systematically recommendations from the previous and the present Special Rapporteurs. These include promotion of education for tolerance and wider study of the status of women in the light of religion or belief.

The Special Rapporteur has consistently recommended intra-religious, inter-religious, and inter-cultural dialogue, including respect for non-religious beliefs, and so it is to be hoped that the mandate will be seen by the General Assembly as an effective implementing partner for appropriate recommendations from its High Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace to be held on 4 to 5 October 2007.

The mandate has addressed specific and sensitive issues such as irresponsible proselytism, legitimate missionary activities, conscientious objection, display of religious symbols or dress, desecration of holy places, and the particular vulnerability of some minorities. The mandate has consistently upheld the right to free and responsible personal choice which respects necessary legal limitations.

There has been good co-operation with other mandates such as those for freedom of expression and for contemporary forms of racism. Some of these may be better equipped to focus upon issues such as defamation of religions or responses to terrorism, but conditions for resolving such serious problems must often depend on scrupulous respect for freedom of religion or belief. We call for the continuance and strengthening of the existing mandate as it protects people from crippling manifestations of intolerance and promotes the enabling value of freedom of religion or belief.