

United Nations Human Rights Council

Forum on Minority Issues - Sixth Session

“Beyond freedom of religion or belief: Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities”

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Protecting Religious Minorities: A Human Imperative

Presentation of Rev. Majed El Shafie, One Free World International

Mister/Madam Chair,
Madam Independent Expert,
Distinguished delegates and colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Reverend Majed El Shafie, and I am the President and Founder of One Free World International (OFWI), an international human rights organization based out of Toronto, Canada. I would like to thank the Forum for the opportunity to present our comments and recommendations on this most urgent issue of the rights of religious minorities.

Before I discuss our topic today, I beg your indulgence as I give you a little background. I was born in Egypt to a prominent Muslim family of judges and lawyers and grew up with a vast library of books on law, justice, and human rights, determined to become a human rights lawyer. During law school I was persuaded by much personal study and reflection to accept the beliefs of Christianity and shortly after my conversion began advocating equal rights for Egyptian Christians. For these reasons I was detained and severely tortured by Egyptian authorities and sentenced to death. I fled Egypt and finally settled in Canada in 2002, establishing OFWI to share a message of freedom, hope, and tolerance for religious differences and to promote human rights in this area through advocacy and public education.

Our mission and calling at OFWI is to stand up for religious minorities and individuals around the world who are being persecuted because of their personal beliefs, regardless of religion or creed. We advocate on behalf of religious minorities and individuals through direct interventions with foreign governments, by educating our own politicians and citizens about religious freedom and abuses of human rights in this area, and through humanitarian aid and rescue missions.

It is not necessary today to go into detail about the kinds of challenges and violations religious minorities face around the world. Without wishing to oversimplify the matter, the vast majority of challenges faced by religious minorities fall into three categories. Firstly, there are the threats from secular authoritarian regimes, which monitor, regulate, and control religious practice and expression within their boundaries and suppress any unauthorized practice. The second involve cases of religious dominance; this may involve a state favouring a majority religion while discriminating against or persecuting minority religions or it could involve the actions of religious extremists often acting with the tacit support of state

authorities. Often the freedom of thought and expression of those belonging to the majority religious group is also compromised. The third category in today's world is often, but not necessarily, linked to the second, namely the treatment of religious minorities in conflict or post-conflict situations.

Violations of religious freedom typically involve violations of other fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, the right to life and to be free from torture, etc. In many places around the world, religious minorities face these threats daily: Falun Gong adherents or Uyghur Muslims in China; Buddhist monks in Tibet; Dalit Christians in India; independent churches in China, Cuba, or Vietnam; Bahai's, Christians and Christian converts, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and Jews in Muslim countries across the Middle East and South-East Asia; Shi'a Muslims in some Muslim countries and Sunni Muslims in others, to mention only a few.

Action on the part of States and the international community to protect and respect the rights of these religious minorities and others is critical. In this regard, One Free World International supports the Forum's recommendations regarding the prevention of violence and protection of religious minorities. We support the recommendations and efforts of the Forum participants to increase training and education on the rights of religious minorities among domestic authorities and requiring the accountability of these authorities in cases where they fail to respect the rights of religious minorities. We agree that States must increase consultation with and participation of religious minorities and improve access for religious minorities to state services as well as to positions of influence and thus to facilitate their participation in the political and economic life of their respective countries to the benefit of all. We would also encourage States that have aid and trade ties with States where minorities face threats to offer their assistance to such States in implementing the rights of religious minorities and to connect their aid and trade to measurable improvements in these matters.

We stand against hatred in all its forms. We do not, however, support the spread of hate crimes legislation which raises troubling questions about the impact such laws have on other rights, such as the right to freedom of thought and expression, and which run the risk of being turned against the very religious minorities the Forum intends to protect. This would more likely be indirectly, for example through such legislation being used to justify blasphemy laws such as those existing formally in Pakistan or informally in a number of other countries, and which must themselves be abolished because of the threat they pose to religious minorities. Instead, we would urge the improvement of existing criminal laws and their enforcement in cases where the victims belong to religious minorities, something that is currently lacking in many countries of concern.

Finally, we would encourage the Forum participants to recognize the special needs of converts and the related question of the relationship between religious minority rights and the rights of majority adherents to question their beliefs and to receive accurate, unbiased information about other religions if they so desire, as well as their right to change or reject their own religious beliefs and practices in accordance with their individual conscience. We would also encourage the Forum to recommend that States pay particular attention to supporting members of religious minorities who are fleeing from conflict zones as internally displaced persons or refugees and who often are doubly victimized in the process and the result.

As human beings we cannot stand idly by as our fellow human beings are denied essential aspects of their humanity. We must do everything in our power to protect religious minorities and ensure their rights are protected and OFWI would like to assure the Forum of our support to this end.