



United Nations Human Rights Council 26<sup>th</sup> Session (10 – 27 June 2014)  
Item 3 General Debate  
Monday 16 June 2014  
Speaker: BHA representative, Amelia Cooper

Thank you Mr President.

The notion of 'blasphemy', which has been repeatedly criticised as inconsistent with normative human rights standards<sup>1</sup>, is no longer limited to the protection of religious sensitivities. It has become a tool by which States silence dissent<sup>2</sup>, invoke narrow-identity politics<sup>3</sup>, and deny citizens their right to seek and impart information.

Online activists and bloggers are increasingly targeted by blasphemy laws, both in the censorship of their work and in their actual incarceration. Last week, despite committing to a UN resolution detailing that freedom of expression online shall be protecting in the same manner as offline<sup>4</sup>, Pakistan's Electronic Media Regulatory Authority demanded that Tweets reported as 'blasphemous' or 'un-ethical'<sup>5</sup> are removed, specious grounds that violate international guidance on censorship. Bloggers accused of blasphemy remain in prison throughout the world, including in Saudi Arabia<sup>6</sup>, Bangladesh<sup>7</sup>, Tunisia<sup>8</sup>, and Mauritania<sup>9</sup>.

The recourse to justice for those accused of blasphemy is, at best, skewed; at worst, non-existent. Arbitrary arrests<sup>10</sup>, mob violence<sup>11</sup> and extra-judicial killings<sup>12</sup> are common consequences of blasphemy allegations. Lawyers refuse to take defence cases, for fear of reprisals<sup>13</sup>: unsurprising, given that in the past month, the lawyer on a blasphemy case in Saudi Arabia is now in jail<sup>14</sup>, while in Pakistan, lawyer Rashid Rehman, who said that defending someone accused of blasphemy was akin to 'walking in to the jaws of death'<sup>15</sup>, has indeed been murdered<sup>16</sup>. Judges have reportedly been attacked for acquitting those accused of blasphemy, while the investigative process itself often lacks basic standards<sup>17</sup>.

Blasphemy laws undermine the principles of this Council and are conducive towards a myriad of human rights abuses, both State-sanctioned and through vigilantism. Their abrogation is manifestly overdue, and we urge the Council to take immediate steps to ensure that States with such laws are no longer allowed to violate their citizens' rights.

Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> The Rabat Plan of Action urges the repeal of blasphemy laws ([http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat\\_draft\\_outcome.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf)); the SR on Freedom of Religion or Belief calls for their repeal in A/HRC/25/58; blasphemy laws are based on the concept of 'defamation of religions' which was rejected by this Council as being inconsistent with human rights norms and standards.

<sup>2</sup> <http://iheu.org/prominent-atheist-blogger-remains-danger-pending-blasphemy-trial-bangladesh/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://iheu.org/pakistan-time-has-come-politicians-police-and-clerics-must-confront-blasphemy-mobs-unison-and/>

<sup>4</sup> "The same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice, in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." A/HRC/20/L.13, 2012

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.chillingeffects.org/international/notice.cgi?action=image\\_3272033](https://www.chillingeffects.org/international/notice.cgi?action=image_3272033)

<sup>6</sup> For example, Raif Badawi <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27318400>

<sup>7</sup> For example, the two teenagers arrested in March <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2014/04/01/teenage-bloggers-in-bangladesh-arrested-for-blasphemous-facebook-posts/>; or the four arrested bloggers <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2013/03/27/bangladesh-widens-crackdown-on-blasphemous-atheist-bloggers/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/05/21/Tunisian-jailed-after-pardon-for-blasphemous-cartoons-.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://freearabs.com/index.php/politics/69-stories/937-jb-span-mauritania-jb-span-writer-blogger-apostate>

<sup>10</sup> All arrests under blasphemy laws are, according to international law, arbitrary. However, the already unjust law is often employed falsely, due to failures in investigative process, or to settle personal vendettas. Further, a recent mass arrest in Pakistan only cited 8 of the 68 accused's names.

<sup>11</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304655304579550030970480094>

<sup>12</sup> Murder of an atheist blogger in Bangladesh <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2013/05/2013511988676973.html>; murder of defence lawyer Rashid Rehman in Pakistan <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27319433>. At least 52 people accused of blasphemy in Pakistan have been lynched since 1990, according to 'Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan: Historical Overview', Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). Quoted in many media outlets such as <http://tribune.com.pk/story/433305/crss-report-52-murdered-in-two-decades-over-blasphemy/>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/08/us-pakistan-blasphemy-idUSBREA4709N20140508>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27319433>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elham-manea/waleed-abulkhair-imprison\\_b\\_5267086.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elham-manea/waleed-abulkhair-imprison_b_5267086.html)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/08/world/asia/pakistan-activist-shot-dead-aided-blasphemy-suspects.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27319433>

<sup>17</sup> In Pakistan, 'the law does not require evidence to be presented in court and there are no penalties for false allegations'. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/08/us-pakistan-blasphemy-idUSBREA4709N20140508>