



United Nations Human Rights Council: 29th Session (15th June to 3rd July 2015)

GD Item 4

Thursday 24th June

Speaker: BHA Representative, Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivan

Blasphemy in Bangladesh: The Persecution of the Non-Religious

Thank you Mr President.

The violence and discrimination to which religious non-conformists are subject has increased in both severity, and frequency in Bangladesh in recent times¹.

In 2013, a group of 100,000 Islamist protestors called for the prosecution and death of bloggers who insult Islam², providing a list of 84 humanist activists to the government of Bangladesh³.

In response, the government criminalised 'defamation of religion'⁴ creating a de facto 'blasphemy' law⁵. Additionally, section 295A of the penal code, states that anyone with 'deliberate' or 'malicious' intentions of 'outraging...religious feelings' will be liable to imprisonment. These laws have been used in practice to prosecute and imprison humanists and secularists⁶.

This amounts to state sanctioned persecution of freethinkers and minority belief groups, violating articles 18 and 19 of the ICCPR.

Violent vigilantism has also increased this year; three bloggers were hacked to death for expressing beliefs critical of radical Islam between February and May⁷. These attacks are crimes 'not only against the person, but against freedom of speech and humanity'⁸.

The persecution of non-believers is not limited to Bangladesh – according to the International Humanist and Ethical Union Freedom of Thought Report 2014⁹, thirteen states punish atheism or apostasy by death. Therefore, some of the most basic human rights to which we are all guaranteed under international law are being impinged upon to an intolerable degree by members of this Council.

As highlighted in the Oxford Declaration¹⁰, freedom of thought and expression 'have proved the most essential conditions for human flourishing'. As such, we urge the Council to exert pressure on Bangladesh to reform its legal code and practice in order to preserve these fundamental human rights, and to protect its freethinking citizens from escalating violent vigilantism. This is imperative should they wish to retain any credibility as a member of this Council.

Thank you.

¹ The murder of three Bangladeshi humanist bloggers, which occurred between February and May this year, has been widely reported, for example on 12th May 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/12/third-atheist-blogger-killed-in-bangladesh-after-knife-attack>

² Widely covered, for example on 6th April 2013: <http://rt.com/news/bangladesh-protest-muslim-blogger-431/>

³ International Humanist and Ethical Union, Freedom of Thought Report, 2014, available to download: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/>

⁴ International Commission of Jurists briefing on the amendment of the Information Communication Technology Act 2006, published in November 2013, available for download here: <http://www.ici.org/bangladesh-information-and-communication-technology-act-draconian-assault-on-free-expression/>

⁵ International Humanist and Ethical Union, Freedom of Thought Report, 2014, available to download: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/>

⁶ Several humanist bloggers were arrested following protests, see Index on Censorship coverage, published on 8th April 2013: <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/04/bangladesh-rejects-call-for-blasphemy-law-but-atheist-bloggers-still-detained/>

⁷ British Humanist Association news item covering the murder of Ananta Bijoy Das, the humanist blogger murdered most recently, published in May 2014: <https://humanism.org.uk/2015/05/12/ananta-bijoy-das-killed-the-third-bangladeshi-blogger-hacked-to-death-in-three-months/>

⁸ Quote from the statement of Rafida Bonya Ahmed, wife of Avijit Roy who was present and injured during the attack, published 10th March 2015: http://www.centerforinquiry.net/newsroom/bonya_ahmed_wife_of_murdered_blogger_avijit_roy_join_us_in_a_demand_for_jus/

⁹ Available for download here: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/>

¹⁰ The Declaration on Freedom of Thought and Expression adopted by the 2014 World Humanist Congress, on 10th August 2014: <http://iheu.org/oxford-declaration-on-freedom-of-thought-and-expression/>