

United Nations Human Rights Council: 30th Session (14 September – 2 October 2015)
GD Item 3
Thursday 17th September 2015
Speaker: BHA representative, Cordelia Tucker O’Sullivan
The persecution of religious non-conformists: a multi-faceted human rights abuse issue

Thank you Mr. President.

Religious non-conformists, including atheists, humanists, and secularists, are subject to increasingly brutal human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention,¹ enforced disappearances,² and violent vigilantism,³ which the international community has failed to adequately challenge.

In Saudi Arabia, Raif Badawi continues to be imprisoned and lashed⁴ simply for exercising his right to free expression. His lawyer, Waleed Abu Al-Khair has also been jailed for his work as a human rights activist⁵. Waleed was the first person charged and convicted in Saudi Arabia under the new ‘extreme terrorism’ decree (2014) which, along with a series of related royal decrees, criminalises virtually all dissident thought⁶.

In Bangladesh, in response to increasing pressure from Islamist protestors,⁷ authorities outlawed ‘defamation of religion’,⁸ and according to the International Humanist and Ethical Union Freedom of Thought Report 2014,⁹ arbitrarily arrested and detained¹⁰ a number of secularist commentators. Four Bangladeshi humanist bloggers have been hacked to death by Islamist extremists since February of this year¹¹, demonstrating the culture of impunity surrounding the persecution of atheists and humanists.¹²

These are but two examples in a much broader scheme of persecution directed towards religious minorities, political dissenters, and free speech defenders. 55 countries punish blasphemy,¹³ 39 of these impose a custodial sentence, and 6 impose death. In 19 countries, apostasy is a crime, punishable by death in 12 countries.¹⁴

As highlighted in the Oxford Declaration,¹⁵ freedom of thought and expression ‘have proved the most essential conditions for human flourishing’. Yet religious non-conformists are routinely denied these fundamental freedoms. We therefore urge the Council to put pressure on the relevant States to amend their legal codes and practices, and adequately defend the human rights of *all* its citizens.

Thank you.

¹ In paragraph 10(b) their most recent report (A/HRC/30/37), the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention considers a deprivation of liberty arbitrary when it is the result of exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief and/or freedom of speech, as enshrined in articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>).

² Human Rights Watch reported a number of enforced disappearances in Yemen, for reasons including being a Zaidi Muslim. To view the report, see: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/yemen1008/4.htm>.

³ For example, in Bangladesh, four secular bloggers have been murdered since February this year, for the British Humanist Association’s coverage, see: <https://humanism.org.uk/2015/08/07/fourth-bangladeshi-humanist-blogger-niloy-neel-hacked-to-death-by-islamist-extremists/>

⁴ Raif Badawi’s case has been reported on by a number of media outlets, charities, and NGOs, including the International Humanist and Ethical Union: <http://iheu.org/act-now-to-freeraif-calling-for-freedom-gets-you-10-years-1000-lashes-in-saudi-arabia/>

⁵ Waleed’s arrest and subsequent detention qualifies as arbitrary under the definition used in A/HRC/30/37; his case has been reported on by a number of media outlets, including: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/25738> and <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/06/world/meast/saudi-lawyer-sentence/>

⁶ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/06/world/meast/saudi-lawyer-sentence/>

⁷ A group of 100,000 Islamist protestors called for the arrest and death of bloggers who insult Islam, providing a list of 84 humanist activists to the government of Bangladesh. This was widely reported in the international media, including: covered, for example on 6th April 2013: <http://rt.com/news/bangladesh-protest-muslim-blogger-431/>

⁸ For full details of the change in Bangladeshi law, see the 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/>

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

¹⁰ The bloggers were arrested on grounds of offending Islam and its Prophet, which is defined as arbitrary in paragraph 10(b) of the most recent report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, A/HRC/30/37

¹¹ The four bloggers being Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman, Ananta Bijoy Das, and Niloy Chowdhury Neel, their murders have been widely reported in international press, including by the British Humanist Association: <https://humanism.org.uk/2015/08/07/fourth-bangladeshi-humanist-blogger-niloy-neel-hacked-to-death-by-islamist-extremists/>.

¹² While the Bangladeshi authorities have made some arrests in connection with the crimes, IHEU have urged caution with regards to information disseminated by Bangladeshi media and authorities (see: <http://iheu.org/statement-on-arrests-in-bangladesh-blogger-murder-cases/>).

¹³ Or ‘offending religious feelings’.

¹⁴ Statistics obtained from the IHEU Freedom of Thought Report 2014, available for download here: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/>.

¹⁵ 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/>