

United Nations Human Rights Council, 33rd Session (13 – 30 September 2016)

Item 9 General Debate

September 2016

Speaker: BHA representative, Cordelia Tucker O'Sullivan

Thank you, Mr President.

I give this statement on behalf of the British Humanist Association, British Muslims for a Secular Democracy, and the Arab Humanists.

The Durban Declaration calls for the 'elimination of all forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance',¹ including discrimination based on religion or belief.² Nevertheless, many States are failing to address this problem, and in some cases, are exacerbating it.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed serious concern about the 'sharp increase in the number of racist hate crimes especially in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the weeks prior to and following the referendum on the membership of the European Union'. They commented that 'many politicians and prominent political figures not only failed to condemn it, but also created and entrenched prejudices',³ therefore arguing that some State actors *themselves* were complicit in whipping up abhorrent attitudes and practices. In particular, the immediate aftermath of the referendum saw a huge increase in the volume of reported hate crimes directed towards eastern European nationals, as well as Muslims, regardless of their national origin.⁴ A failure to address such actions constitutes a failure to ensure that the human rights of all, regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, economic background, or religion, are respected.

We are also concerned that the segregationist religious curriculum mandated by Egypt fuels xenophobic attitudes and practices. Muslim and Christian students are required to take Islamic and Christian courses respectively, neither of which mention non-monotheistic faiths or those who lack faith. Such policies are likely to reinforce sectarianism and will do nothing to challenge the ongoing religiously motivated violence,⁵ such as the recent case of a 70 year old Coptic woman being stripped naked, with 7 other Christian homes being ransacked and torched, following rumours that her son had had an affair with a Muslim woman.⁶

We wish to remind all States of their commitment to the elimination of racism, xenophobia, and related intolerance, and urge them to review their legislation such that this goal can be realized in practice.

Thank you.

¹ CERD/C/GBR/CO/21-23 preambular paragraph 4

² Article 79, Durban Declaration; <http://www.un.org/WCAR/durban.pdf>

³ CERD/C/GBR/CO/21-23 para 15

⁴ See: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/29/frenzy-hatred-brexite-racism-abuse-referendum-celebratory-lasting-damage>, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/racist-brexite-blowback-muslim-women-targeted-abuse-after-eu-referendum-vote-1567421>, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-poland-incidents-idUKKCN0ZD19V>

⁵ Such as that committed against Ahmad and Sally Harqan: see the International Humanist and Ethical Union's Freedom of Thought Report 2015, available for download here: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/> (p94)

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/muslim-mob-in-egypt-strips-elderly-christian-woman-in-violent-attack>