

Multinational Efforts to Promote Freedom of Religion or Belief

Joint Action for the Common Good

New York, Thursday 17th – Saturday 19th September 2015

Violations of freedom of religion or belief are increasing globally with devastating effects on individuals and communities as well as global security and stability. Both international and intra-national strife is spawned by these violations, well documented by institutions such as the Pew Forum or the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. People of all convictions and faiths have been the objects of human rights abuses for merely wanting to live out their beliefs peacefully. Billions of people live in countries where their religious freedoms are restricted through government and/or societal actions. Perpetrators include authoritarian regimes, extremist groups, terrorists and other non-state actors (especially in failed or failing states).

International standards are clear on religious freedom. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a robust definition of freedom of religion or belief, including the right to have any or no faith, to change one's faith or other personal rights such as the freedom to practice and express religious convictions. The UDHR was forged out of the ashes of World War II and remains incredibly relevant to today's environment plagued by violence and war. Although UN Member States have agreed to these standards, compliance has dramatically declined globally in the past decade.

Meeting these challenges and successfully pushing back against this rising tide of violations goes beyond the capabilities of any one country or organization. Governments and parliaments for the first time have begun working across national boundaries to advocate together for greater respect for freedom of religion or belief. The Oslo meeting of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief in November 2014 launched an inter-parliamentary effort to advance religious freedom for all. Parliamentarians signed the 'Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief', pledging themselves to uphold international standards and to work to promote the right, thus starting an international and interreligious alliance for parliamentary action. In addition, the Inter-Governmental Contact Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief was publicly launched in Brussels in May 2015, which seeks to network government efforts for greater impact.

The purpose of this meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly, hosted by the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation is to take the parliamentary effort to the level of the United Nations. It will provide a platform to further discuss ways to increase international cooperation to combat persecution and advance religious freedom for all. Case studies and blueprints for action both on the parliamentary as on government level will be reviewed. The meeting will assemble diplomats, UN officials, parliamentarians, civil society and religious groups to participate in an interactive discussion. The event will be the first such meeting of its kind bringing together governments, parliamentarians, international organizations and civil society in the context of the United Nations