

Free to BELIEVE

Open Doors Free to Believe Campaign 2010

BACKGROUND:

Who: The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), an inter-governmental organization of 57 states with majority or significant Muslim populations, has been working for several years through the United Nations system to justify and advance the Defamation of Religions Resolution.

What: The Defamation of Religions Resolution, introduced in the UN, seeks to criminalize words or actions that are deemed to be against a particular religion, especially against Islam. Although proponents justify the “defamation of religion” concept as protecting religious practice and promoting tolerance, it really promotes intolerance and human rights violations of religious freedom and freedom of speech for religious minorities in these countries.

Why: The Defamation of Religions Resolution has the effect of providing international legitimacy for national laws that punish blasphemy or otherwise ban criticism of a religion.

When: The OIC is expected to propose to the UN General Assembly another “defamation of religions” resolution to be voted on late November/early December.

Where: The UN General Assembly in New York City, New York.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

What is the Defamation of Religions Resolution?

It is a nonbinding but influential statement that in the name of religious tolerance condemns words that denigrate any religion. In practice, the resolution provides cover for various laws in the Islamic World that restrict religious freedom and freedom of expression, such as Pakistan’s notorious blasphemy laws. The resolution has been introduced and voted on in various forms and under various titles since 1999. It is expected to be proposed again in the UN General Assembly this fall.

What is the Organization of the Islamic Conference?

The Organization of Islamic Conference is an inter-governmental organization of 57 states with majority or significant Muslim populations. The OIC’s original Defamation of Religions campaign had targeted the “defamation of Islam,” but later it was reframed as the “defamation of religions” to broaden support.

Until this year, Islam was the only faith specifically mentioned in the resolutions the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly have passed. In March 2010, a new version which refers once to Anti-Semitism and Christianophobia was introduced and passed by a narrow majority at the Human Rights Council. But protecting Islam is still a clear focus in the resolution.

What is the reality of this resolution?

Although proponents justify the “defamation of religion” concept as protecting religious practice and promoting tolerance, it really promotes intolerance and human rights violations of religious freedom and freedom of expression. This resolution has empowered repressive government and religious extremists to suppress and punish whatever they deem to be offensive or unacceptable speech about a particular favored religion or sect. It gives a cloak of international respectability to persecution.

For example, blasphemy laws in some countries have been used to justify actions that selectively curtail civil dissent, halt criticism of political structures, and restrict the religious speech of minority faith communities, dissenting members of the majority faith, and persons of religious faith. Under these laws, criminal charges have been levied against individuals for defamation, denigrating, insulting, offending, disparaging and blaspheming Islam, often resulting in gross human rights violations.

Is this persecution really taking place?

Yes! These are just a few of many documented incidents.

Pakistan:

In December 2008 a Christian couple was detained for failing to do a ritual washing before touching Islamic scripture, and for using the Quran for black magic. A lawyer for The Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) attested that the accusations concerning the use of the Book for black magic was false, and that the dispute had originally started amongst the couple’s children and the children of the accusing Muslim couple. On March 3, 2010 they were convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/pakistan/16071/>

On February 25, 2010, Qamar David was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment plus a 100,000 rupee fine for some blasphemous text messages he was accused of sending in May 2006 in spite of the sixteen witnesses at the trial who testified that it was not David who sent the messages, but the owner of the cell phone, Muslim Munawar Ahmad. <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/pakistan/16071/>

Sudan:

Another widely publicized incident of enforcement of “defamation of religion” laws was the November 2007 Sudanese court case sentencing of a British teacher to fifteen days in jail for “insulting religion,” after she named a class teddy bear Mohammed. The class had chosen the name in honor of a popular student in the class who was also named Mohammed. The teacher was pardoned and deported the next month. <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/africa/12/03/sudan.teacher/index.html>

Egypt:

On October 3, 2008 a Christian high school social worker and blogger was arrested for posting a link on his blog to a Coptic website, which had its own link to a controversial book thought to critique Islam. He was detained without charge for almost two years under Egypt’s Emergency Law. While in prison he was

abused, deprived and pressured to convert to Islam. He was finally released on July 22, 2010 due to a critique in the Emergency Law. <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/egypt/24465/>

What is the bottom line for Christians?

Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ serving and worshipping in these countries are severely impacted by these laws. From the right to worship freely to the ability to share the Gospel, the Defamation of Religions Resolution threatens to affirm local persecution. The Defamation of Religions Resolution prevents religious freedom and therefore ultimately inhibits the formation of civil society.

What is Open Doors doing?

Open Doors is mounting a coordinated advocacy campaign called FREE TO BELIEVE to raise awareness of this resolution's danger to religious liberty and to prevent it being passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

- Open Doors is lobbying countries at the United Nations to prevent the resolution being passed.
- Open Doors USA is working to provide educational information to members of the US Congress on this issue as well as recommendations that members of Congress can use to strategically pressure UN country missions to change their vote on the resolution.
- Many Open Doors development bases are lobbying their own government, and others, to highlight the issue and to maximize pressure to encourage more nations to vote against the resolution in the United Nations.
- Open Doors USA is asking our supporters to email their members of Congress from our website, asking these members to contact UN country missions and to encourage them to vote against the Defamation of Religions resolution.
- The email campaign is a vital part of our media focus designed to raise awareness of the issue and increase the pressure for countries to vote against the resolution at the United Nations.

What can I do to help?

Your voice is vitally important to defeat the Defamation of Religions Resolution. Please join the Open Doors advocacy team and take action at www.OpenDoorsUSA.org to send your member of Congress a message, asking him/her to pressure strategic countries to change their votes and to stop supporting the Defamation of Religions resolution.

The Open Doors advocacy team will convey the level of global support by Christians around the world against the resolution not only to the United Nations, but also as we lobby the countries which have voted "YES" or abstained from voting on this issue in the past.

Why is this urgent?

While Defamation of Religions Resolutions have been introduced and passed by the UN in the past, it is up again this year for a vote. There has already been a significant decrease in support for the resolution over recent years and we are very near to defeating it this year. Concerted action now could make all the difference.

Consistent lobbying, grassroots action, and media awareness are needed to tilt the balance and finally defeat the resolution. Until this resolution is defeated, it continues to lend legitimacy to national legislation such as Pakistan's blasphemy laws which are used to restrict the freedom of religion, particularly for Christians.