

United Nations Human Rights Council, 36th Session (11 – 29 September 2017)

Item 3 – Arbitrary detention

14 September 2017

Speaker: Humanists UK representative,¹ Jay Harman

Mr President.

We welcome the report of the working group on arbitrary detention, and note the continued detention around the world of those arbitrarily convicted of blasphemy. Indeed, there is no more arbitrary a sentence than that which is conferred under blasphemy laws, which are so often enforced selectively to persecute minorities or further political agendas. As the Rabat Plan of Action correctly identifies, ‘blasphemy laws afford different levels of protection to different religions and have often proved to be applied in a discriminatory manner’.²

One recent example of this is the death sentence handed to Ahmad Al Shamri in April this year by the Supreme Court in Saudi Arabia on charges of ‘atheism and blasphemy’, following an unsuccessful appeal.³ Raif Badawi’s continued detention by the Saudi government is, of course, another.⁴

Equally concerning, if not more so, is the extra-judicial nature of the punishments that many alleged blasphemers receive. Since 1990, for instance, more than 60 people have been killed in Pakistan during cases relating to blasphemy,⁵ and humanists and other activists continue to be killed in the streets of Bangladesh on account of their beliefs.⁶

The situation that currently exists, therefore, is one in which those who wish to exercise their freedom of religion and belief and their freedom of expression, guaranteed by Article 19 of the UDHR and ICCPR, find themselves subject either to arbitrary detention at the hands of the state, or to arbitrary violence at the hands of religious extremists. And often, both.

We call upon all states, even those whose blasphemy laws are not considered ‘active’, to abolish such laws, and to defend freedom of expression against intolerance and the threat of violence.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association. Humanists UK is a member of the End Blasphemy Laws coalition: <http://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

² http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-man-sentenced-death-atheism-ahmad-al-shamri-hafar-al-batin-appeal-denied-a7703161.html>

⁴ www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/22/saudi-arabia-website-editor-facing-death-penalty

⁵ <http://crss.pk/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Report-on-Blasphemy-Laws-.pdf>

⁶ http://iheu.org/category/location/asia/southern_asia/bangladesh/