

United Nations Human Rights Council, 37th session
26 February - 23 March 2018
Item 3 - General debate
Speaker: Humanists UK¹: Dr David Harvey

Mr President,

Freedom of religion and belief is guaranteed by Article 19 of both the UDHR and ICCPR. Despite this, it is gravely violated by the presence of anti-blasphemy laws, which often target the non-religious in particular, as the Rabat Plan of Action identifies.²

For instance, in January this year it was announced that Egyptian lawmakers will consider a bill criminalising atheism and dictating that corresponding sentences are severe.³ Given the experience of non-religious people subject to similar laws in other parts of the world, it is not difficult to imagine what this will mean in practice.

Last year, in Malaysia, officials publicly threatened to 'hunt down' apostates.⁴ In the Maldives secularist blogger Yameen Rasheed was stabbed to death in the stairwell of his apartment. In India, H Farook was hacked to death for posting 'atheistic comments' online.⁵ According to the most recent *Freedom of Thought Report*, atheists and humanists are 'severely discriminated against' in 85 countries around the world.⁶

The Council should note, too, that this situation is made worse when, despite these dangers, member states continue to deny asylum to apostates and non-religious people facing persecution. The United Kingdom recently rejected a claim for asylum from Hamza bin Walayat, a Pakistani apostate,⁷ after wrongly stating that the 1951 Refugee Convention does not apply to persecution of the non-religious.⁸ This is despite the UK claiming it 'remains concerned about the overall human rights record of Pakistan'. This is far too typical of the way in which the UK deals with non-religious asylum seekers.

All states should abolish anti-blasphemy laws and vehemently defend those accused of blasphemy from extrajudicial violence. Until that happens, we also urge member states to offer the protection under international law that is due to both non-religious and religious minorities fleeing persecution in their home countries.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association

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

³ <http://iheu.org/humanists-denounce-proposed-law-criminalize-atheism-egypt/>

⁴ <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/atheists-in-malaysia-should-be-hunted-down-minister-says#6pJYxfWbv4PXTWwc.97>

⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/coimbatore/tamil-nadu-muslim-atheist-killed-over-facebook-posts/articleshow/57699358.cms>

⁶ <http://freethoughtreport.com/>

⁷ <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/01/17/home-office-tells-humanist-hell-be-deported-for-not-identifying-plato-or-aristotle/>

⁸ <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>