

United Nations Human Rights Council 42nd Session (9 September-27 September 2019)

Item 3 - General Debate

Speaker: Humanists UK Representative, Farah Mohammed¹

Mr President,

The Human Rights Council in Resolution 36/17 urged all States that have not yet abolished the death penalty to ensure it is not imposed for specific forms of conduct, including apostasy and blasphemy.² Currently 14 countries still impose such punishments, including Pakistan where no evidence is required to prosecute a charge of blasphemy, and there are no penalties for making false allegations, and in two states in Malaysia where apostasy is an offence punishable by death.³

We remain concerned about Muhammad Asghar, a British businessman, who is awaiting execution in Pakistan for blasphemy. Asghar has a history of mental illness, including a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. In September 2014, he was shot in the back by a prison guard who was supposed to be protecting him.⁴ We are gravely concerned for his safety. We call on Pakistan to release Muhammed Asghar, repeal its blasphemy laws, ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and abolish the use of the death penalty.

We welcome the announcement in 2018 that Malaysia would abolish the death penalty. However we are concerned by recent comments made by a Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mohamed Hanipa Maidin, which seem to roll-back on this commitment, stating that the government will only repeal mandatory death sentences.⁵ This would leave it open to a judge's discretion whether to impose the death penalty.

In light of such concerns we call upon member states to recognise that blasphemy and apostasy are actions whose very criminalisation violates freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief. We further call upon Member States to continue to work towards the universal abolition of the death penalty.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK is the trading name of the British Humanist Association.

² Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 29 September 2017 36/17, *The question of the death penalty*. https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/36/L.6

³ End Blasphemy Laws campaign. <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

⁴ End Blasphemy Laws campaign, Pakistan.

<https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/asia-central-southern-and-south-eastern/pakistan/>

⁵ Malaysia accused of U-turn on death penalty abolition.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/03/468937/malaysia-accused-u-turn-death-penalty-abolition>