

United Nations Human Rights Council, 41st Session (24 February to 20 March 2020)

Interactive Dialogue with SR Cultural Rights

Speaker: British Humanist Association Representative, Tallulah Gordon¹

We welcome the recommendation that member states must 'abrogate or reform without delay any legislation not in compliance with international standards or that inhibits the work of cultural rights defenders' including blasphemy laws.

Across several countries, cultural rights defenders are routinely suppressed by accusations of blasphemy. In Bangladesh, where blasphemy is a de facto imprisonable offence, there is an ongoing campaign of murder against humanist bloggers, poets and authors.² In 2015 alone, five bloggers were killed in the country³ including the humanist author and cultural rights defender Avijit Roy, killed publicly at a book fair. He described his writings as a means of building a society 'based on reason, compassion, humanity, equality and science'.⁴ Such a society cannot be realised until the rights to freedom of expression, and the right to freedom of religion or belief, including for the non-religious, are fully recognised and protected by law. In countries such as Pakistan, blasphemy laws are being used particularly to target Christians and prevent the free practice of their religion.

As noted in your report, in 2019, Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'kheitir, a Mauritanian blogger, was released after five years on death row for apostasy after publishing a blog that spoke out against slavery and caste discrimination.⁵ M'kheitir fled Mauritania upon his release, as he faced ongoing threats to his life from religious figures.⁶

Will the Special Rapporteur comment on the linkages between abuses of cultural rights and their defenders, and the freedom of religion or belief under blasphemy and apostasy laws, and whether she would consider this as a topic for a report at the next council session she is present for?

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

² Humanists International, 'Freedom of Thought Report 2019: Bangladesh'.

https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/bangladesh/#Atheist_blogger_murders

³ BBC News, 'Death for Bangladesh blogger killers', 31 December 2015.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35204243>

⁴ BBC News, 'Obituary: US-Bangladesh writer Avijit Roy', 27 February 2015.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-31664262>

⁵ Humanists International, 'Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir freed after 6 years in detention', 1 August 2019.

<https://humanists.international/2019/08/mohamed-cheikh-ould-mkhaitir-freed-after-6-years-in-detention/>

⁶ Humanists UK, 'Mauritanian blogger freed after five years' imprisonment for apostasy', 1 August 2019.

<https://humanism.org.uk/2019/08/01/mauritanian-blogger-freed-after-five-years-imprisonment-for-apostasy/>



Thank you.