

United Nations Human Rights Council, 46th Session (22 February - 23 March 2021)

Item 3 – General Debate

Speaker: Humanists UK representative Karen Wright¹

During the global pandemic, we are witnessing unprecedented hostility towards the non-religious. The right to hold non-religious and humanist beliefs is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and it is imperative that this Council acts to fully uphold this right during this globally challenging time.²

Persecution during the pandemic has taken many forms and in many cases, the non-religious have faced unsubstantiated blame for Covid-19. In Zimbabwe, the implementation of National Prayer Days by President Mnangagwa presented the pandemic as a warning for non-religious sinners of God.³ In Kenya, the Government placed religion over public health by hosting religious leaders to a national day of prayer immediately before banning public meetings, leading to further transmission of the virus. It has been reported that religious leaders continued to attribute the pandemic to punishment from God and continued with public services of worship, against Government directives.⁴

Covid-19 has also worsened the situation for those living in states where blasphemy is a crime. In Iran, Covid restrictions have been used to target and further marginalise the non-religious and members of minority religious communities.⁵ In some cases, the banning of in-person meetings has also left non-religious people feeling further isolated. Members of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka, who are unable to publicly express their beliefs for fear of persecution, are instead forced to pray up to five times a day whilst they remain quarantined with their families.⁶

We call upon all members to recognise the harms this pandemic has presented to non-religious people around the world, and to renew their commitment to preserving the right to freedom of religion or belief by repealing restrictions that disproportionately target or adversely affect minority belief groups.

Thank you.

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

² Universal Declaration on Human Rights

https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

³ Humanists International. 'Freedom of Thought Report 2020: Zimbabwe'.

https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/zimbabwe/#Religious_Bias

⁴ Humanists International. 'Freedom of Thought Report 2020: Kenya'. https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/kenya/#Non-belief_in_the_times_of_a_pandemic

⁵ All Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief. *Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief*. 2020.

<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/2020-APPG-commentary-final.pdf>

⁶ Humanists International. 'Rishvin Ismath from Sri Lanka: "Some of us are forced to pray five times a day"'. 2020. <https://humanists.international/blog/rishvin-ismath-from-sri-lanka-some-of-us-are-forced-to-pray-five-times-a-day/>