

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 48th Regular Session
13 September 2021 to 8 October 2021**

Item 4: General Debate

Speaker: Humanists UK Representative,¹ Andrew Copson

Thank you, Mr. President.

I wish to draw the Council's attention to the immediate threat to freedom of religion or belief caused by the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. Two years ago, we spoke before this Council during the universal periodic review of Afghanistan and welcomed the new penal code which reduced the number of capital offenses on the statute books.² Today, it is difficult to say whether that code is still in force, or indeed, what rule of law or international mechanisms now protect the people of Afghanistan.

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was one of the 13 countries where blasphemy or apostasy is punishable by death. The Taliban's history and current actions suggest that they will use such laws as a cover for the systematic persecution of religious and non-religious minorities, including humanists, Sikhs, Christians, and Shiite Muslims. We ask the Council, what steps can be taken to ensure that the Taliban maintain international commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights?

Last month, this council passed a resolution calling for the progress in the political and social participation of women and of ethnic, religious, non-religious, and other minority groups in the past 20 years not to be lost.³ Will the President consider the creation of a special mandate role holder to ensure that this is the case? This seems to us to be necessary before he presents his written report to this Council in March.

We are also concerned about the welfare of Afghan refugees. We call upon this Council to ensure that all resettlement programmes are inclusive of non-religious and apostate Afghan refugees, who are at particular risk of persecution, alongside those of minority religious groups. We also ask this Council if it will call upon member states to declare a moratorium on forced returns to Afghanistan, and ensure the human rights of refugees arriving from Afghanistan are fully respected.

Thank you.

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

² Humanists UK, 'Humanists UK at UN calls for protections for Afghanistan's religion and belief minorities', 8 July 2019. <https://humanists.uk/2019/07/08/humanists-uk-at-un-calls-for-protections-for-afghanistans-religion-and-belief-minorities/>

³ Human Rights Council, 'Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 24 August 2021 S-31/1. Strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights in Afghanistan' <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/SpecialSessions/Session31/Pages/31stSpecialSession.aspx>