



UN Human Rights Council, 33rd Session (13 – 30 September 2016)
Item 8 General Debate
Monday 26th September 2016
Speaker: BHA representative, Cordelia Tucker O’Sullivan

Thank you, Mr President.

This is a joint statement between the Arab Humanists and British Humanist Association.

We are greatly concerned that a number of States are not living up to their obligations under Vienna, including respecting the right to freedom of religion or belief,¹ and the universality of human rights.²

The Egyptian constitution places Islam at its core ‘whilst only recognising other “Abrahamic” religions...as legitimate forms of worship. Other religion or belief minorities, even those with a demonstrable presence such as the Baha’is and the non-religious, are not recognised.’³ This has led to numerous human rights abuses being directed towards religious and belief minorities, such as in 2014, when Egypt launched what has been called a ‘coordinated government crackdown on perceived atheists’,⁴ which resulted in several arrests.⁵ In Egypt, you can be imprisoned for insulting any of the Abrahamic religions, as three Coptic Christian teenagers currently seeking asylum in Switzerland have discovered the hard way,⁶ yet there is nothing to protect even the basic right to freedom of religion or belief for followers of other faiths, or the non-religious.⁷

The universality of human rights, a principle to which all UN member states are committed, means that no one is to be denied their human rights based on their sexual orientation or gender identity [or for any other reason]. Yet homosexuality remains illegal in 72 countries, amounting to 37% of UN member States; it is punishable by death in 13.⁸ Last year six Tunisian men were sentenced to three years imprisonment for homosexual activities; police attempted to prove the charges by subjecting them to an intrusive anal exam, an act that ‘counts as torture’.⁹ Additionally, a minister for justice was fired after suggesting that the law on this subject be changed.¹⁰

We urge those States who are failing to safeguard the right to freedom of religion or belief, Egypt being among them, *and* States who are failing to respect the universality of human rights with regards to LGBTI persons, in particular, those States who punish homosexuality by death, to revise their laws and policies in order to comply with international law.

Thank you.

¹ Article 22 of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

² Articles 1 and 15 of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

³ See the entry on Egypt from the International Humanist and Ethical Union’s Freedom of Thought Report 2015 (pp89-96), available for download here:

<http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/> (pp89-96)

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/13/egypt-3-year-sentence-atheist>

⁵ See the International Humanist and Ethical Union’s Freedom of Thought Report 2015, available for download here: <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/> (pp89-96)

⁶ <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/coptic-teenagers-accused-insulting-religion-seek-asylum-switzerland>

⁷ Articles 19 and 18 of the ICCPR respectively.

⁸ ‘State sponsored homophobia 2016: A world survey of sexual orientation laws: criminalisation, protection and recognition’, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), 2016. http://ilga.org/downloads/02_ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2016_ENG_WEB_150516.pdf

⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/six-tunisian-students-sodomy-gay-prison-lgbt-crime>; the sentence was reduced in March this year by an appellant judge.

¹⁰ Specifically, article 230 of the Penal Code; <http://assafir.com/Article/5/451790>