

**Review Conference 2010, Warsaw, 30 September - 08 October 2010****Statement by Human Rights First****Working Session 2: Freedom of religion or belief****October 1, 2010**

Human Rights First call on participating States to ensure the right to freedom of religion, by:

- taking steps to ensure the implementation of constitutional and international norms guaranteeing freedom of conscience and religion and nondiscrimination against any individual or group of individuals based on their religion;
- affirming publicly the equality before the law of members of all religious communities and refraining from using rhetoric that divides groups into “traditional” and “nontraditional;”
- investigating and prosecuting cases of bias-motivated violence against individuals or property associated with religious communities.

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Violent acts motivated by religious intolerance continue to proliferate across the OSCE region, as hate crimes overall have surged in the past decade. Violence motivated by antireligious prejudices affects individuals' ability to freely practice a religion and safely meet with coreligionists.

Under OSCE commitments, governments are obligated to respond to hate crimes, including acts of violence targeting religious communities and individuals. However, as with other forms of bias-motivated violence, the authorities have been slow to take action against this violence.

Virtually every religious community in the OSCE has been subjected to acts of vandalism and other serious property damage, while individuals associated with religious groups have been targeted for violence. The desecration of graves and cemeteries is a common problem.

- The first decade of the Millennium has witnessed some of the highest levels of antisemitic violence since the end of World War II. After a dramatic upsurge in attacks in 2000, a forceful wave of incidents swept over much of western Europe in 2009.
- In recent years, bias-motivated violence against Muslims has become increasingly aggressive, manifested by personal assaults in the streets and attacks on places of worship and on Muslim immigrant-run businesses.

- Adherents of religions deemed by governments to be nontraditional in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are often dealing with private violence that occurs in the context of government restrictions on religious activities and official rhetoric that vilifies such groups.

Official obstruction of religious activities is a particular problem that mostly affects religious minorities. Nontraditional groups are often described by officials, media, and the public as “totalitarian sects.” In official rhetoric against these “new movements” and nontraditional faiths—including the Hare Krishna, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Pentecostals—public officials have demonized them, emphasizing their “alien” nature and foreign funding, sometimes adding accusations of espionage.

These minority religious groups often face arbitrary and overly burdensome registration requirements, restrictions on building permits for places of worship, formal or informal bans on the rental of places of assembly for religious services, and sporadic public statements by political leaders denouncing minority faiths. In some cases, members of nontraditional religious groups have been prosecuted under the very same articles of the penal code used in prosecutions of violent hate crimes. This comparison is unacceptable. In the climate of xenophobia and religious chauvinism to which such restrictive and unnecessary policies contribute, members of minority religious congregations are particularly susceptible to threats and physical attacks carried out by private citizens with limited real recourse to justice for such abuses.