

United Nations 75th General Assembly Third Committee:

Item 74(b)

Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance

[Freedom of religion or belief]

Statement by the Nordic-Baltic countries

20 October 2020

Delivered by: H.E. Mr. Martin Bille Hermann, Ambassador, Permanent
Representative

Chairperson,

I have the honour to make this statement on behalf of the Nordic-Baltic countries: Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden and my own country, Denmark.

We join this interactive dialogue at a critical juncture.

Available data suggest that the prevalence of laws, policies and government actions that restrict the ability of rights holders to enjoy freedom of religion or belief have increased globally. Both in terms of favouritism, general laws and policies, harassment of religious groups and when it comes to limits on religious activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered religious and ethnic minorities particularly vulnerable, including through exclusion, restriction, misuse of law,

such as blasphemy and even scapegoating. We would like to thank Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed for bringing the world's attention to cases, which not only constitute violations of the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, but which also make it even harder to deliver on the 2030 Agenda of "leaving no one behind".

Dr. Shaheed's proposal to develop structural, process and outcome indicators to assess discrimination and persecution on the basis of thought, conscience and religion is interesting. Such indicators could serve to empower minorities to assert and claim the full range of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Also, more objective transparency is crucial to succeed in "leaving no one behind."

We align ourselves with Dr. Shaheed when he suggests that we should include action on sustainable development in our efforts to promote freedom of thought, conscience and religion, particularly in the context of religious or belief minorities who may experience unequal access to essential services such as health care, quality education and housing, among many other SDGs.

We are pleased to note that the Special Rapporteur found the Expert Consultation on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals, facilitated by the Foreign Ministries of Denmark and Norway, to be a useful analysis of possible synergies.

We also believe that the SDGs can serve as a source of inspiration for inter-faith dialogues and inter-faith activities, which hold the potential to break down barriers and enhance mutual understanding, and engage communities in common practical endeavours to improve the individual lives of people, which is what the SDGs are about.

Finally, could the SR/panel kindly indicate which of SDGs he/they see(s) as the most relevant in the context of promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Thank you!