

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to welcome you here today at the Danish Contact Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

I'm happy to see such a large attendance.

I'm also grateful for the interest you pay to the somewhat forgotten human right: freedom of religion or belief.

I would like to give a special welcome to the international experts who are with us here today.

As Minister for Development Cooperation, it's my ambition to ensure that Danish development policy is strongly rooted in local communities and civil society.

The Contact Forum is a very good example of that.

Faith-based actors gives us insights into both good examples and problems.

Thanks to the actors who are here today to share their stories.

It's your work that inspires the Danish Government to continue prioritizing this area in our development policy - as well in our foreign policy.

Freedom of religion or belief is connected to both areas and I will continue to work closely with the Minister of Foreign Affairs in promoting the agenda.

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The number of persecutions based on religion or belief is increasing.

Christians and Muslims are discriminated or persecuted in more than 140 countries.

And atheists are being attacked in many of these countries as well.

In 71 countries blasphemy is considered a crime; and in 12 countries apostasy is punished by death.

This is a dangerous tendency.

The freedom of religion or belief is the canary in the coal mine.

The restriction of freedom of religion or belief warns us that other human rights may be at risk. It warns us that we must act. To protect this freedom, and all other human rights.

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Working to promote freedom of religion of belief is a matter of solidarity.

In the Western World we've taken this right for granted.

But recent history tells another story: The Balkan wars, the recent attacks in Christchurch, Sri Lanka, Pennsylvania, Burkina Faso,

Nigeria – the list goes on. We will step up efforts to deal with religion and foreign and development policy.

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In February this year, the Danish strategy for promoting freedom of religion or belief and protection of religious minorities was presented to Parliament.

All political parties expressed their support to the strategy. A rare sight in Danish politics.

Therefore, the Government has chosen to continue to promote freedom of religion or belief.

And to continue to fund projects on the topic.

And we will maintain staff in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dedicated to promoting the freedom of religion or belief and protection of religious minorities.

However, there is a need to adjust part of the strategy.

First, we want to underline that freedom of religion or belief is a right for everyone.

Not only is it correct to talk about anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

It is also necessary to talk about discrimination against Christians - AND against humanists and atheists.

It might be semantics to some, but it matters.

In the coming talks on creating an International Alliance on Religious Freedom, it is important for Europe to emphasize the “B” for Belief in FoRB. [udtal FoRB i ét ord]

Second, we have decided to deepen our efforts on the thematic intersection between the freedom of religion or belief and the responsibility to protect.

We will step up our efforts to engage with faith-based actors and their contribution to conflict-prevention and reconciliation.

This will also help achieve Sustainable Development Goal number 16.

There are already good examples from your organizations in countries like Myanmar, Cameroon and Uganda.

In the Kachin province in Northern Myanmar, Danmission has established a project with Caritas bringing together Christian and Buddhist communities in dialogue and capacity building.

Mission Africa and D-M-R-U have shown us how interreligious efforts between Muslims and Christians on the border of Nigeria have been working together to hinder Boko Haram from entering into Cameroon.

And there are many more examples.

These examples have inspired us to examine where such efforts can be used more widely in Danish development assistance.

Cooperation with all of you will be key to achieve this.

Third, the Government has decided to broaden our focus from development projects on freedom of religion or belief in four specific countries to a broader and more flexible approach to dialogue and cooperation in this field with other countries, where this fundamental right is under pressure.

Our guiding principle will be to open up a dialogue “where it is necessary and possible” - instead of singling out specific countries.

Such an approach will give us more flexibility and more of countries to engage in dialogue and cooperation with.

With these adjustments, we will continue the efforts, and freedom of religion or belief remains one of our four priorities for our membership of the UN Human Rights Council.

Moreover, we will continue to push for the new EU Commission to prioritize this agenda.

Based on a proposal from Denmark, freedom of religion or belief is now an explicit human rights-goal in the new draft EU regulation for development assistance from 2020 to 2027.

Allow me to finish by underlining that freedom of religion or belief is a human right

Equal to all other human rights.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is not a devine right.

It does not depend on national context.

It is a universal right for all, and should be defended by all.

Thank you.