HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
First session
Agenda item 4

IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 60/251
OF 15 MARCH 2006 ENTITLED “HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL”

Joint written statement* submitted by Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (CCIA/WCC), Franciscans International (FI), International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), and International Council of Women (ICW-CIF), non-governmental organizations in general consultative status and All India Women’s Conference (AIWC), Anglican Consultative Council (ACC), Baha’i International Community, Dominicans for Justice and Peace (Order of Preachers), Interfaith International, International Association for Human Values (IAHV), International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW), International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Federation of University Women (IFUW), International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), International Network of Liberal Women (INLW), International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Pax Romana (International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs and International Movement of Catholic Students), Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), Susila Dharma International Association (SDIA), Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women (WFMUCW), World Union of Catholic Women’s Organizations (WUCWO), and World Young Women’s Christian Association (WYWCA), non-governmental organizations in special consultative status and the Institute for Planetary Synthesis (IPS), International Association for Counselling (IAC), International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAG), International Catholic Society for Girls, and Soka Gakkai International (SGI), non-governmental organizations on the Roster.

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 June 2006]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).
Joint Statement by NGOs on the Mandate and Work of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

As we approach the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 November 1981, and the 20th anniversary of the creation of the mandate on religious intolerance/freedom of religion or belief, it is urgent to pay close attention to the conclusions and recommendations in the latest report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms Asma Jahangir (E/CN.4/2006/5); this could not be considered sufficiently at the truncated 62nd session of the Commission on Human Rights. It is to be hoped that the new Human Rights Council will quickly resolve structural and procedural matters and give its early attention to substantive issues such as are raised in the reports of special procedures.

Issues of protection remain of grave concern in many countries. There is need for protection from denial or obstruction of the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief as well as from the prohibition or punishment of the exercise of the freedom to change one’s own religion or belief. In a number of countries there have been insensitive and provocative attempts to legislate against certain religious symbols, including religious dress; in other countries there have been attempts to legislate against or punish “conversions” without sufficiently differentiating between “forced” and “freewill” conversion. There have been world-wide confusions and even acts of violence over the failure to respect both the freedom of religion and belief and the freedom of expression. It is necessary to protect convictions based on religion or belief from defamation and offensive disrespect. It is equally necessary to protect responsible use of freedom of expression from virulent over-reactions.

Issues of prevention remain an important part of the mandate and vision of the Special Rapporteur. NGOs which seek to mobilize and sensitize civil society often feel frustrated that there has been little implementation of preventive measures despite formal encouragements received from United Nations bodies. For example recommendations from the “International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination”, held in Madrid in 2001, have not been sufficiently followed up and resourced through fully staffed United Nations programmes or through support for related NGO programmes. It is to be hoped that the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education and the programmes for dialogue among civilizations will bring new momentum to the task of education for tolerance in the context of ignorance, prejudice and discrimination based on religion or belief. One must also hope for more follow-up of the “Study on the Status of Women in the light of Religions and Cultures” by Professor Abdelfattah Amor, the former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

During the transition from Commission to Council, the recommendations that followed in situ visits by several Special Rapporteurs, even when they drew urgent attention to gross or life-threatening violations, have not been considered, much less implemented. Furthermore, the reluctance of some governments to issue or renew invitations for in situ visits is a continuing dilemma, as is the lack of mechanisms to review and require implementation of recommendations.
The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has urged increasing “involvement of the relevant policy makers” and has stressed the need for “a mechanism to appropriately address the situation of countries that consistently fail to cooperate with the special procedures mechanisms”. She has also encouraged governments and NGOs to “support the initiatives that will be taken to organize events that will take stock of achievements since 1981” and to “identify the provisions of the Declaration that today raise particular concern and challenge rising trends of religious intolerance”.

The vision and determination shown by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief deserve the full support of governments and NGOs, and call for adequate mechanisms of investigation, follow-up and, if necessary, enforcement. The Special Rapporteur has shown by her methods of cooperation with other Special Rapporteurs how inextricably connected with the freedom of religion or belief are many other fundamental human rights. Similarly in the NGO community, the NGOs which have signed this statement, many of which work together regularly in the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Geneva), represent a spread of concerns extending beyond freedom of religion or belief to the status of women, the right to education, the rights of the child, and many other issues. However, freedom of religion or belief is a cross-cutting concern that unites us all, as much as it divides many societies. Now, more than ever, the important mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief deserves the support of governments and civil society alike.

National Council of Christian Churches USA, Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rissho Kosei-Kai (Geneva), Union for Reform Judaism, and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (The Hague) also share the views expressed in this statement.