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WASHINGTON, DC –The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomed the UN Human Rights Council's significant step away from the pernicious "defamation of religions" concept. Today, the Council adopted a resolution on religious intolerance that does not include this dangerous concept. The defamation concept undermines individual rights to freedom of religion and expression; exacerbates religious intolerance, discrimination, and violence; and provides international support for domestic blasphemy laws that often have led to gross human rights abuses. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has promoted this flawed concept at the United Nations for more than a decade.

"USCIRF and others, including the State Department, members of Congress, and NGOs, have worked hard against the defamation of religions concept for years. USCIRF specifically applauds Secretary Clinton and her team for today's result. We also thank Representatives Eliot Engel (D-NY), Christopher Smith (R-NJ), Shelley Berkley (D-NV), and Frank Wolf (R-VA), for their leadership roles on this issue," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "Thanks to these efforts, and those of previous administrations and Congresses, more countries each year voted against the defamation of religions concept because they understood that blasphemy laws increase intolerance and violence. Tragically, it took the assassinations of two prominent Pakistani officials who opposed that country's draconian blasphemy laws—Federal Minister of Minorities Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti and Punjab governor Salman Taseer—to convince the OIC that the annual defamation of religions resolutions embolden extremists rather than bolster religious harmony."

The efforts over the past several years by USCIRF, the State Department, Congress, and a broad coalition of NGOs helped bring about a steady loss of support both in Geneva and New York for the defamation resolutions. Since 2008, the resolutions have been supported by only a plurality of member states. In 2010, at both the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly, defamation of religions resolutions garnered the least support and most opposition the issue had ever received, coming within, respectively, four and 13 votes of defeat.

In place of the divisive "combating defamation of religions" resolution, today the UN Human Rights Council adopted a consensus resolution on "combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief." The resolution properly focuses on protecting individuals from discrimination or violence, instead of protecting religions from criticism. The resolution protects the adherents of all religions or beliefs, instead of focusing on one religion.

Unlike the defamation of religions resolution, the new consensus resolution does not call for legal restrictions on peaceful expression, but rather, for positive measures, such as education and awareness-building, to address intolerance, discrimination, and violence based on religion or belief.

“USCIRF is gratified that this new resolution recognizes that religious intolerance is best fought through efforts to encourage respect for every individual’s human rights, not through national or international anti-blasphemy laws,” said Mr. Leo. “What is needed now is for countries, such as Pakistan, that have blasphemy laws to eliminate them.”

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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