

**United States Commission on International Religious  
Freedom  
Hearing**

**Remarks by the UN High Representative of the Alliance of  
Civilizations**

**23 October 2019**

Distinguished members of the Commission,

Dear witnesses,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First, I would like to convey my gratitude to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to this hearing, which provides me with the opportunity to present and discuss a subject that is central to my mandate as High Representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

The Commission was established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, 21 years ago. I commend the vision of the United States Congress to pass such comprehensive and innovative legislation at a time when these issues were not as prominent on the international agenda as today.

From its side, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary in 2020.

Thus, this Commission and the Alliance of Civilizations have had a similar life span during which the challenges that we both confront to monitor religious freedom through the lens of

international human rights standards, in the case of the Commission, and to serve as a political tool for preventive diplomacy through the promotion of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as regards the UN Alliance of Civilizations, have grown increasingly more complex.

Turning now to the topic that brings us together this afternoon, I was extremely pleased with the language and the content of the hearing announcement, which fully coincides with the objectives of the United Nations Plan of Action to safeguard religious that my Office developed in the aftermath of the attacks against mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, last March, as per the subsequent request of the United Nations Secretary-General.

In preparations for the Plan, I engaged in an inclusive consultative process with governments, religious leaders, faith-based organizations and other relevant stakeholders to listen carefully to their ideas and inputs for the Plan.

As a result of these consultations and my own reflections, it was clear to me that the Plan had to be action-oriented document containing clear recommendations for all relevant stakeholders to work better individually and jointly in a multi-faceted approach to safeguard religious sites.

I am pleased to inform you that the Plan of Action to safeguard religious sites was officially presented by the UN Secretary-General to Member States on 12 September in New York and that it has received positive feedback.

Since the full version of the Plan has been made available to you, let me present here the main highlights of the Plan and focus in particular on some recommendations addressed to Member States, which can be especially relevant in the context of this hearing:

1. The Plan is anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, relevant United Nations resolutions, and rooted in the following guiding principles:

**RESPECT** for all peoples.

**RESPONSIBILITY** to build bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation.

**DIVERSITY** to accept and respect differences among human beings.

**DIALOGUE** as a tool to better communicate and engage with one other.

**SOLIDARITY** to support one another, particularly in times of sorrow or trouble.

**STANDING TOGETHER** as one to respond with unity to attempts to divide us.

**STAYING TOGETHER** as one to ensure that unity in response to attacks against religious sites is sustained and reinforced over time.

2. The Plan is structured in two sections on **prevention** and **preparedness and response**, respectively:

- The section on **prevention** stresses the role of Member States, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, civil society, youth, women, local communities and Parliaments in the identification of vulnerabilities and potential threats to religious sites. The Plan also highlights the role that legislative bodies have across the spectrum of countering violent extremism and how they can contribute to public debate and advocacy related to the safeguard of religious sites.

Two key components of prevention are:

- Education, an issue that may be of particular interest to Commissioners Manchin and Bhargava, with particular focus on education programs on the significance

and protection of religious sites and the promotion of respect towards other religions and cultures;

- Addressing hate speech and online hate speech, which may be of special interest to Commissioners Arriaga de Bucholz, Dorjee, Khawaja and Moore, who have ample experience in media and communications.

Among the recommendations on prevention addressed to the United Nations system, States, religious leaders, civil society and online providers, I would like to briefly highlight some recommendations addressed to States to:

- ✓ Engage with religious leaders to promote respect a mutual understanding through interfaith activities.
- ✓ Facilitate the involvement of civil society in strategies and programs to prevent violent extremism through different initiatives and establish benchmarks to measure progress.
- ✓ Mainstream gender in plans and actions to prevent violent extremism.

3. Religious sites are especially vulnerable to attacks due to their accessibility and the fact that there are usually limited security measures in place. **Preparedness and response** to possible attacks involves a thorough analysis of potential threats, risk assessments to adapt policies to the evolving nature of threats, information sharing at all level of government, as well as with religious leaders.

The Plan encourages Member States to:

- ✓ Develop or strengthen national plans to address early-warning systems, emergency response, crisis management, security, and resilience.

- ✓ Consider establishing, where appropriate, in accordance with national legislation and procedures, specialized units in central and local administrations to safeguard religious sites.
- ✓ Develop and sustain relationships between government and religious leaders to build trust and help ensure information sharing.

Distinguished members of the Commission,

The success of the Plan is to be measured by the implementation of its recommendations. This is why I am engaged with all relevant actors to make progress on the following issues:

- Global Communication Campaign. I am working with relevant colleagues in the United Nations system to develop a campaign to foster mutual respect and understanding. Terrorist attacks seek to divide us. A campaign to foster unity and solidarity can be a powerful tool to counteract those messages.
- Mapping of religious sites. Again, I am working with relevant United Nations colleagues on a mapping of all religious sites around the world which will produce an online interactive tool to capture the universality of religious sites and contribute to fostering respect and understanding of their profound significance.
- A global conference to be convened by the UN Secretary-General in 2020 will provide an occasion to bring together the UN system, Member States, political figures, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, media and civil society to spearhead political support for specific actions to take the Plan forward.
- In the context of the future Global programme on the protection of vulnerable targets, including safeguarding religious sites from terrorism-related threats, which will be

implemented under the leadership of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, in consultation with relevant United Nations entities, including the UN Alliance of Civilizations, Burkina Faso will be one of the first countries where the programme will be implemented.

Let me finish my intervention by highlighting two areas in which there is potential for further collaboration between the US Administration policy on religious freedom and the role of the UN Alliance of Civilizations.

First, in the context of the International Religious Freedom Alliance that Secretary of State Pompeo announced during the second Ministerial Meeting to Advance Religious Freedom that took place in Washington on 16-18 July, and that I had the honor to attend, I look forward to exploring synergies and areas of mutual collaboration with the common goal of upholding the fundamental human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Secondly, and again on the key area of education, I am working with the Appeal of Conscience Foundation to convene a global conference on education which will help advance the implementation of the Plan. We look forward to the support of the US Administration in this important endeavor.

I thank you again for this opportunity to discuss crucial issues to advance our common goal to promote religious freedom and help safeguard the right of everyone to manifest their religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Thank you very much.