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PAKISTAN Change of direction on combating defamation of religions

In a dramatic shift, Pakistan signaled the end of the “combating defamation of religions” campaign at the United Nations today.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) this afternoon passed a resolution that has received widespread acceptance from the international human rights community for being more consistent with international human rights law and norms relating to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. The resolution had been tabled by Pakistan, on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The new resolution marks a shift from those passed annually by the OIC over the past twelve years. In 2009 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) had joined over 180 other NGOs in condemning the former resolutions, arguing that they were unworkable, inconsistent with individual freedoms and that they effectively justified domestic blasphemy laws such as those in Pakistan, which are routinely misused.

In contrast, the resolution passed by the HRC today affirmed traditional human rights and called for “a global dialogue for the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace at all levels, based on respect for human rights and diversity of religions and beliefs”.

The shift in tone comes after years of heated debate on the issue at the UN, and more recently a shift in voting on the issue away from the OIC’s position.

It also comes in the wake of the assassinations of Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, two high-profile political leaders in Pakistan who had directly opposed Pakistan’s domestic blasphemy laws.

CSW’s Public Affairs Officer, Matthew Jones, said, “We welcome Pakistan and the OIC’s re-wording of its controversial resolutions. We urge the OIC to continue in this direction at the UN General Assembly later in the year towards being fully consistent with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

“It has seemed for some time that the tide was shifting on this issue but we are encouraged that this new resolution is so explicit in affirming the importance – and complementary nature – of freedom of religion and freedom of expression. There was also a strong indication at recent UN meetings that a catalyst for the change may have been the domestic and global concern over Taseer and Bhatti’s assassinations and increasing worldwide realization of the negative effects of blasphemy laws.”

Notes to editors:

1. For further information on the assassination of Salmaan Taseer, see the CSW press release, ‘Assassination of Salmaan Taseer highlights danger faced by opponents of Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws’
2. For further information on the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, see the CSW press releases, ‘CSW appalled and grieved by death of Shahbaz Bhatti’ and ‘Tributes pour in to Shahbaz Bhatti on day of his funeral’