



May 13, 2020

Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1040 Brussels

Re: The continuation of the mandate of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU

Dear President von der Leyen,

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, are writing to applaud your commitment to universal human rights and the rule of law, and respectfully request that the EU continue to lead on the promotion of human rights throughout the world by continuing the mandate of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU.

Many of us are participants in the U.S.-based International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable. With ten years of continuous operations, the IRF Roundtable is an informal group of individuals from non-governmental organizations who gather regularly to discuss the most pressing issues facing communities and individuals of all faiths and no faith, when they have their right to freedom of religion or belief violated. Further, the IRF Roundtable is a multifaith venue for collaboration to advance the right to freedom of religion or belief, which is a fundamental human right for everyone, no matter his or her specific faith. The IRF Roundtable and its participants have been fortunate to be able to work extensively with the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU, and have been deeply grateful for the work that the EU has done to promote freedom of religion or belief throughout the world. The EU's advocacy has borne real fruit for so many victims who have been targeted for their religion or belief.

In the constellation of human rights, freedom of thought, conscience and religion plays a central role, as the basic ability of any human being to think and act according to his or her beliefs. However, these freedoms have come under increasing attack over the past decade. According to the Pew Research Center's latest annual study on global restrictions on religion, 83% of the world's population lived in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions and/or hostilities in 2017, up from 79% in 2015, 74% in 2014 and 68% in 2007. These freedoms are undermined and threatened in many parts of the world, whether in the form of blasphemy and anti-conversion laws, severe restrictions on freedom of expression and the free practice of religion, or physical attacks on people targeted because of their religion or belief—such as Muslims in New Zealand, Christians in Sri Lanka, Jews in San Diego, or the ongoing crises involving the Rohingya in Myanmar. Even now, countless prisoners of conscience, among them those imprisoned for their religion or belief, languish in appalling circumstances, exceptionally

vulnerable to diseases like COVID-19. These individuals need the voices of the international community.

The EU must stand strong and united in order to respond to these challenges. The EU must stand together in the face of these unprecedented attacks on universal human rights. With its Special Envoy, the EU has led in the international response, and that leadership is needed now more than ever. We sincerely hope that the EU will continue the role of the Special Envoy, and even strengthen the tools available in this regard, so that the EU's necessary voice on universal human rights will continue to play a key role in the growing international movement for the protection of religion or belief for all people everywhere.

We again applaud your leadership, President von der Leyen, on universal human rights, and humbly request that the continuation of the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU will be a priority in the EU's deliberations in the coming months.

Respectfully Yours,

ORGANIZATIONS

21Wilberforce

ADF International

Advocates International

Baptist World Alliance

Boat People SOS

Buddhist Solidarity Association

Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)

Center for Defence of Human Rights

Center for Pluralism

Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience (Italy)

Church of Almighty God

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Citizen Power Initiatives for China

Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

Coptic Solidarity

European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom

Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe

Free Yezidi Foundation

Human Rights Without Frontiers

Indian American Muslim Council

Institute for Global Engagement

International Christian Concern

International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue

International Human Rights Committee

International Multi-Faith Coalition

International Organization to Preserve Human Rights

Iraq Religious Freedom Roundtable

Jubilee Campaign USA

LYN Community

Middle East Concern

Minh Van Foundation

National Youth Council of Nigeria

Open Doors International

Patmos Institute

Religious Freedom & Business Foundation

Religious Freedom Institute

Saint Nicholas Freedom Group

Search for Common Ground

Set My People Free

Stefanus Alliance International

Syriens Chrétiens pour la Paix

Tahrir Alnisa Foundation

United Macedonian Diaspora

United Sikhs

Vietnam Coalition Against Torture

Vietnamese Women for Human Rights in Vietnam

Voice for Justice UK

World Headquarters of the Bektashi Order

Individuals

With title and organization for identification purposes

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Canadian MP (ret.)

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Rumi Forum

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Journalist

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Independent Old Catholic Church

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IDRAC (International Dialogue Research & Awareness Centre)
Islamabad, Pakistan

Dr. Jonas Adelin Jørgensen
Interchurch Council
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark

Mahomed Akbar Khan
Founder
American Muslim Strategies

Jamil Maqsood
Director for Brussels & Eastern Europe
Director for Eurasia Dialogue
International Human Rights Council

Paul Marshall
Wilson Professor
Baylor University
Senior Fellow Hudson Institute

Alberto Melloni
Secretary
Foundation for Religious Studies John XXIII
Bologna/Palermo

Greg Mitchell
Chair
International Religious Freedom Roundtable

Quang Pham
Association for the Advancement of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vietnam

Prof. Dr. Herman Selderhuis

President
Theological University of Apeldoorn