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Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [75/187](#). It provides information on steps taken by States to combat intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief. It also outlines activities undertaken by the United Nations in that regard and provides conclusions and observations on the way forward. States are encouraged to pay particular attention to the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in view of religious intolerance, both offline and online, targeting members of minority communities, who were stigmatized as supposed carriers of the virus or faced discrimination and attacks.

* [A/76/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 75/187, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit at its seventy-sixth session a report that included information provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on steps taken by States to combat intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief.

2. The report, which covers the period from July 2020 to June 2021, is based on contributions received from 21 Member States¹ in reply to a note verbale sent by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on 24 February 2021. In section II of the report, actions and initiatives taken by States are presented under headings that correspond to the points of the action plan outlined in paragraphs 7 to 10 of General Assembly resolution 75/187.² Section III outlines activities undertaken by the United Nations in support of the implementation of the action plan. Section IV provides conclusions, notably within the context of COVID-19, and observations on the way forward.

II. Steps taken by Member States in the implementation of the action plan

3. OHCHR received information from Andorra, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Colombia, Croatia, Cyprus, Ecuador, Hungary, Italy, Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritius, Namibia, North Macedonia, the Philippines, Poland, Qatar, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uruguay in relation to constitutional and legislative frameworks present and/or being amended in the countries pertaining to combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, based on religion or belief.

A. Creating collaborative networks to build mutual understanding, promoting dialogue and inspiring constructive action towards shared policy goals and the pursuit of tangible outcomes, such as servicing projects in the fields of education, health, conflict prevention, employment, integration and media education³

4. Andorra reported that its three educational systems (Andorran, Spanish and French) were governed by the fundamental principle that guaranteed the admission of any person regardless of their origin, religion, sex or affiliation with a political or ideological order. The curriculums of the Andorran educational system included educational projects aimed at promoting human rights, tolerance and non-discrimination in schools, facilitating democratic participation, promoting group cohesion, promoting the learning of social values and competencies and encouraging a sense of commitment and responsibility from the earliest age of school children.

5. Croatia reported that religious organizations operated shelters for women victims of domestic violence, working together with State bodies and local and

¹ The original texts of the submissions, including those sent after the deadline, are available for consultation at <https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/SitePages/Anti-discrimination%20database.aspx>.

² The related resolutions and reports since 2011 are available at www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Minorities/Pages/CombatingIntolerance.aspx.

³ General Assembly resolution 75/187, para. 7 (a).

regional self-government units, and that civil society organizations working in the area of protection of victims of domestic violence received regular State funding.

6. Poland reported that the Government was cooperating with churches and other religious organizations. Several additional bodies had been established to maintain a permanent dialogue with representatives of churches and religious organizations, including the Polish Bishops' Conference and the Polish Ecumenical Council. Churches and religious organizations in Poland were developing joint initiatives for peace, safety and the prevention of violence, such as ecumenical days and the Day of Judaism in the Roman Catholic Church.

B. Creating an appropriate mechanism within Governments to, inter alia, identify and address potential areas of tension between members of different religious communities and assisting with conflict prevention and mediation⁴

7. Andorra reported the establishment in 2019 of the Secretary of State for Equality and Citizen Participation, which guaranteed the principle of equality in all public policies, in accordance with the strategic plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The establishment of the Secretary of State for Equality and Citizen Participation as a service dependent on the Head of Government placed equality at the strategic centre of Government policy.

8. Brazil reported that pursuant to Decree 10.174 of 13 December 2019, the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights had within its purview the coordination of activities related to public policies regarding freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, academic freedom and the secular character of State institutions. Subsequently, the Ministry had established the unit for the Coordination of Freedom of Religion or Belief, Freedom of Conscience, Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom, which was specifically entrusted with the defence of such freedoms. The Ministry had also set up a telephone hotline for victims of human rights abuses or violations called "Dial 100", which had specific procedures for handling allegations of religious discrimination. Calls were free, could be anonymous and were given a unique protocol number, which allowed victims to monitor the progress and solution of their case.

9. Iraq reported that relevant government departments, as well as specialized non-governmental organizations, continued to provide services according to the adopted strategies for the purpose of mitigating the harms resulting from violence against people based on religion or belief, especially by the so-called Da'esh. Furthermore, the Government had established a directorate in the Ministry of the Interior to protect families and children from domestic violence and to provide possible means and measures to prevent harm resulting from violence against women and children.

10. Uruguay reported that the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia and All Other Forms of Discrimination had been tasked under Act No. 17.817 with preventing and combating all forms of discrimination in Uruguay; planning and promoting campaigns aimed at preserving social, cultural and religious pluralism; gathering and centralizing information on racist, xenophobic and discriminatory behaviour; keeping a record of such behaviour and filing the corresponding legal complaints; providing advice to victims of discrimination; and informing public opinion on discriminatory attitudes and behaviour.

⁴ Ibid., para. 7 (b).

C. Encouraging the training of government officials in effective outreach strategies⁵

11. Azerbaijan reported that the State Committee on Religious Associations had carried out some 50 awareness-raising events in 2020, including online, which had been attended by more than 5,000 people, in close cooperation with central and executive authorities, the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, youth organizations, religious organizations and other non-governmental organizations. Owing to the spread of COVID-19 and the social isolation requirements implemented in Azerbaijan since March 2020, religious awareness-raising events planned to be held in live format had been held through video conferences.

12. Brazil reported that the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights had established an institutional partnership with the Federal University of Uberlândia on a project on promoting freedom of religion or belief, which involved the production of digital and print content with recommendations targeted at public servants through the National School of Public Administration. In addition, the project included the preparation of a manual on the collective exercise and organizational autonomy of religious entities as well as four reports on jurisprudence and national and international experiences relating to freedom of religion or belief and the convening of online training events regarding the manual and the reports.

13. Qatar reported that the Human Rights Department at the Ministry of the Interior was keen to integrate the principles and values of equality, anti-discrimination, acceptance of others and a culture of dialogue in all of its training and educational programmes. The programmes were tailored bearing in mind that members of the Qatari police force exercised their duties in a multicultural, multiracial and multi-religious community environment.

D. Encouraging the efforts of leaders to discuss within their communities the causes of discrimination and developing strategies to counter those causes⁶

14. Colombia reported on the establishment of a programme to train 2,000 religious leaders in the design, preparation and presentation of projects on religious freedom. A booklet had been issued with guidelines on how to present a project, for example, within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2020, the Government had launched the Academic Network for the Respect and Guarantee of Religious Freedom, aimed at bringing together various universities in Colombia to help them to develop academic programmes, research groups and courses on religious freedom.

15. Namibia reported that the Government continued to work with faith-based organizations to combat gender-based violence, harmful practices and drug and alcohol abuse. Religious groups registered as non-profit organizations and those formed as voluntary associations were exempt from paying taxes, while other faith-based organizations could also register as welfare organizations with the Ministry of Health and Social Services.

16. The Philippines reported that the Government, through the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, regularly conducted peace education and peace caravans in conflict-affected and conflict-vulnerable communities. Furthermore,

⁵ Ibid., para. 7 (c).

⁶ Ibid., para. 7 (d).

it had spearheaded conflict-sensitive and peace-promoting approaches by training human rights duty-bearers, civil society organizations and communities and supporting youth, peace and security initiatives in 2020 and 2021.

E. Speaking out against intolerance, including advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence⁷

17. Croatia reported that the condemnation of hate speech in public spaces and social networks and the strengthening of prevention activities through public campaigns and media literacy had been clearly emphasized in the Government's programme for the period 2020–2024. Considering that the COVID-19 crisis had exposed or even exacerbated inequalities, a set of measures was being developed to strengthen the capacities of the public sector to secure the protection of human rights and combat discrimination in crisis situations.

F. Adopting measures to criminalize incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief⁸

18. Croatia reported that the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration, in accordance with the obligations arising from the Anti-Discrimination Act and the Protocol for Procedure in Cases of Hate Crimes, collected and consolidated data from the competent courts, including disaggregated data on discrimination and hate crimes on grounds of religion or belief. In April 2021, the Government had adopted a new protocol on procedure in cases of hate crimes, and the monitoring system was currently being upgraded, including with a separate classification of hate crimes and criminal offences of public incitement to violence and hatred, as well as disaggregation of data based on bias motivation.

19. Poland reported that the provisions of the European Union Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law had been reflected in Polish national legislation, including in articles 18 and 255 to 257 of the Criminal Code. Furthermore, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration coordinated the implementation of a training programme for law enforcement officers to identify hate crimes, conduct proper actions in carrying out investigations and respond to such cases and prevent them.

20. The Russian Federation reported that a total of 63 crimes had been registered in 2020 under article 282 of the Criminal Code, which punished incitement of hatred or enmity as well as abasement of human dignity. A total of 49 of those crimes had been committed using the Internet, which constituted an increase compared with 2019, in which 12 out of 19 cases related to the Internet.

⁷ Ibid., para. 7 (e).

⁸ Ibid., para. 7 (f).

G. Understanding the need to combat denigration and the negative religious stereotyping of persons, as well as incitement to religious hatred, by strategizing and harmonizing actions at the local, national, regional and international levels through, inter alia, education and awareness-raising⁹

21. Croatia reported on training programmes for teachers, police officers, public servants and local and regional administrations, focusing on anti-discrimination on multiple grounds, anti-Semitism and education about the Holocaust. In 2020, the Education, Science and Culture Committee of the Croatian Parliament had expressed its view that education had an essential role in the prevention of intolerance and stimulated improvements in life-long learning against racism and xenophobia, highlighting the need to remember the victims of the Holocaust in a dignified manner.

22. Cyprus reported that religious education encompassed both the Christian Orthodox tradition and the universal phenomenon of religion, including other Christian denominations and religions. In order to reduce bureaucratic procedures, exemptions from attending religious education were granted by the district education offices. The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute had conducted several actions to support teachers and schools in implementing the Code of Conduct against Racism and the Guide for Managing and Recording Racist Incidents. For the school year 2019–2020, the Pedagogical Institute had received reports from 41 schools on a total of 245 racist incidents, including 11 that were attributed to religion.

23. Turkey reported that various amendments had been made to the national curriculum to include the teaching of the fundamental values of non-discrimination, respect for differences and inclusiveness and to integrate an encompassing approach to all religions in all levels of education. The Ombudsman Institution also monitored the compliance of public institutions with the principle of prevention of discrimination. Pursuant to the Action Plan on Human Rights, which had been announced by the President on 2 March 2021, the Turkish Criminal Code would be amended to include a new provision on discrimination and hate crimes. Furthermore, a database would be established regarding criminal offences and misdemeanours involving hate and discrimination.

H. Recognizing that the open, constructive and respectful debate of ideas, as well as interreligious, interfaith and intercultural dialogue, at the local, national, regional and international levels, can play a positive role in combating religious hatred, incitement and violence¹⁰

24. Colombia reported on the Government's establishment of a repository of interfaith initiatives. The religious sector had been acknowledged as a key stakeholder in the social fabric and the process of building sustainable development. For the period 2018–2022, the national development plan had included religious freedom as a specific Government goal for the first time.

25. Cyprus reported on the continuation of the “Imagine” programme, which included a diverse range of activities related to human rights and anti-racism within the education for a culture of peace. In collaboration with the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research at the “Home for Cooperation”, the programme was

⁹ Ibid., para. 7 (g).

¹⁰ Ibid., para. 7 (h).

held in the buffer zone during school time, under the auspices of the Bicomunal Technical Committee on Education and had been approved by the negotiators of the two communities. Pupils engaged in pedagogical activities in which Greek-Cypriot pupils came into contact with Turkish-Cypriot pupils of the same age, accompanied by their teachers. While the programme had been continued for the school year 2019–2020 and had been enriched with more activities and meetings among children, its implementation was limited in 2020–2021 owing to COVID-19 restrictions.

26. Iraq reported that the visit by Pope Francis to the country from 5 to 8 March 2021, during which he had held religious services in several Iraqi cities and visited the historic city of Ur, had received a national, regional and international welcome. His meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani constituted an important step for tolerance and joint action to prevent discrimination and persecution, and Iraq had declared that 6 March of every year would be a national day of tolerance to commemorate the historic visit.

27. Mauritius reported that in February 2021, the Government had agreed in principle to hold consultations with stakeholders and the public in general on the proposed amendments to the Information and Communication Technologies Act, with a view to addressing the problem of misuse and abuse of social media in Mauritius.

I. Taking effective measures to ensure that public functionaries, in the conduct of their public duties, do not discriminate against individuals on the basis of religion or belief¹¹

28. Colombia reported on its nationwide campaign to prevent discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs, which had been promoted among officials in institutions such as the National Police and the Ministry of the Interior.

29. Hungary reported that, in cooperation with the Hungarian Islamic community, a guidebook on the proper treatment of Muslim inmates had been prepared for the staff of the prison service. It also reported that the prison service offered the possibility of fasting during the month of Ramadan and that prisons could offer a diet that aligned with religious instructions if the inmate's application had been approved. Inmates could also keep religious items that were needed for practising their religion with them in the cells or living rooms. On the basis of the cooperation between the Directorate-General for Law Enforcement and the Directorate-General for Crime Investigation, a brochure had been published in February 2021, containing information and advice for victims of hate crime.

30. Poland reported that, between 2019 and 2020, the National School of Judiciary and Public Prosecution had organized several training sessions on the subject of the practical aspects of cultural diversity in criminal proceedings and that it was planning training sessions in 2021 on the subject of the cultural diversity of participants in criminal proceedings. The National School enabled Polish judges and prosecutors to participate in international training events on European Union anti-discrimination law and gender equality law.

31. The Russian Federation reported that the text of General Assembly resolution [75/187](#) had been brought to the attention of the judges of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation and employees of its staff as well as lower courts, including by posting the specified text in the automated system available to the courts. As at 19 March 2021, related to the subject matter of resolution [75/187](#), the automated system contained the texts of 90 General Assembly resolutions, 450 reports prepared

¹¹ Ibid., para. 8 (a).

by special rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council and a number of documents adopted by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance.

J. Fostering religious freedom and pluralism by promoting the ability of members of all religious communities to manifest their religion and to contribute openly and on an equal footing to society¹²

32. Andorra reported on the adoption of Act No. 13/2019 on equal treatment and non-discrimination, which lays down basic definitions that must prevail in all fields of social life, guaranteeing the effective application of the principle of equality by recognizing its nature as a subjective right. For the first time, the principle of reversal of the burden of proof was regulated within Andorra's legal system, and the Act introduced a specific sanctioning regime that guaranteed compliance with the Act.

33. Azerbaijan reported that 969 religious communities (932 Muslim, 26 Christian, 8 Jewish, 2 Baha'i and 1 Krishnaite) had been registered in Azerbaijan as at March 2021, with 2,250 mosques, 16 churches and seven synagogues operating in the country. It noted that the activity of the State Committee on Religious Associations was based on establishing favourable conditions for the implementation of religious freedom, conducting the registration of religious communities and strengthening tolerance, mutual understanding and respect among religious communities of different faiths. Through the reserve fund of the President, the State had provided financial assistance to religious communities.

34. Brazil reported on the adoption of Law No. 13.796/2019, which guaranteed students in public and private educational institutions the right to alternative examination dates whenever examinations or classes conflicted with holy days. Brazil followed a model of collaborative secularism, wherein the political and religious spheres were separate and the State and religious organizations could cooperate among themselves. Such cooperation had proved to be especially important within the context of ongoing efforts against the COVID-19 pandemic, during which organizations representing different religions or beliefs supported vulnerable populations, helping to guarantee their food security among other fundamental contributions.

35. Colombia reported that, through an agreement with the United Nations Development Programme, it had begun an in-depth analysis of its religious sector. To date, more than 2,000 religious organizations had been analysed and described according to the social impact of their work in the areas where they were based. The main conclusion was that religious actors played a major role in national development.

36. Ecuador reported that it had recognized more than 5,000 religious organizations, the members of which were primarily Evangelicals, Indigenous Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals. There were also the Native American religious organizations and Muslim religious organizations, which conducted their worship with guarantees of freedom and religious equality. In 2020 alone, 160 new religious organizations had been established in Ecuador.

37. North Macedonia reported that 40 religious entities were currently registered in the country, including three religious entities that had been newly registered in 2020. The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups was continuously in contact with religious entities in 2020, which had contributed during

¹² Ibid., para. 8 (b).

the COVID-19 crisis to faster transmission of information for protection against the virus.

38. Poland reported that freedom of conscience and religion was guaranteed, including through the criminalization of acts of discrimination against persons on the grounds of religion or lack of religious belonging and through the criminalization of behaviours directed against the public manifestation of religion.

39. The Russian Federation reported that 31,598 religious organizations of more than 60 confessions had been registered, including 484 new religious organizations, which the Ministry of Justice had decided to register in 2020. Citizens of the Russian Federation were equal before the law in all areas of civil, political, economic, social and cultural life, regardless of their attitude to religion and religious affiliation. Foreign citizens and stateless persons legally present on the territory of the Russian Federation enjoyed the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion on an equal basis with citizens of the Russian Federation and bore responsibility established by federal laws for violation of the legislation on freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious associations.

40. Turkmenistan reported that 132 religious organizations had been registered with the Ministry of Justice, including 109 Muslim organizations, 12 Orthodox organizations and 11 other confessions. According to the law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations, citizens of Turkmenistan were equal before the law regardless of their attitude to religion and religious affiliation, and foreign citizens and stateless persons enjoyed the right to freedom of religion on an equal basis with citizens of Turkmenistan.

K. Encouraging the representation and meaningful participation of individuals, irrespective of their religion or belief, in all sectors of society¹³

41. Croatia reported that measures to encourage and secure the representation of religious minorities and meaningful participation of individuals in all sectors of society were in place. In 2021, Croatia had adopted its National Development Strategy 2030, which included the promotion of equality and equal opportunities as a horizontal priority, meaning that all public policies should contribute to the development of society without discrimination based on religious beliefs or other forms of intolerance.

42. Turkey reported that the Human Rights Action Plan of March 2021 was aimed at ensuring the enjoyment of freedom of religion and conscience to the widest extent. In order to realize that goal, public and private sector employees as well as students, regardless of their religion, would be granted leave of absence on the holidays of their respective religions. Furthermore, facilities would be provided in buildings and spaces allocated for public use so that the people belonging to different faith groups could fulfil their religious obligations depending on demand and needs.

43. Turkmenistan reported that it was currently preparing the adoption of a new National Action Plan for Human Rights for 2021–2025, in which one section would be devoted to measures to ensure freedom of religion, opinion and speech, freedom of association and the rights of journalists. The new human rights plan, like the previous ones, would be implemented in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme.

¹³ Ibid., para. 8 (c).

L. Making a strong effort to counter religious profiling, which is understood to be the invidious use of religion as a criterion in conducting questioning, searches and other investigative law enforcement procedures¹⁴

44. Azerbaijan reported that, according to article 4 of the Law on Freedom of Religion, everyone was equal before the law and courts regardless of religion, and that any indication of a person's religious affiliation in official documents was allowed only at his or her request.

45. Turkey reported that new identity cards for Turkish citizens did not include any indication of the person's religion in order to prevent any discriminatory behaviour that might arise because of such indication.

M. Adopting measures and policies to promote full respect for and protection of places of worship and religious sites, cemeteries and shrines and taking protective measures in cases where they are vulnerable to vandalism or destruction¹⁵

46. Colombia reported that in 2020, it had hosted the first Hemispheric Forum on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which served as a platform to discuss actions and strategies currently being carried out in America on the protection of religious expressions and places of worship, as well as challenges to the interfaith dialogue. Government officials, together with representatives of the academic sector and civil society, had exchanged points of view on issues such as tolerance, inclusion and rejection of religious discrimination.

47. Lebanon reported that article 475 of the Penal Code punished the disruption of religious ceremonies and the demolition of buildings for worship. As for the special measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the health crisis had begun in Lebanon in March 2020, the authorities had decided to close most places that hosted gatherings, including places of worship, as a precaution to prevent the spread of the virus. Some two months later, the Government had decided to allow citizens to go to mosques and churches again, provided that health conditions and public safety measures were adhered to.

N. Strengthening international efforts to foster 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 beliefs¹⁶

48. Azerbaijan reported that the State Committee on Religious Associations had cooperated with institutions in Belgium, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Uzbekistan. At the regional level, the State Committee on Religious Associations had participated in November 2020 in the supplementary human dimension meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on the role of civil society and digital technology in promoting freedom of religion or belief for all.

¹⁴ Ibid., para. 8 (d).

¹⁵ Ibid., para. 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., para. 10.

49. Brazil reported that it would host the fourth Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom or Belief, as well as the second Ministerial of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, in Brasilia in November 2021.

III. Actions taken by the United Nations in support of the implementation of the action plan

A. Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect

50. The Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide continued to serve as the focal point for the implementation of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech,¹⁷ in cooperation with a working group led by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and United Nations field presences. At the launch of the Strategy, the Secretary-General also called for a global ministerial-level conference to be convened on the role of education in addressing hate speech. The conference was delayed because of the pandemic but is planned to take place in October 2021. The conference is being organized jointly by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

51. During the reporting period, the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect continued to provide support through technical assistance and capacity-building to United Nations field offices on developing their own context-specific action plans to implement the United Nations Strategy on Hate Speech. In September 2020, the Office issued the Detailed Guidance on Implementation for United Nations Field Presences¹⁸ and continued implementing the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes.¹⁹

52. In response to the appeal by the Secretary-General for solidarity, unity and compassion during COVID-19, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations jointly organized a virtual consultation with religious leaders and faith-based actors in May 2020. The consultation resulted in the Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations.²⁰ The Global Pledge includes a declaration by religious leaders and faith-based actors with commitments in response to COVID-19. It is complemented by a mapping of ongoing activities and possible areas of collaboration with the United Nations. Addressing and countering COVID-19-related hate speech, interfaith dialogue and capacity-building figure prominently in the mapping both as cross-cutting issues and as specific areas where religious leaders and faith-based organizations are focusing their actions and responses to COVID-19.

53. OHCHR, the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations have followed up to the Global Pledge with an online peer-to-peer learning programme on topics in which the role of faith-based actors is particularly influential. The series of six monthly interactive

¹⁷ www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf.

¹⁸ www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/hate-speech-strategy.shtml.

¹⁹ www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/publications-and-resources/Plan_of_Action_Religious-rev5.pdf.

²⁰ www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeAction.pdf.

webinars, which took place between December 2020 and May 2021, shared good practices and lessons learned to promote gender equality, address hate speech, safeguard religious sites, protect religious or belief minorities, prevent atrocity crimes and facilitate interfaith dialogue.²¹ Experiences on concrete initiatives undertaken by participants, including United Nations human rights mechanisms, and action-oriented recommendations from the series of webinars were compiled in peer-to-peer learning snapshots.²²

B. United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

54. In 2020 and 2021, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations continued to lead in the implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites.²³ The global communications campaign was launched in September 2020 as a global call to action under the hashtag #forSafeWorship to safeguard religious sites and worshippers worldwide. The campaign invites people around the world to submit multimedia stories about their personal connections to religious sites. By late 2020, the Alliance had received and featured multimedia stories from people in 14 countries and had reached 315,000 people on social media. The Alliance continues to mobilize faith communities, including youth leaders, to promote the universality and symbolism of religious sites and places of worship and the imperative to protect them regardless of religion or belief or non-belief. On the mapping of religious sites, the Alliance continued to work with the Operational Satellite Applications Programme of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research to finalize modalities to start a phased mapping approach in five pilot countries in 2021.

55. During the reporting period, the Alliance convened and/or co-organized several meetings, which provided a platform for faith-based actors to build more inclusive and peaceful societies, particularly in the context of the response to COVID-19. As a co-organizer of the seventh annual G20 Interfaith Forum, held in Saudi Arabia in October 2020, the Alliance participated in several rounds of consultations for religious leaders and faith actors from the Arab region and in consultations of the G20 Interfaith Forum Education Task Force, and also contributed to the expert group focusing on inclusive learning spaces.

56. Since his designation by the Secretary-General as the United Nations focal point to monitor anti-Semitism and enhance a system-wide response, the High Representative of the Alliance continued to engage with major Jewish organizations and Jewish leaders. In March 2021, he convened a high-level meeting of national and regional envoys and coordinators on combating anti-Semitism and relevant United Nations entities, including UNESCO, the Department of Global Communications and treaty bodies, to “Explore holistic approaches to combating anti-Semitism”. The Alliance is currently working on developing a results-oriented document that can provide guidance towards a coordinated and enhanced response to anti-Semitism anchored in human rights. The High Representative also participated in several events dedicated to combating anti-Semitism, including the 2020 Balkans Forum Against Anti-Semitism, organized by the Albanian Parliament, the high-level event on the role of the United Nations in combating anti-Semitism, organized by the World Jewish Congress and the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations, as well as the international meeting of the envoys and coordinators on combating anti-Semitism, organized by the European Commission.

²¹ www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeActionConcept.pdf.

²² www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeRecommendations.pdf.

²³ www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/12-09-2019-UNAOC-PoA-Religious-Sites.pdf.

57. The High Representative continued to broaden the scope of the Alliance's engagement with religious leaders and faith actors across the faith spectrum. Designated as the main United Nations focal point for engagement with the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity,²⁴ the High Representative supported and mobilized relevant United Nations entities for the "Pray for Humanity" call initiated by the Higher Committee, dedicating 14 May 2020 as a day for fasting, prayers and supplications for the good of humanity to end COVID-19.

58. The Alliance capitalized on its broad network of religious leaders and faith-based organizations to incentivize their mobilizing capacity within their communities to promote mutual respect, tolerance, understanding and unity within their communities; voice their rejection of violent extremism, radical ideologies, hate speech and stigma; promote cultural diversity and religious pluralism; and promote the universality of religious sites and places of worship as symbols of our shared humanity, history and traditions, as well as pluralism, and to emphasize the role of individuals in supporting their national Government's efforts in safeguarding all religious sites, regardless of religions or beliefs.

59. The Alliance launched, jointly with the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, the seed-funded project entitled "Peer-to-Peer capacity-building training between young religious leaders and young media makers". A group of 22 young media makers, young religious leaders, and faith actors participated in a series of practical workshops in 2021, covering topics on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, preventing violent extremism through strategic communications, countering hate speech, demystifying digital violence and promoting social cohesion, tolerance and mutual respect.

C. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

60. OHCHR continued to work on the various dimensions of religious intolerance, including multiple forms of discrimination, xenophobia, freedom of religion or belief, religious profiling and incitement to racial, national or religious hatred. As a member of the working group to operationalize the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, OHCHR developed its own strategy on hate speech in May 2020. It also issued two guidance notes in June 2020, on racial discrimination in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and on COVID-19 and minority rights.²⁵

61. OHCHR has been piloting the #Faith4Rights toolkit²⁶ with faith-based actors, academics and United Nations human rights mechanisms at the national, regional and global levels.²⁷ The toolkit translates the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on "Faith for Rights" (A/HRC/40/58, annexes I and II) into practical peer-to-peer learning programmes, offering concrete ideas for exercises and cases to debate on addressing incitement to hatred and violence against minorities, including in a pandemic context. Three webinars on keeping faith in times of hate and on confronting COVID-19 from the prism of faith, gender equality and human rights were conducted together with Religions for Peace, the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief and on minority issues and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, as part of its Knowledge Hub

²⁴ www.forhumanfraternity.org/.

²⁵ www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/COVID-19_and_Racial_Discrimination.pdf; and www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/OHCHRGuidance_COVID19_MinoritiesRights.pdf.

²⁶ www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/faith4rights-toolkit.pdf.

²⁷ www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/FaithForRights.aspx.

initiative.²⁸ OHCHR and special procedure mandate holders also contributed to the crash course on “Stomping out hate speech” held in October 2020 by the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, as well as to the massive open online course on international standards on freedom of expression and the safety of journalists, held jointly in May and June 2021 by UNESCO and the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at the University of Oxford.

62. OHCHR expanded its work on anti-Semitism, including through cooperation with the World Jewish Congress in the context of exhibitions and panel discussions. On the most recent International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust (27 January 2021), the High Commissioner issued a press statement in which she stressed that 2020 had seen frightening increases in the number of hate crimes in many societies, as well as a sharp rise in online anti-Semitic activity amid the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the World Jewish Congress reporting a 30 per cent increase in anti-Jewish slurs on major social media sites since November 2019.²⁹

63. OHCHR has played an important and catalytic role within the United Nations system and beyond in developing human rights-based policies and frameworks for the use and governance of digital technology by States and technology companies, including advocating for respect for minority rights in the digital space. OHCHR engaged directly with a range of companies. The aim is to develop effective rights-respecting responses to threats to civic space in collaboration with OHCHR field presences and civil society partners. OHCHR advocated with different social media platforms for them to step up efforts to meet their human rights responsibilities under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. In 2020, OHCHR collaborated with Facebook, Google/YouTube and Twitter with a view to better protecting human rights defenders and responding to content that might constitute incitement to hostility, discrimination or violence.

D. Human rights treaty bodies

64. In its statement on derogations from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Human Rights Committee stressed that States could not tolerate, even in situations of emergency, the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that would constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, and that they must take steps to ensure that public discourse in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic did not constitute advocacy and incitement against specific marginalized or vulnerable groups, including minorities and foreign nationals (CCPR/C/128/2, para. 2). In its general comment No. 37 on the right of peaceful assembly, adopted in July 2020, the Human Rights Committee refers to the six-part threshold test on incitement to violence in the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence and to the Beirut Declaration on Faith for Rights (CCPR/C/GC/37, paras. 19 and 50).

65. In November 2020, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination adopted its general recommendation No. 36 on preventing and combating racial profiling by law enforcement officials. The Committee recommended that States ensure that law enforcement agencies regularly evaluate recruitment and promotion policies and, if necessary, adopt temporary special measures to effectively address the

²⁸ www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/CEDAW_statement_COVID-19_final.doc.

²⁹ www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26689&LangID=E.

underrepresentation of various national or ethnic minority groups and of groups experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination based on, inter alia, religion, sex and gender, sexual orientation, disability and age (CERD/C/GC/36, para. 47). Furthermore, States should ensure that algorithmic profiling systems deployed for law enforcement purposes were designed for transparency and should allow researchers and civil society to access the code and subject it to scrutiny. The Committee also suggested examining potential and actual discriminatory effects of algorithmic profiling based on grounds of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin and their intersection with other grounds, including religion, sex and gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, age, migration status and work or other status (*ibid.*, para. 60).

E. Special procedures

66. In April 2020, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief expressed extreme concerns that certain religious leaders and politicians continued to exploit the challenging times during the COVID-19 pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities.³⁰ He called upon all religious leaders and faith actors to combat incitement to hatred through engagement and education, referring to some useful tools, such as Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, the Rabat Plan of Action and the #Faith4Rights toolkit.³¹

67. In September 2020, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar recommended that the Government ensure that freedom of religion and belief could be exercised and guarantee that any advocacy of or incitement to hatred and violence was effectively addressed and countered, including in print, broadcast and social media, in line with Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (A/75/335, para. 99 (m)).

68. In October 2020, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief stressed that no one would be left behind only when sustainable development efforts advanced the political, social and economic inclusion of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities. The Special Rapporteur therefore encouraged States to employ specific indicators to identify the impact of interventions on reducing inequalities involving religion or belief (A/75/385, para. 61). In order to address and mitigate the impacts of Islamophobia, the Special Rapporteur recommended in his 2021 report to the Human Rights Council that States fulfil their obligations to prohibit any advocacy of religious hatred that constituted incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, in line with international norms and soft law instruments developed under the auspices of the United Nations.³²

69. In January 2021, four special procedure mandate holders³³ urged the Government of Sri Lanka to end its policy of forced cremation of the COVID-19 deceased, which runs contrary to the beliefs of Muslims and other minorities in the

³⁰ www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E.

³¹ www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25814&LangID=E.

³² See A/HRC/46/30, para. 79 (d); Human Rights Council resolution 16/18; and the Rabat Plan of Action and the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on Faith for Rights.

³³ Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; and Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

country. The Special Rapporteurs noted that such hostility against the minorities exacerbated existing prejudices, intercommunal tensions and religious intolerance, sowing fear and distrust while inciting further hatred and violence.³⁴

70. The Special Rapporteur on minority issues highlighted in March 2021 that minorities and other vulnerable groups constituted the majority of victims of incitement to hatred. He noted that the theme of “hate speech, social media and minorities”³⁵ pitted many of the most vulnerable communities, including religious or belief minorities such as Baha’i, Muslims, Jews and Christians, against the interests of some of the most powerful corporate entities, with States sitting uncomfortably between the two (A/HRC/46/57, paras. 24 and 36).

71. On the tenth anniversary of Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, in March 2021, five Special Rapporteurs³⁶ welcomed that historic consensus and flagged that, sadly, a new wave of stigma, racism, xenophobia and hate had been amplified by digitalization and social networks and aggravated in the context of the pandemic, targeting minorities and those seen as “others” with impunity. At the same time, they noted that the policing of opinions and expressions online, the targeting of certain religious communities for reasons of national security and the use of counter-terrorism or public order laws to suppress legitimate expression had reinforced negative stereotypes and might contribute to incidents of intolerance, discrimination and violence against persons based on their religion, belief or opinions in any region of the world. They also voiced concern at State actions that were incompatible with freedoms of religion, belief, opinion and expression, including the use of anti-blaspemy and anti-apostasy laws, which rendered religious or belief minorities, including atheists and dissenters, vulnerable to discrimination and violence. The Special Rapporteurs stressed that States must not revive the dangerous notion of “defamation of religions” and the divisive debate that had undercut efforts to combat religious discrimination and intolerance prior to achieving the consensus agreement 10 years earlier.³⁷

IV. Conclusions and observations on the way forward

72. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and even exacerbated intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons, including based on religion or belief. Both online and offline, religious intolerance has targeted in particular members of minority communities across the world, who have been stigmatized as supposed carriers of the virus and have faced discrimination and attacks. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions on meetings and travel have also hampered interreligious, interfaith and intercultural engagement at the local, national, regional and international levels.

73. At the same time, cooperation by States with faith-based organizations and among religious or belief communities has proved to be particularly important in the COVID-19 context, for example in supporting those in a situation of vulnerability and providing humanitarian assistance. United Nations human

³⁴ www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26686&LangID=E.

³⁵ Theme of the 2020 Forum on Minority Issues, see A/HRC/46/58.

³⁶ Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; and Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

³⁷ www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26937&LangID=E.

rights mechanisms and OHCHR have provided detailed guidance on COVID-19 and its human rights dimensions.³⁸ States are encouraged to pay particular attention to the impact of COVID-19 within the context of violence, discrimination and incitement to hatred against persons based on religion or belief.

74. It is welcome that 21 States submitted contributions for the present report, which constitutes a significant increase from the number of contributions received for previous reports.³⁹ All States are encouraged to further contribute in order to provide peer-to-peer learning elements based on national practices of the various stakeholders.

75. Moreover, for the first time in the annual reports to the General Assembly since 2012, States provided information on action taken to encourage the efforts of leaders to discuss within their communities the causes of discrimination and develop strategies to counter those causes (see action plan contained in Assembly resolution 75/187, para. 7 (d)). This notably included information on cooperation with faith-based organizations to combat gender-based violence and harmful practices as well as, more broadly, training efforts on anti-discrimination and gender equality legislation.

76. With regard to other paragraphs of the action plan, which previously had received few updates,⁴⁰ States also reported in 2021 on several steps taken to encourage the training of Government officials in effective outreach strategies (para. 7 (c)) and on their efforts to counter religious profiling (para. 8 (d)). Concerning the latter issue, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination provided important guidance in November 2020 through its general recommendation No. 36 on preventing and combating racial profiling by law enforcement officials in which it also addressed situations of double or multiple discrimination, such as discrimination on grounds of gender or religion (CERD/C/GC/36, para. 4).

77. As noted in previous reports,⁴¹ women and girls suffer from discrimination on the grounds of both gender and religion or belief and it is important to consider how they are affected by issues such as religious profiling. States are encouraged to include in their future submissions further reference to the gender dimension of discrimination based on religion or belief and the steps taken to implement the action plan with respect to women and girls.

78. States may also consider analysing the complex root causes of religious discrimination, violence and intolerance, including the manner in which relevant educational curricula are conceived and implemented. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development could be the entry point for alleviating the inequalities and discrimination suffered on the basis of religion or belief, including through the achievement of Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10 and 16. It was also recently proposed to monitor freedom of religion or belief through structural, process and outcome indicators to identify the impact of interventions on reducing inequalities involving religion or belief (A/75/385, paras. 61 and 65). Furthermore,

³⁸ www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID-19.aspx.

³⁹ A total of 12 contributions were received for the most recent report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/46/67) and 16 contributions for the previous report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly (A/75/369).

⁴⁰ For an assessment of the contributions received between 2012 and 2020, see A/HRC/46/67, paras. 94–98.

⁴¹ A/75/369, para. 96; and A/74/229, para. 88.

COVID-19 response plans must be designed in such a manner as to address the root causes of discrimination, violence and intolerance.

79. Several States indicated that they had adopted measures to criminalize incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief. Such laws must neither be used to stifle freedom of opinion and expression nor to curtail civic space, such as through attacks on human rights defenders.

80. Ten years after achieving the historic consensus in Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, States are encouraged to make better use of existing mechanisms for implementing the action plan. It is accompanied by a dedicated implementation mechanism, the Istanbul Process for Combating Intolerance, Discrimination and Incitement to Hatred and/or Violence on the Basis of Religion or Belief, with seven international meetings having been held to date in Washington, D.C.; London; Geneva; Doha; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; Singapore and The Hague. States are also encouraged to make use of the Human Rights Council universal periodic review process to promote the implementation of the action plan, report on progress and share examples of promising approaches. National human rights institutions, national mechanisms for reporting and follow-up and civil society organizations could also include a specific analysis of implementation of the action plan in their reports.

81. States should also consider operationalizing the threshold test of the Rabat Plan of Action, “which sets the right balance between protecting freedom of expression and prohibiting incitement to hatred, based on a case-by-case assessment of the context, speaker, intent, content, extent of dissemination and likelihood of harm”.⁴² In that context, it is a welcome development that in 2021, the Facebook oversight board has used the Rabat threshold test in several decisions⁴³ and explicitly referred to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, general comments by treaty bodies, reports by special procedure mandate holders and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

82. Standing up against religious intolerance at all levels is essential in preventing intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping and incitement to hatred. Such work needs to be carried out more systematically in a collective interfaith manner. Public officials, religious and community leaders and the media should speak out, recognizing their collective responsibility as set out in the Rabat Plan of Action.⁴⁴ The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” recognize the importance of engaging religious leaders in addressing intolerance and standing up for human rights firmly and promptly. The Secretary-General has also emphasized the crucial role of religious leaders in addressing the multiple challenges of COVID-19, including hate speech, continuity of education and violence against women and girls.⁴⁵

83. As indicated above, United Nations entities such as OHCHR, the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, UNESCO and the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute have enhanced their collaboration and cooperation with relevant human rights treaty bodies and special procedure mandate holders, including in terms of peer-to-peer learning and joint action against violence, discrimination and incitement to religious hatred.

⁴² www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26937&LangID=E.

⁴³ <https://oversightboard.com/decision/>.

⁴⁴ See A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, appendix, paras. 35–36.

⁴⁵ www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-12/remarks-role-of-religious-leaders-addressing-multiple-challenges-of-covid-19.

Furthermore, through the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, the United Nations system works closely with States, civil society organizations, the private sector and the media to address hate speech.
