

UN expert stresses role of States in promoting religious tolerance



UN Special Rapporteur, Asma Jahangir

27 October 2009 – Governments have a central role to play in either preventing or contributing to religious friction, an independent United Nations expert said today, noting that a State's commitments to non-discrimination, as well as its policies and messages, can promote tolerance.

Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told a news conference in New York that there are preventive measures governments can take to avoid further polarization on the basis of religion before it erupts into violence.

She also noted that while governments are talking about issues such as defamation of religion, there is "less addressing of the issue of religious incitement to violence, discrimination and hatred."

In her presentation to the General Assembly last Friday, Ms. Jahangir discussed warning signs and prevention, as well as how religion is being used for political purposes.

"It is quite clear that as long as discrimination on religious grounds persists at the national or global levels, tensions will deepen and, indeed, also be exploited by various religious, political as well as militant forces," she had told delegates.

Ms. Jahangir added today that governments must meet this challenge with political announcements or messages that are "in the right direction."

While policies are one tool in the hands of governments to deal with the issue, she noted that they also have at their disposal political statements, education and inter-faith

dialogues, as well as bringing young people together for discussions on each other's religions, among others.

A related issue is the indoctrination of children into hating other religions, she said. "The government has an obligation under the Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect children from this kind of mental abuse."

She also discussed how women have become central to the prohibition or the allowing of religious symbols. "There are countries that simply will punish women if they do not wear a headscarf and there are other countries where women, if she wears a headscarf, will be penalized or sanctioned," the Special Rapporteur pointed out.

"It has to be balanced," she said, noting that this is an issue related to freedom of expression, as long as that right is not impinging on the rights of others.

In addition, she raised the issue of using technology for incitement to violence, and what capacity States have to tackle this in a way that does not impinge on the freedom of expression.

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