



Faith-based and other groups commit to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in Southeast Asia

At a two-day conference held in Bangkok, and first of its kind, committed to working to enhance the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Southeast Asia.

For the first time, approximately 70 human rights defenders, members of religious groups, rights groups, UN agencies and representatives from the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Rights of Women and Children, National Human Rights Institutions and other government agencies from across the region gathered together to discuss key pressing concerns regarding the right to freedom of religion or belief in Southeast Asia with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom on Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt.

The event was co-organized by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), the ICJ, and Boat People SOS (BPSOS) from 30 September to 1 October 2015 in Bangkok, Thailand.

During the event, participants were able to deepen their understanding on the right to freedom of religion or belief under international law and standards, and how religious freedom and other human rights should be interpreted and applied in a complementary manner.

“Many people suffer complex violations of their human rights, for example in the intersection of religious minority status, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or indigenous origin,” said Heiner Bielefeldt.

The two-day conference also successfully provided a multi-stakeholder platform for the participants to share challenges and best practices, as well as brainstorm ideas on addressing violations related to state control and regulation of religion, and extreme interpretations of religion.

“The politicization of religion undermines freedom of religion or belief, not only to the detriment of minorities, but also of followers of majority religions who do not wish to see their faith be turned into a tool of political power gambling,” added the Special Rapporteur.

Notable suggestions raised by the group on addressing identified obstacles to the free practice of religion or belief included the need for reforms, such as the repeal of blasphemy laws and mandatory registrations, and the importance of dialogue between groups of the same faith, as well as those of different religions.

“We need more cooperation across boundaries, including between faith-based and secular civil society organization,” stressed the expert.

Participants at the conference also recognized the opportunity presented before them in advancing freedom of religion or belief in the region and committed to working to enhance this right by reaffirming:

- Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”
- Freedom of religion or belief is an inalienable, non-derogable human right, encompassing the right to hold or not to hold any faith or belief, to change belief, and to be free from coercion and to manifest religion or belief.
- For freedom of religion or belief to be fully enjoyed, other human rights must also be respected, particularly the principle of nondiscrimination and freedoms of expression, assembly, association, education, and movement.

The participants also committed to:

- Defend and promote freedom of religion or belief as a universal, inalienable and non-derogable human right, as set out in the Universal Declaration, in international law and declarations, and in the work of national, regional, and global institutions.
- Defend and promote freedom of religion or belief for all persons, as individuals and in community with others, through their work and respective institutions by sharing information and mobilizing effective responses.
- Work toward the nondiscriminatory realization of freedom of religion or belief in recognition of multiple and intersectional discriminations and vulnerabilities, including, among other grounds, on grounds of ethnicity, indigenous identity, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, and disabilities.
- Enhance global and regional cooperation by working across geographical, national, racial, ethnic, political and religious boundaries.
- Advocate for accountability and remedies for individuals and communities suffering from violence, persecution, discrimination, harassment, marginalization or other abuses of human rights because of their religion or belief.
- Express and act in solidarity with individuals and communities suffering from violence, persecution, discrimination, harassment, marginalization or other abuses of human rights because of their religion or belief.

The Conference Declaration was based on the Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief and the New York Resolution for Freedom of Religion or Belief of the International Panel of Parliaments for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFORB).