

Recommendations to the Government of Norway regarding Human Rights at the United Nations in 2014

Norwegian NGO-forum for human rights
on behalf of
Amnesty International Norway
FIAN Norway
FOKUS – Forum for Women and Development
Human Rights Committee of the Norwegian Bar Association
Human Rights Committee of the Norwegian Psychologist Association
Human Rights House Foundation
JussBuss Legal Aid Clinic
Norwegian Center against Racism
Norwegian Helsinki Committee
Norwegian Humanist Association
Norwegian Human Rights Fund
Plan Norway
Stefanus Alliance International
United Nations Association of Norway

Countries and areas.....	2
Democratic People’s Republic of Korea	2
Iran	2
Russian Federation	3
Ukraine	5
Uzbekistan	6
Thematic recommendations	7
Discrimination based on work and descent	7
Election observation.....	8
Promotion of Child Rights and Best Interests Determination.....	8
The absolute prohibition against torture and the right to redress for victims of torture	9
Violations of freedom of religion or belief in conflict and transition.....	10

Countries and areas

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

In *North Korea*, a country marked by hunger and oppression, the inhabitants are deprived of most human rights. For more than 60 years the indoctrinated population has been held in an iron grip in a society based on fear, informants and betrayal. All inhabitants are divided into around 50 socio-political classes (*the Songbun system*), based on supposed loyalty to the regime. One's class affects every aspect of life – standard of living, place of residence, access to education, health care and employment, degree of monitoring and food rations. Those assumed to be religious are automatically placed among the lowest classes, deemed to be enemies of the states. Freedom of expression and religion is virtually non-existent.

The widespread gulag system, with up to 200.000 prisoners incarcerated under inhumane conditions, is characterized by grave torture, slave labor, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial executions and collective punishment. Forced repatriation, even of minors, and harsh punishment await those who flee the country to *China* and are caught. Reports indicate that *North Korean* authorities actively try to infiltrate groups of refugees, who are helped by or have contact with *South Koreans* or religious groups in *China*.

While much attention has been focused on the nuclear issue, in March 2013 the *Human Rights Council* established a *Commission of Inquiry on North Korea*. At the upcoming 25th session its findings will be presented. The Commission's work is of extreme importance in order to shed light on the egregious ongoing abuses of the *North Korean* people.

We urge the Norwegian government to:

- ensure that the forthcoming *UN Human Rights Council resolution* should significantly strengthen the mandate of the *UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea*, and increase the resources available to him.
- support calls to make the human rights crisis in *North Korea* a permanent agenda item at the *UN Security Council*, alongside the nuclear question.
- raise concerns about the grave, systematic and widespread human rights violations at the review of *North Korea* at the 19th *UPR session*. Raise such issues as: institutionalized discrimination due to the *Songbun system*, the prison camp system, persecution of religious adherents and restrictions imposed on religious practices, torture and extrajudicial executions and punishment of repatriated refugees.
- encourage the *UNHCR* to use the possibility of binding arbitration with *China*, in order to get access to the *North Korean* refugees in *China*; and use the various *UN* mechanisms and treaty bodies reviewing *China* to highlight the plight of the refugees, especially *CEDAW* and *CRC*.
- co-sponsor a debate and side-event on human rights violations in *North Korea*, with a special focus on freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, during the 25th session of the *Human Rights Council*, when the *Commission of Inquiry* will present its report.

Iran

After eight years of deteriorating human rights under the *Ahmadinejad* presidency, many hoped that newly elected president *Rouhani* would change this and that new opportunities for engagement with Iran would open up. There have already been seemingly positive developments in the nuclear

negotiations between *Iran* and the *P5+1*. However, since *Rouhani* was elected in mid-June 2013, there has been a clear increase in executions. In the period between *Rouhani's* inauguration on August 4 and October 7, 2013, there were at least 125 executions. It is important to keep addressing the alarming human rights situation with the new leadership in *Iran*.

Although prohibited constitutionally, authorities regularly engage in arbitrary arrest and detention, especially of political and religious dissidents; a trend that is increasing. The authorities' crackdown on non-Muslim religious minorities is at its highest since the early years of the revolution. Members of recognized and unrecognized religions, including members of the *Baha'i* and *Christian* communities, are experiencing an upsurge in legal discrimination and arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment. As of May 2013, at least 109 *Bahai's* were in prison due to their belief. More than 300 *Christians*, most of them converts from *Muslim* background, have been arbitrarily arrested and detained between June 2010 and the end of 2012.

Approximately 500 human rights defenders are currently under detention in *Iran*. The new penal code continues to use broad and vague wording, such as «*moharebeh*» (*enmity against God*) and «*sowing corruption on earth*», giving authorities extensive leverage in their pursuit of political and religious dissidents. Lawyers who take on political and religious cases risk harassment, interrogation and incarceration as a consequence. At least 42 attorneys working on political or religious cases have been prosecuted since 2009.

We urge the Norwegian government to:

- ensure that human rights are not overshadowed by nuclear arms negotiations with *Iran*, and are continually addressed at international and bilateral fora. The international community should not miss out on any opportunity of dialogue with *Iranian* authorities and should advocate strongly against the widespread use of torture and capital punishment.
- urge *Iranian* authorities to cease the practice of arbitrary arrests and detentions of religious and political dissidents, to ensure that all prisoners receive free and fair trials according to international standards and that lawyers enjoy full professional freedom without risk of repercussions and state intervention.
- urge *Iranian* authorities to immediately release all prisoners of conscience.
- support the work of the *Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran* and encourage *Iranian* authorities to extend an official invitation to the *Special Rapporteur*.
- forward the above mentioned recommendations to *Iranian* authorities at the *UPR-hearing of Iran* in the 20th *UPR-session*.

Russian Federation

On September 24, 2011 *Prime Minister Vladimir Putin* and *President Dmitry Medvedev* declared their plan to exchange positions, just before the *Duma* and presidential elections were held. Thousands of *Russians* went to the streets to protest in December 2011 and May 2012. *Russian* authorities did not expect such a large scale public outcry. Hundreds of demonstrators and activists were arrested. The human rights situation in *Russia* has worsened remarkably since *Vladimir Putin* started his third term as *President of Russian Federation*, in May 2012. The period started with legal amendments and initiatives, which violate human rights and limit the influence of civil society initiatives. Among the most controversial legal initiatives are: (1) The so-called "*foreign agents law*", approved in November 2012, which imposes a legal obligation on *Russian NGOs* which receive foreign aid in any form and are engaged in what the law loosely defines as "*political activities*" to register as "*organizations*

performing the functions of foreign agents". In Russian, the expression "*foreign agent*" is akin to spying. No NGO has registered as a "*foreign agent*"; (2) The law against "*propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations*" is allegedly aimed "*to protect children*" but severely infringes the freedom of expression for anyone intending to promote LGBT-rights; (3) the legal amendment on deprivation of paternal rights for LGBT parents was withdrawn from the *Duma* before it could be voted on and is presently under examination; (4) The *Law on treason* was approved in November 2012, and introduces changes in the *Law on espionage*; (5) The *Law on insulting religious feelings* was approved in June 2012, violations may be punished with up to 3 years in prison; (6) Amendments to the *Law on demonstrations* were adopted in June 2012.

The laws are yet another step in the ongoing campaign against human rights groups and civil society in general. Hundreds of NGOs have been inspected during 2013 under the "foreign agent law". While the inspections are allegedly justified on official grounds that formally fall within the law, by their scale and nature they undermine the independence and impact of civil society.

Although some prominent political prisoners have been released, new political prisoners are continually being arrested. For instance, *Evgeny Vitishko*, an ecologist from the *Sochi region*, could be sentenced to 3 years in prison for painting on a fence. Several activists have been detained and interrogated in the *Krasnodar region/Sochi* in the run up to the Olympic Games. The human rights activist *Mikhail Saava* from *Krasnodar* could face 23 years of imprisonment for "*treason*". Suspects in the ongoing "*Bolotnaya case*", - the trial of the participants in the demonstrations after the elections, - may get 5-6 years imprisonment.

The suicide bombings in *Volgograd* in December 2013 are reminders of continuing conflict in the *North Caucasus*, the neighboring region to *Krasnodar*, hosting the *Olympic Winter Games* in February 2014. The conflict started in *Chechnya* in 1994 has been spreading to the neighboring republics *Dagestan*, *Ingushetia*, and *Kabardino-Balkaria*. Insurgents conduct suicide actions and attack police offices. In response, law enforcement personnel frequently conduct *anti-terror operations*, in which they arrest without due process, and torture and often kill alleged "terrorists". Friends and family members of alleged "terrorists" are often held responsible and suffer similar extra-legal consequences. The ongoing military conflict in the region and growing nationalism in *Russia*, feed hostile attitudes towards people from the *North Caucasus*, especially *Chechens*, in the whole of *Russia*.

The anti-Western rhetoric and fight against so-called internal and external enemies results in significant problems for *Russians* who have partners abroad. Some journalists and human rights activists have had their applications for visas to visit *Russia* rejected, as in the case of *Bjørn Engesland*.

We call on the Norwegian government to urge:

- the *Russian Federation* to immediately halt persecution of human rights defenders and NGOs, honor its obligations to protect and support human rights work and give the NGOs and other civil society initiatives the opportunity to function freely.
- the *Russian Federation* to respect freedom of association, expression and assembly, including by security services and law enforcement officers, and to invite the *UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Assembly and Association* to visit the country.

- the *Russian Federation* to respect the rule of law and to actively prosecute any alleged violation of human rights and international humanitarian law, to end impunity for crimes such as forced or involuntary disappearances, killings and torture by thoroughly investigating each case and providing fair and public trials.
- that a legal process for grave crimes in the *Northern Caucasus* region is established, in accordance with the *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe resolution 1323 (2003)*, and that the *Russian Federation* fully implements the decisions of the *European Court of Human Rights*.

Ukraine

The situation in *Ukraine* after the *Euromaidan* protests started in November 2013, is concerning. The protests started when President *Yanukovich* refused to sign a cooperation agreement with the European Union, and mass protests in Kiev gathered up to several hundred thousand protesters. After president *Yanukovich* signed into force laws severely restricting freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression, protests intensified both in *Kiev* and around the country. 20 – 23 January, 2014 there were clashes between police forces and protesters, and severe violence was used against protesters. Also protesters made use of violence. Five protesters are reported dead. Several went missing. More were kidnapped and tortured before they were released. Hundreds were injured. Many protesters were imprisoned. The persecution and use of excessive force against demonstrators must be investigated and those responsible brought to justice.

By the end of January *Prime Minister Azarov* had resigned and the laws adopted only two weeks earlier were repealed in an attempt to meet some of the protesters' demands. However, demonstrators remain discontent. The protests take place against a backdrop of reversal of democratic reforms in recent years, the sentencing of former *Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko* to several years in prison in a politically motivated trial and massive corruption leading all the way to the top of government.

The development in *Ukraine* is essential, not only to *Ukrainians*, but also to the people in other countries in *Eastern Europe*. A failure of *Ukraine* to move towards more democratic values will effect negatively the development also in neighboring countries. Presidential elections in *Ukraine* are scheduled to take place in 2015. There is a possibility that both parliamentary and presidential elections will be held early.

We call on the Norwegian government to urge Ukraine to:

- immediately release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.
- Promptly and effectively investigate the deaths, disappearances and torture of protesters from *Euromaidan*, and bring those responsible to justice.
- permit and support the establishment of an independent body to inquire and establish the facts of the violence related to *Euromaidan* with the inclusion of civil society representatives, and especially human rights groups.
- ensure that elections will be held under equal conditions for contenders to elected posts, in an environment free of intimidation and procedural impediments.
- start a reform process to secure standards guaranteeing a free and democratic society and the rule of law.

Uzbekistan

The human rights situation in *Uzbekistan* represents a great challenge to the international community, as the country has one of the most repressive and brutal regimes not only in the *former Soviet Union*, but in the world as a whole. The government has systematically proven unwilling to implement recommendations from the *UN*, *OSCE* and leading human rights organizations. *Uzbekistan* has repeatedly denied access to all *UN Special Procedures* who have requested access to the country. Eleven requests for invitations have been rejected so far. In recent years we have seen a certain fatigue in the international community's attempts to influence the regime. We believe that the international community must re-ignite its engagement with the government of *Uzbekistan* on human rights issues. While the current president *Islam Karimov*, has proven defiant, his high age implies that a new leadership will be in place in the near future. Therefore, it is essential to engage with *Uzbekistan* at this point.

There is a brutal pressure placed on civil society, journalists and religious groups and civil society in the country is marginalized. Many activists have sought refuge abroad or have been imprisoned, adding to the high number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. International non-governmental organizations are not permitted to visit the country in their official capacity, and are being denied visas or stopped at the borders. Travel restrictions are imposed on *Uzbekistani* citizens known to have differing political views from that of the government. The *UN Committee against Torture* has found that torture and ill-treatment are "systematic, unpunished and encouraged by law enforcement and security officers". Systematic torture applies to both prisons and detention centers. Other areas of particular concern are extensive use of forced labour and discrimination against sexual minorities. Amongst the range of other important concerns, the lack of an independent international investigation of the 2005 *Andizhan massacre* stands out.

At the *Universal Periodic Review*, in April 2013, *Uzbekistan* rejected a number of highly important recommendations pertaining to its human rights record. 14 recommendations were rejected as "factually wrong", while 44 recommendations were considered "not part of *Uzbekistan's international obligations*." Claiming recommendations are factually wrong is highly rare in the UPR, *Egypt* and *Singapore* being the only precedents. The *Uzbek* delegation claimed that there are no political prisoners in the country, although numerous such persons are proven to live under harsh conditions in *Uzbekistan's* prisons. A large number of these are religious believers imprisoned under false accusations of extremism. *Uzbekistan* also rejected recommendations regarding freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, forced labour and the rights of sexual minorities.

We call on the Norwegian government to urge *Uzbekistan* to:

- issue invitations to the *UN Special Procedures* with pending requests for such invitations.
- immediately release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.
- carry out large-scale reforms of its legal system to ensure that claims of torture by police officials and security services are effectively and impartially investigated and that perpetrators are brought to justice.
- permit an independent international investigation of the 2005 massacre in *Andizhan*.
- reconsider its approach to international human rights organizations, permitting visits and taking action on recommendations issued by such organizations.

Thematic recommendations

Discrimination based on work and descent

Caste discrimination is a global human rights issue, affecting an estimated 260 million people. The vast majority of those affected live in *India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri-Lanka*. The practice of treating *Dalits* as "untouchable", due to their inherited status, results in massive violations of their economic, social, and civil rights. *Dalits* are subject to violence, abuse, exploitation and social exclusion and have limited access to water, land, employment, education and health care. Human rights abuses against *Dalits* are typically committed with impunity. Implementation of existing legislation remains extremely weak in all affected countries. Many *Dalit* women face violence, gang rape and other forms of sexual abuse.

In 2013, grave concerns on these and other forms of violence and discrimination against *Dalit* women were raised by several UN bodies, including the *UN High Commissioner for Human Rights* and the *Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women*. Seven UN special procedures mandate holders have made a special appeal to the world community to address "the continued plight of the untouchables" and the topic has been addressed by states under UPR reviews at the *Human Rights Council*. The *European Parliament* expressed deep concern and adopted several resolutions on caste discrimination in 2012-2013. Norway made a historic call at the *Human Right Council* in 2011 for "a stronger international engagement on this issue". In 2012 the *Minister of Development* pledged *Norway's* commitment to work against caste based discrimination by using UN mechanisms.

All of the above is welcome, but with the persistence and scale of caste discrimination and related unaddressed violations of international human rights law and domestic legislation, further action by the international community, including *Norway*, is imperative.

We therefore call on the Norwegian government to:

- Support the global work against caste-based discrimination by taking concrete action, together with other states, for a joint statement on caste-based discrimination and ultimately a resolution in the *Human Rights Council*, with a view to secure the endorsement and use of the *Draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent*, published by the *Human Rights Council* in 2009 (A/HRC/11/CRP.3).
- co-sponsor a debate in cooperation with other concerned states and relevant stakeholders at the 26th session of the *Human Rights Council*, on violence and discrimination against *Dalit women* and strategies to mainstream the topic into the women's rights agenda of the UN – in follow up to the side-event co-sponsored by Norway at the 23rd session of the *Council* in 2013.
- address caste-related human rights violations, in country and thematic reviews and debates at the *Human Rights Council*, and in responses to reports on the topic by *Special Procedures mandate holders* and the *OHCHR*. Issues of particular importance include impunity for crimes, non-implementation of legislation, violence and discrimination against *Dalit* women and children, bonded labour, torture and unequal access to justice, basic services and resources (e.g. education, land, housing, water and health), as well as restrictions on *Dalit* human rights defenders.
- present recommendations for inclusion of caste discrimination in the post 2015 development framework recognising that social exclusion of particularly marginalized groups is a root cause of poverty and inequalities that needs to be addressed.
- follow up *Norway's* recommendations given during the UPR, including the recommendations on marginalised communities and caste-based discrimination with affected states.

Election observation

We strongly believe in the importance of domestic election observation. In order for democratic institutions to function well, to safeguard against abuse of power and to develop societies in a positive direction, checks and balances need to be in place. Elections are the most pungent expressions of democracy, a process where all citizens are welcome to take part in order to express their will. This process should also be monitored by citizens, in fully fledged democracies as well as in much less democratic regimes. Domestic civil society plays a pivotal role in building democracies. Even though we support and encourage international election observation missions organized via intergovernmental institutions such as the *UN*, *OSCE* and the *European Union*, such missions need to be supplemented by domestic observers.

Domestic observers monitor elections in their own countries, and form an important part of the democratic process. They have the advantage of knowing language, culture and backgrounds in a way no international missions can match. Domestic observers remain in-country to continue building democratic societies when the international election observation missions have left.

Authorities in many countries take the findings and recommendations from domestic civil society seriously. Unfortunately, not all regimes recognize the positive and important role of domestic observers. In countries like *Russia*, *Belarus* and *Azerbaijan* qualified *NGOs* observing elections are harassed and hindered by the authorities. This weakens democracies in transition even further. In *Belarus*, *Ales Bialiatski*, the leader of *Viasna*, the most acknowledged *NGO* on election observation, has been sentenced to four and a half years in prison. In *Azerbaijan*, his colleague *Anar Mammadli* of the independent *Election Monitoring Center* had a 3 months pre-trial detention imposed on him on 16 December 2013. He risks a similar fate to *Bialiatski's*. In *Russia*, the highly professional election observer *NGO*, *Golos*, continually experiences apparently groundless legal challenges, discrediting and hindering its work. In these and many other countries *NGOs* who monitor elections in an objective manner are refused registration and face attempts to close them down. These *NGOs* need and deserve support and recognition, not harassment.

We urge the Norwegian government to:

- highlight that domestic election observation is legitimate and important for the promotion and protection of democracy in all countries
- demand that access and security for election observers is ensured, and encourage all relevant UN mandates to monitor and address threats to the security and unhindered operation of domestic election observers.
- bring up cases of harassment against election observers with relevant authorities in the framework of the declaration on human rights defenders, keeping in mind the pivotal role of domestic election observation in the promotion and protection of democracy.

Promotion of Child Rights and Best Interests Determination

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the accompanying *third Optional Protocol* establishing an individual communications procedure under the *Convention* are major tools to protect and promote children's rights worldwide. The *Optional Protocol* will enter into force in April 2014, allowing children from ratifying states to bring complaints about violations to the *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* if they have not found a solution at national level. In June 2013 the *Norwegian Parliament* unanimously adopted a decision that the government must put forward a concrete proposal to ratify this *Optional Protocol* "urgently". This has not happened by the time of writing.

Such ratification will provide a base for *Norway* to continue to be in the forefront of promoting children's rights nationally and internationally. It is also in accordance with the new *Norwegian* government's platform and policy declaration which states that vulnerable groups, such as children, will receive special focus in its development agenda.

The overarching principle of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *the best interest of the child*, is often referred to but is vaguely defined and difficult to settle when in conflict with other rights and principles. Guidelines are needed to provide authorities with a common understanding of the aspects to be considered when determining *the best interest of the child*. Furthermore, there is a need to develop an explicit, knowledge-based understanding of how the *best interest principle* should be weighed against other considerations in cases of conflict. To ensure a thorough assessment of the *best interest of the child*, regulations should specify *how* the interests of the child shall be considered, and *what weight* should be given to these considerations. In its *concluding observations* to *Norway's Fourth State Report* (January 2010), the *Committee on the Rights of the Child* recommended that "*practicable directions for how to operationalize the principle*" should be elaborated. A valuable first step to operationalize and propose a procedure for best interest determinations was published in 2008 by the *UNHCR*¹. These guidelines relates particularly to unaccompanied refugee children, but can be further developed to cover other groups and situations.

National independent human rights institutions for children bring an explicit children's focus to traditional adult-oriented governance systems. Acting as direct mechanisms for accountability, they provide checks and balances and increase awareness of the impact of various existing and proposed policies and practices on children's rights. We urge *Norway* to continue promoting the establishment of similar institutions in other member states.

We call on the *Norwegian* government to:

- sign and ratify the *Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child* establishing an individual communications procedure to the *UNCRC*, and promote rapid ratification by other *State Parties*.
- initiate processes to clarify, substantiate and operationalize *the best interest principle* under the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* and to strengthen best interest determination procedures in *Norway* and other member states.
- promote the establishment of national independent human rights institutions for children in human rights dialogues and other contacts with states.

The absolute prohibition against torture and the right to redress for victims of torture

The right to redress for victims of torture is well established in international human rights law, and further outlined in *General Comment no 3* adopted by the *UN Committee against Torture* in November 2012. The general comment details the meaning of Article 14 of the Convention, which refers to the right to rehabilitation after torture, that is, the right to the means for rehabilitation to take place in practice. Rehabilitation refers to multidisciplinary assistance in order for victims of torture to regain function and independence. This must be seen in relation also to other forms of

¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child*, May 2008, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/48480c342.html> [accessed 27 January 2014]

reparation, such as the right to truth and to justice. Norway is strongly encouraged to do all possible to further support resolutions and other initiatives to ensure the right to redress and rehabilitation to victims of torture in all parts of the world.

Despite the international prohibition, torture continues to be a destructive practice committed against people either as part of interrogation, as part of detention, or as punishment. There is no justification for torture and no reason can be invoked as justification for torture. The international community has developed important monitoring mechanisms in order to prevent torture in all its forms. Norway has recently ratified the *Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture*. This reemphasizes Norway's already longstanding obligation to ensure that initiatives to prevent torture are in fact effective. To prevent torture, the obligations to investigate torture allegations and punish those responsible for torture must be fulfilled by all states. In particular, it must be reiterated that the absolute prohibition and the obligation to investigate and prosecute perpetrators applies fully to torture practiced as part of the so-called war against terror.

We urge the Norwegian government to, in all possible and relevant contexts to:

- support international initiatives to strengthen the right to redress, including rehabilitation for victims of torture.
- ensure in bilateral and multilateral settings that states' obligation to provide redress and rehabilitation is developed in practice, which means *inter alia* to develop plans for and implement professional, effective and accessible services and care.
- speak out against torture more clearly, and include obligations under the Convention of Torture in bilateral relations with states, reminding governments that there is no justification for torture, and that this holds true also in cases of alleged terror and treatment of terror suspects.
- continue reinforcing, at all levels, the importance of independent monitoring mechanisms to places of detention, *inter alia*, by encouraging states to ratify the *Optional Protocol to the Torture Convention*.
- *take on and demonstrate a strong commitment* to strengthen international work for ensuring accountability for crimes against humanity, *inter alia*, by contributing to the work of the *International Criminal Court*, and in particular, support and protection to victims and witnesses.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief in conflict and transition

In countries marked by conflict and in countries in transition freedom of religion or belief often is violated. Religious minorities are especially vulnerable to a multitude of abuses. Followers of majority religions and especially minority groups often find their ability to freely express and exercise their faith restricted by governmental or other actors. Religious adherents are increasingly experiencing violence toward themselves, their families, their properties and sacred places. Perpetrators often go unpunished.

In failed and fragile states violent religious extremism easily finds a breeding ground, i.e. in *Syria, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan*. The *UN Human Rights Council* has expressed concern over the rise of religious extremism. There are worrying signs that violent religious extremism in *Nigeria* might spread to neighboring countries. Conflicts may take a strong religious or sectarian character, as in

Syria, Iraq and lately in the *Central African Republic*. Freedom of religion or belief also has a weak position in countries in transition with fragile governmental structures. Violent religious nationalism can gain ground, i.e. in *Myanmar* where the radical *Buddhist* movement has attacked and vilified *Muslims* in general and *Rohingya* in particular. In *Egypt* there is a worrying trend of polarization along religious lines. Respect for freedom of religion or belief and protection of vulnerable religious groups must be incorporated in peace negotiations and nation building.

The *Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Mr. *Bielefeldt*, has called freedom of religion and belief a *non-harmonious peace project*. Where religious plurality is tolerated and freedom of religion and belief flourishes, there is a greater chance that violent tensions are deescalated. Restrictions tend to increase religious tensions and potentially lead to increased conflict levels. Therefore, the protection of freedom of religion or belief in conflict and transition is of great importance to peaceful co-existence between diverse groups.

Norway is a country with great commitment to help strengthen and re-build failed and fragile states. We, therefore, call upon the Norwegian government to:

- use all relevant UN mechanisms to urge governments in failed and fragile countries, both in conflict and transition, to fully respect freedom of religion or belief.
- use its influence to make sure that UN peacekeeping forces and other forces supported by Norway in failed and fragile states are sufficiently trained in how to respect religious freedom in order not to aggravate religious tensions, and how to detect violations of freedom of religion or belief.
- be sensitive to how freedom of religion or belief is affected in conflict and transition in all its engagements multilaterally and bilaterally as well as in peace negotiations, in addition to develop a freedom of religion or belief assessment tool, in the same way as with gender sensitivity and climate impact, when planning and evaluating aid engagements.