

**This World Day Against Death Penalty:
The International Community must take immediate steps to ensure
states repeal laws which mandate the death penalty for apostasy or
blasphemy**

8 October 2020

Dear Ambassador,

On 9 July 2020 the transitional government in the Republic of the Sudan made the historic step of repealing their apostasy law which mandated the death penalty for anyone who left Islam.ⁱ

There are still over 10 countries however, where courts can sentence an individual to death if they leave the state religion or express a dissenting opinion about the religion. This is the case in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Brunei Darussalam, Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, the Republic of Maldives, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, several states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the State of Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Federal Republic of Somalia, United Arab Emirates, and the Republic of Yemen.ⁱⁱ

The death penalty, even when not applied, is used to pressure individuals to recant and to not practice publicly. One ex-Muslim described the laws as being a constant, “sword over our throats.” The UN Secretary General has noted this concern saying that even where a moratorium is in place the laws have, “a chilling effect on the legitimate exercise of human rights.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy has also been shown to incite violence by non-state actors against those who leave or question the religion. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has said, “where domestic laws provide for the death penalty for religious offence, it is more likely that the existence of such laws will encourage vigilante mobs or zealots to murder those alleged to have violated those laws.”^{iv} The most recent example was in July 2020, when a man shot dead Tahir Ahmed Naseem, who was on trial for blasphemy in Pakistan.^v There are still 40 individuals in prison on death row in Pakistan, under blasphemy charges.^{vi} The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, has recommended states take a “triage-based approach” and prioritise the repeal of those laws that “put lives at risk,” in this case those which mandate the death penalty,^{vii} as a means to “expedite full compliance with international human rights standards,”^{viii} including article 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As the World Day Against the Death Penalty approaches, it is a reminder that states have an obligation to protect fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to adopt, leave or change their religion or belief. Every state that has apostasy or blasphemy laws should repeal them and ensure that no one is sentenced to death for exercising their basic rights. We urge the international community to condemn in the strongest terms countries which have or condone the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy and to push for the right to apostasy for ex-Muslims and converts.

Yours sincerely,

Organizations

Advocates International

American Humanist Association

Center for Inquiry

Center for Pluralism

Christian Freedom International

Church in Chains

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

Ex-Muslims of Norway

Humanists UK

International Christian Concern

International Christian Response USA

Jubilee Campaign

Legalise Apostasy UK

Set My People Free

Tahrir Alnisa Foundation

The St. Charles Institute

Individuals

Agera Teman Liti
Chief Operating Officer
CSW Nigeria

Deana Brown,
Founder/CEO
FSI - Freedom Seekers International

Kamal Fahmi
Founder Set My People Free

Mike Ghouse
President, Center for Pluralism

Rachid Birbach
Former General Secretary of the International Assembly of Islamic Scholars

Ridvan Aydemir
Creator of Apostate Prophet

Robyn E. Blumner
President and CEO, Center for Inquiry
Executive Director, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science

Scott Morgan
President, Red Eagles Enterprises

ⁱ “Sudan Scraps Apostasy Law and Alcohol Ban for Non-Muslims.” *BBC News*, BBC, 12 July 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53379733.

ⁱⁱ Global Legal Research Directorate Staff; Goitom, Hanibal. *Laws Criminalizing Apostasy*, 1 June 2014, www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/index.php. Some regions in Northern Nigeria also have the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy.

ⁱⁱⁱ UN Human Rights Council, Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General, *Capital punishment and the implementation of the safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty*, A/HRC/42/28 (28 August 2019), available from undocs.org/en/A/HRC/42/28.

^{iv} UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, 5 March 2019, A/HRC/40/58., para. 59.

^v “Man Killed in Pakistani Court on Blasphemy Charges Was US Citizen.” *Voice of America*, www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/man-killed-pakistani-court-blasphemy-charges-was-us-citizen.

^{vi} Deutsche Welle. “Junaid Hafeez: Pakistani Academic given Death Sentence for Blasphemy: DW: 21.12.2019.” DW.COM, www.dw.com/en/junaid-hafeez-pakistani-academic-given-death-sentence-for-blasphemy/a-51762475.

^{vii} UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, 5 March 2019, A/HRC/40/58., para. 58.

^{viii} UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, 5 March 2019, A/HRC/40/58., para. 58.