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Geneva: ARTICLE 19 Campaigns for a “No” Vote on Religious Defamation at Human Rights Council

ARTICLE 19 is urging UN Human Rights Council members to vote against a resolution on “defamation of religions” at its regular session in Geneva this month.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) will likely propose a resolution on combating defamation of religion during the 10th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in March 2009, although it has not yet made public the text of this resolution.

ARTICLE 19 is concerned that resolutions of this type represent a step back from established principles of freedom of expression because they limit free speech and disallow criticism of a religious belief.. They go beyond the concept of group defamation, since they may even prohibit the defamation of religious ideas and doctrines and limit the possibility for free debate or criticism of religion.

“The concept of defamation of religion is vague and has no basis in international law. International human rights laws protect the rights of individuals; they do not protect religions, ideologies or belief systems,” says Dr Sejal Parmar, Senior Legal Officer for ARTICLE 19. *“The resolution seeks to protect the belief, rather than the believers.”*

Equally, ARTICLE 19 is concerned that the concept, if passed into national legislation in some countries, may lead to persecution of those who challenge religious doctrine, as well as possible prosecution of religious minorities or a general silencing of dissenting voices.

ARTICLE 19 has actively lobbied 23 countries expressing serious concerns about this proposed resolution. The last time a similar resolution came before the HRC, 21 states voted in favour, 11 against and 14 abstained. ARTICLE 19 is now lobbying states who abstained to vote against the resolution, and states who voted in favour to now abstain.

Defamation of religion was first introduced into the UN system in 1999 and several resolutions have passed through the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council in recent years.

“ARTICLE 19 believes that the adoption of further resolutions on defamation of religions will undermine the established framework of international human rights law

as well as the credibility of the Human Rights Council itself,” comments Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director.

Instead, ARTICLE 19 recommends that the UN must not allow the concept of “defamation of religion” to become the international standard. Instead, the countries should commit to implementing a key provision (article 20) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which prohibits “advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.
- The OIC is a delegation to the UN which represents 57 countries aligned to Islamic values.