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ARTICLE 19

For immediate release – 15 December 2008

Special Mandates Condemn Defamation of Religions

The four special mandates on freedom of expression – the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the ACHPR (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information – today issued a Joint Declaration on Defamation of Religions, and Anti-Terrorism and Anti-Extremism Legislation, with the assistance of ARTICLE 19.

The Joint Declaration expresses concern about the resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council on the subject of defamation of religions, calling on these and other international organisations to desist from adopting further statements on this issue. The Declaration also expresses concern about the proliferation, since the attacks of 11 September 2001, of anti-terrorism and anti-extremism laws which outlaw a range of legitimate political and critical speech. Among other things, the Declaration calls for:

- The rejection of the very notion of defamation of religions, given that religions do not have a reputation of their own.
- The repeal of laws which restrict criticism of ideas and beliefs, including religious ones (blasphemy laws).
- Hate speech laws to be limited to advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.
- A limited definition of terrorism as the perpetration of violent crimes with a view to inflicting terror on the general public so as to influence the actions of public authorities.
- The rejection of vague notions such as the 'glorification' or 'promotion' of terrorism or 'extremism' in anti-terrorism laws.
- Respect for the media's role in informing the public about terrorism and acting as watchdog of government, as well as their right to protect their confidential sources of information.

ARTICLE 19 first brought the special mandates on freedom of expression together in 1999 and they have issued a Joint Declaration every year since then. Each Declaration serves to elaborate on the meaning of freedom of expression in a different thematic area(s). Collectively, the Declarations provide important guidance to those wishing to understand international human rights standards.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The Joint Declaration is available at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/other/joint-declaration-on-defamation-of-religions-and-anti-terrorism-and-anti-ext.pdf>
- For more information: please contact Toby Mendel, a19law@hfx.eastlink.ca, +44 (0)796 401 5083.
- 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.