

European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

6th Newsletter
30th October 2014

1. About the EPWG on FoRB

European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (EPWG on FoRB) was founded by a group of like-minded MEPs to promote and protect FoRB in the European Union's (EU) external actions. The EPWG has a Bureau with two Co-Presidents (Dennis de Jong and Peter van Dalen) supported by a secretariat (Alfiaz Vaiya and Marina Zaitsava).

2. EPWG on FoRB news

On 30th August, EPWG on FoRB Co-President Dennis de Jong spoke at the 48th Jalsa Salana near London, in which more than 30'000 Ahmadiyyah Muslims gathered around the theme 'Love for All, Hatred for None'.

EPWG on FoRB mission to Washington: USCIRF invited EPWG on FoRB co-chairs Peter van Dalen and Dennis de Jong to travel to Washington DC in order to visit USCIRF Commissioners and staff and to meet several federal US policymakers dealing with FoRB. Peter van Dalen was accompanied by Jannes de Jong and Claire Jansen went on behalf of Dennis de Jong. During the visit, the EPWG on FoRB delegation met with Rabbi David Saperstein, Executive Director of the Religious Action Center and nominee for Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Katrina Lantos Swett, USCIRF Chair, Steve Feldstein, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State at the State Department and Melissa Rogers, Executive Director of the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Partnerships. The EPWG on FoRB delegation also met with Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA), the sponsor of several legislative initiatives on FoRB as well US Congress staff members and a number of American NGO's who sit on the Roundtable on International Religious Freedom.



EPWG on FoRB meeting with European External Action Service (EEAS) FoRB Desk Officer Jean-Bernard Bolvin: The Co-Presidents of the EPWG on FoRB met with Jean-Bernard Bolvin from the EEAS to discuss FoRB in the EU's external action. Topics that were covered in the meeting included current FoRB violations in the world, EEAS and European Parliament action in regards to FoRB, implementation of the EU Guidelines on FoRB and future cooperation between the EPWG on FoRB and EEAS.

The EPWG on FoRB wrote letters to the Governments of Sri Lanka and Yemen in the early part of October regarding FoRB concerns and violations:

- After meeting with civil society and religious or belief groups, the Co-Presidents of the EPWG on FoRB wrote to the Sri Lankan President regarding the mistreatment and forced expulsion of asylum seekers in Sri Lanka. According to groups and international organisations such as the United Nations, many of the asylum seekers went to Sri Lanka to escape religious or belief persecution and then were sent back by the Sri Lankan government to their countries of origin.
- The EPWG on FoRB was given information about a Baha'i Yemeni citizen who had been arrested because of his religious belief. The EPWG on FoRB wrote to the Government of Yemen after his family expressed concerns for his safety and in the letter stated clearly that the arrest was a violation of FoRB under Article 18 of the UDHR and ICCPR and that the government should do all within its power to ensure his safety in police custody and that he is given a fair trial.

European Parliament debate on the Asia Bibi's case: After Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi's lost her death sentence appeal in the Lahore High Court in Pakistan, EPWG on FoRB Co-President Peter van Dalen requested a plenary debate in the European Parliament. This request received strong support from the Parliament's political groups. Both Peter van Dalen and Dennis de Jong spoke in the debate and urged leaders to take action. Dennis de Jong spoke about the situation of religious minorities in Pakistan saying that "Pakistan's blasphemy laws make it dangerous if not impossible for religious minorities in Pakistan to express their faith". Peter van Dalen spoke about the role the EU should play and how the High Representative/Vice President "should now quickly pull out all the stops to prevent the implementation of the death sentence". Many other MEPs expressed their outrage at this case and the continued abuse of innocent and vulnerable citizens through the Pakistani blasphemy laws. The European Commission promised to send EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis to Pakistan to demand Asia Bibi's release. The EPWG on FoRB has been closely monitoring the case of Asia Bibi and issued a press release earlier this year on her case calling on "all those involved in the case to show courage and not to give in to any pressure or external threat". As Peter van Dalen said in the plenary debate: **"It is now time to take action, and not just for her. We know that there are thousands of other "Asia Bibi's".**

3. Forthcoming activities and future EPWG on FoRB work

The EPWG is currently restarting its work and will continue to be active in promoting FoRB in the EU's external actions through parliamentary work and holding events. The EPWG on FoRB is also looking for information and contributions from civil society and religious or belief groups regarding serious FoRB violations that we can raise awareness about. This can be done by contacting the secretariat through the website by clicking on the following link: <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/forb-violation/>

4. Contact us

For any enquiries or more information about the working group please email:

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5. Website and facebook

The EPWG on FoRB website:
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www.facebook.com/epwgonforb