

U.S. activists lobby against U.N. defamation resolution

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Religious freedom advocates are urging members of the United Nations to vote against the latest proposal from Islamic countries to combat "defamation of religions."

For the last decade, the Organization of Islamic Conference has successfully sponsored similar resolutions as a way to address religious persecution. But U.S. religious liberty activists increasingly say the resolutions actually do more harm than good.

"The OIC-sponsored U.N. resolutions on this issue instead provide justification for governments to restrict religious freedom and free expression," the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said in a policy statement.

The draft OIC resolution calls defamation of religions "a serious affront to human dignity, leading to the illicit restriction of the freedom of religion of their adherents and incitement to religious hatred and violence."

The resolutions express the sentiments of the U.N. General Assembly but do not require specific action by member states. A committee vote is expected this month, followed by consideration and action by the General Assembly in December.

USCIRF, an independent and bipartisan commission, said support for the proposal is on the decline; last March, it squeaked past the U.N. Human Rights Council by just four votes.

"I am pleased to say that our efforts are paying off and more countries are voting against the 'defamations of religions' resolution each year," said Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., in a recent statement. He sent a letter signed by dozens of members of Congress to more than 150 heads of state urging them to oppose the latest resolution.

Bill Donohue, president of the New York-based Catholic League, said the intent of the resolution is cause for concern.

"It is being promoted by member states that are known for disrespecting human rights including, most spectacularly, religious liberties," he said in a statement.

In a recent report on blasphemy laws, the human rights watchdog group Freedom House concluded that rules in seven countries -- including the Muslim countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan -- led to violations rather than protections of human rights, especially of religious minorities.

"Because no one can agree on what constitutes blasphemy, laws that attempt to ban it are themselves vague, highly prone to arbitrary enforcement and are used to stifle everything from political opposition to religious inquiry," wrote Paula Schriefer, Freedom House's advocacy director, in a New York Times op-ed.

The OIC's blasphemy proposal is part of a wider initiative of its 57 member states to counter what they consider "systemic defamation of

Islam." An OIC news release said OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu "underscored the dangerous consequences of the growing trend of Islamophobia on global peace and security."

The U.S. State Department has previously criticized the OIC's U.N. resolutions.

"While the United States deplors actions that exhibit disrespect for particular religious traditions, including Islam, we do not agree with the 'defamation of religions' concept because it is inconsistent with the freedoms of religion and expression," it said in its 2009 report on international religious freedom.