

COMMITTEE: HUMAN RIGHTS

'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.'
-Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
Article 12.

'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.' -Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
Article 18.

Throughout the world, there are ethnic and religious minorities living within countries who face the problem of discrimination and lack of adequate rights to practice their beliefs and lifestyles freely. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities of 1992 was intended to reaffirm the rights of these ethnic and religious minorities and to raise the importance that further 'international human rights instruments' to be ensued. States who were against such a measure include Russia, Cuba and Pakistan due to their repressive policies.

Minority does not necessarily mean a minority of a population; it can simply mean a group that is marginalised by the rest of their society and has less power and political influence. Therefore, when researching the religious and ethnic 'minorities' in your country be sure that you take this into account.

In March 2013, the UN's Human Rights Council adopted the landmark resolution to end any and all of the 'use and abuse' of national law which impairs, restricts and criminalises the work of human rights defenders. Countries like Norway believe that a state has a certain responsibility to safeguard and uphold the basic human rights which allow ethnic and religious minorities to live without discrimination and oppression.

A selection of governments do not provide adequate protection for their individuals within a religious or ethnic minority. When they face harassment, their authorities are unwilling to provide protection. Discrimination within different countries come in many different forms. There are some countries which require citizens to conform to a particular religion, and if they do not they may not be granted identity documents resulting in an inability to go to school, marry or have a passport. Also, import regulations may prevent certain religious or ethnic literature from entering the country.

Yet it is important to note that the rules of a society that make it difficult in practice for religious individuals to follow their religious convictions may serve a legitimate purpose and do not necessarily violate human rights. It is a common misunderstanding that the right to freedom of religion or belief has unlimited application. However, states can and should waive this right if there are other weighty and legitimate considerations that should be given preference. Religious communities may not perform acts that are in conflict with other human rights, or encourage acts that may injure others. The right to religious freedom must be weighed against other rights.

To consider

- Should countries be allowed to decide which human rights to impose or restrict?
- What further steps can be taken to make sure these minorities are no longer discriminated against?
- Who decides what is and isn't acceptable in the way of practices and beliefs?