

WORKING SESSION 6:
Freedom of religion or belief

Statement by Austria

Austria fully aligns herself with the statement made on behalf of the European Union.

Austria is concerned about the rise of discrimination and violence related to religion or belief in various parts of the world. Persons belonging to religious minorities are particularly vulnerable in this context.

These developments show the urgent need to also see the collective dimension of freedom of religion or belief, though being an individual right. Freedom of religion or belief and its protection for all members of society is indeed crucial to peace and social cohesion within each society and consequently also to international peace and security.

Austria strongly condemns all forms of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief, wherever they take place. On the one hand, no person or group shall become the victim of discrimination or attacks on grounds of their religion or belief. On the other hand, universal human rights standards, democratic values and the rule of law must always provide the framework for the free exercise of one's religion. It is the primary responsibility of States to protect freedom of religion or belief, including in particular persons belonging to religious minorities, but also to vigorously oppose the abuse of religion as justification or motive for violence or discrimination.

Austria will continue its strong commitment to promote freedom of religion or belief and the protection of persons belonging to religious minorities, both at the national level and within bilateral, regional and international fora. For example, upon an Austrian initiative, the European Union has developed guidelines for the planning and implementation of its policies and activities with regard to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief.

Austria also has rich expertise regarding inter-religious dialogue, domestically as well as internationally and has taken a range of initiatives to promote and foster inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. Officially recognized religious communities in Austria are regularly included in relevant policy-making and legislative processes. This close cooperation between and among the government and religious communities has contributed to mutual respect and understanding, and counteracted potential prejudices and concerns.

Austria would like to offer the following recommendations:

- Participating States shall ensure the free exercise of religion or belief and protect persons belonging to religious minorities from violence and discrimination through targeted policies and effective legislation.
- Participating States are encouraged to foster, and exchange good practise examples for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue within their countries as a means to strengthen social cohesion and overcome prejudice.