

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

United Nations Office

Oral statement to the 16th session of the UN Human Rights Council

Oral statement to the 16th session of the UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief – item 3
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Geneva

The Baha'i International Community welcomes the focus on school education in the report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. It is our firm belief that education is one of “the most meritorious acts of humankind”, “the indispensable foundation of all human excellence”; it reveals the treasures of inestimable value latent in every child.

We agree with Dr. Bielefeld on the key role of the school environment, not only to promote understanding and tolerance, but also to nurture and develop a sense of commonality and belonging.

And we find his recommendations most pertinent to the creation of an environment where every child can exercise his or her freedom to believe, which – under international law – includes the manifestation of that belief.

But what happens when this freedom is denied? When school becomes a place where a child is “subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice”? Concretely, what happens when a teacher systematically ridicules or insults the religion of a child? When children are pressured to say things that are contrary to what they believe? When the people who are supposed to protect the child at school – teachers and school administrators – harass, intimidate and expel children because of their faith?

In some countries, children face this kind of discrimination because they belong to religious minorities, because their faith is rejected and ostracized.

With this in mind, we would like to ask the Special Rapporteur the following questions:

1. What can be done when a State promotes curricula, textbooks and teaching methods that incite intolerance and discrimination against certain religious groups?
2. In some public school systems, teacher training institutions provide material that clearly intends to incite hatred and discriminates against religious minorities, and teachers are pressured to promote discriminatory practices against the young people they are supposed to protect. Would it not be appropriate to add to your list of recommendations a mechanism to address these cases, so that children belonging to religious minorities have somewhere to turn when their rights are grossly abused?

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