

Foreword

Asma Jahangir

*UN Special Rapporteur on
freedom of religion or belief*

As United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, I have had the opportunity to conduct country missions and document individual cases in which freedom of religion or belief has allegedly been violated. These encounters have confirmed my perception that members of minorities – alongside other groups including women, indigenous peoples, refugees and migrants – are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations. Some national laws openly discriminate against individuals on the basis of religion or belief, or a perceived lack of religious fervour. Violent acts or threats against members of religious minorities are also perpetrated by non-state actors, unfortunately all too often with impunity.

Discrimination based on religion or belief often emanates from deliberate state policies to ostracize members of certain minority communities. In doing

Below: A boy from Pakistan's minority Sikh population collects aid after fleeing the Swat and Buner districts. *Jared Ferrie/MRG.*

so, states pander to the interests of the religious majority community. However, such discrimination against religious minorities is often symptomatic of much deeper problems, with governments frequently using sectarianism as a diversion from other more pressing political, social and economic issues.

A recent survey by US-based think-tank the Pew Forum indicates that about one-third of countries currently have high or very high restrictions on religion. Within these countries, the most salient issue which needs addressing seems to be legislation which unduly limits the right to manifest one's religion or belief, for example through registration requirements or undue restrictions on places of worship. Forced conversion,



often targeting women and children who are abducted, is another particularly malign problem which needs to be tackled. At the same time, in a number of countries, individuals who have voluntarily changed their religion or belief continue to face discrimination, threats and, in the most serious cases, even death. Governments and religious leaders must understand that freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes *everybody's* freedom to change religion or belief, i.e. not just conversion to the majority or official religion of the concerned country.

When governments work to ensure that the rights of members of religious minorities are protected, this not only leads to a more stable and secure society, it is also an indicator of how seriously invested they are in the protection of human rights. This must be accompanied by the use of other more informal strategies, such as inclusive inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue, to help in defusing potential tensions at an early stage. The structure of the state, its method of governance and educational policies may – depending on their design and implementation – either help in creating religious harmony or contribute to religious friction. Preventive activities and the commitment of governments and societies to fundamental human rights are therefore key to creating an atmosphere of religious tolerance. ■

Profile

'People aren't willing to believe that these injustices happen in our society. ... But it's all going on next door.' *Asma Jahangir, speaking to TIME magazine in 2003*



- 1952** Born in Lahore, Pakistan.
- 1978** Graduated with a Bachelor of Law degree, Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan.
- 1980** Instrumental in the organization of Punjab Women Lawyers Association (PWLA).
- 1985** Instrumental in the formation of the Women's Action Forum, an organization dedicated to defending the rights of women living under Islamic law. The Forum describes its mission as providing 'information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam'.
- 1983** In collaboration with the Punjab Women Lawyers Association in

Lahore, was arrested when she organized a march to protest the proposed law of evidence which equated the testimonies of two female witnesses to that of just one reliable male witness.

- 1987** Together with her sister, Hina Jilani, established AGHS Legal Aid as an NGO. AGHS Legal Aid is the first free legal aid centre in Pakistan and specializes in gender violence legal cases. The AGHS Legal Aid Cell in Lahore also runs Dastak – a shelter for women.
- 1987** Founding Member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), first serving as Secretary-General and later as Chair of the Commission.
- 1995** Jahangir and her family faced attempts on their lives by religious extremists.
- 1998** Appointed UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary execution of the Commission on Human Rights.
- 2000** Published *Whither are We!* in which she calls for then Pakistan President General Musharraf to improve his domestic human rights policies, particularly towards women.
- 2001** Together with her sister, Hina Jilani was awarded the UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) Millennium Peace Prize for Women, in collaboration with the NGO International Alert.
- 2004** Appointed UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Since then has undertaken numerous trips to countries, including Angola, Laos, Nigeria, Serbia and Sri Lanka, highlighting and investigating human rights abuses.
- 2010** Continues working as UN Special Rapporteur and as a lawyer and activist.

Over the years Jahangir has represented several clients who were denied their fundamental rights. Notable amongst them are the cases she fought for brick kiln workers, who are mostly bonded labourers in Pakistan. She represented them and was subsequently successful

in getting legislation passed through parliament in their favour. Jahangir has defended cases of discrimination against religious minorities, women and children. She defended three Christians, among them a 14-year-old boy, accused of blasphemy. In an effort to combat rising rates of 'disappearances', she has also called on the Pakistani Attorney-General to inform the public about how many covert intelligence agencies are operating in Pakistan, and under what laws they conduct arrests.

Compiled by Hannah Kaplan