



José Ramos-Horta: Keynote Speech

José Ramos Horta is a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1996); President of Timor-Leste (2007-2012); Prime Minister (2006-2007); Senior Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs (2001-2006); Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Integrated Peace-building Mission in Guinea-Bissau (2013-2014); Chair, High Level Independent Panel On UN Peace Operations (2014-2015); Co-Chair, Independent Commission On Multilateralism (2015-2016).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be with you at this gathering of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

It is very fitting that following your previous conferences in Oslo and New York, you are now gathering in Berlin, this vibrant and imposing city that has been the epicentre of much of what was glorious and tragic in the history of Germany, Europe and beyond; and post WWII Germany has been a remarkable engine of peace and prosperity for Europe and the world.

On this occasion I wish to pay special tribute to Chancellor Angela Merkel for her wise leadership in these challenging times in Germany and in Europe. Angela Merkel's vision of an European Common Home based on the values of human rights, equality and solidarity among all in Europe and compassion towards those fleeing religious persecution and wars is inspirational. Chancellor Merkel deserves our deep gratitude and respect.

Fifteen years ago, the US and much of the world were jolted by the events of September 11. Nearly 3,000 people from 90 different countries were killed, and a further 6,000 were injured.

Since that day, many other events have taken their toll on our collective memory, those of Barcelona, London, Bali, Oslo and Utoya, Sousse, Paris, Brussels, Nice, Beirut, Istanbul, Florida, Nigeria, Kenya.

The daily brutality endured by the people of Syria and Iraq at the hands of extremist groups evokes universal shock and horror. The true impact of this cannot possibly be quantified, and here I would like to offer my deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those affected.

We can, however, shape how these horrific events impact our future.

I come from South-East Asia, which is the world's most religiously diverse region where almost every major world religion – Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism – is represented, as well as many smaller beliefs. Yet, it is a region where freedom of religion or belief is widely violated, by State and non-State actors alike.

It is difficult to think of a more important topic in the realm of human rights today.

Across the globe, the basic right set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the

freedom of thought, conscience and religion, otherwise known as freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) – is under threat.

Whether it is the barbarity of ISIS/Daesh, perhaps the most acute example and certainly the one uppermost on our minds today, or extremism across Africa and Asia, religiously motivated violence and the denial of freedom of religion or belief is something that affects us all.

And it comes from all sides: radical Islamism across the Middle East, through North Africa to Nigeria and Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, to religious nationalism of various kinds – Hindu nationalism in India, Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka – to totalitarian Communist regimes like North Korea; and the reactionary militant secularism now emerging in Europe, where attempts to ban burkhas and burkinis and harass ordinary Muslims are becoming alarmingly frequent and where, at the same time, a venerable aged Catholic priest in France is murdered at the altar.

No one today is immune from this climate of fear, real and imagined, leading to intolerance and extremism on all sides.

A recent speech by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zaid Ra'ad Al Hussein, deserves our attention. In condemning populism and demagoguery in Europe and the United States, he urges us to “pull back from this trajectory”.

He reminds us that “Ultimately, it is the law that will safeguard our societies – human rights law, binding law which is the distillation of human experience, of generations of human suffering, the screams of the victims of past crimes and hate. We must guard this law passionately, and be guided by it.”

But, he concludes, we must also speak up. “It is only by pursuing the entire truth, and acting wisely, that humanity can ever survive”.

Within the UN, there is a need to do more. I pay tribute to the work of the previous Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Heiner Bielefeldt, and welcome the new Rapporteur, Dr Ahmed Shaheed.

I welcome the attention given to this issue by the UN Human Rights Council, and I urge you as Parliamentarians to encourage your governments to play their part at the Human Rights Council in raising these issues.

But there is a need to pay even more attention to freedom of religion or belief and the plight of religious minorities across the world at the UN. The specific challenges faced by religious minorities are not adequately or consistently addressed at the international level.

The role of religious leaders is essential. Myanmar's Cardinal Charles Bo is an example of a religious leader speaking out for freedom of religion or belief for all, defending the rights of Muslims in Myanmar and saying, as he did in his address at the UN in March, that “freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as detailed in Article 18 ...is perhaps the most precious and basic freedom of all. Without the freedom to choose, practise, share and change your beliefs, there is no freedom.”

“Religious and ethnic diversity”, he concluded, is something “to be protected, defended, cherished and strengthened”.

I urge leaders of all religions to follow his example and defend not only their own, but the rights of all.

This leads me to another very important point. Freedom of religion or belief is not a human right for religious people. It is, as with all human rights, universal: for everyone. So it includes the rights of those who do not have a religion, the right not to 'believe', just as it protects the rights to choose and practice a religion.

I pay tribute to the example of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which took up the case of Alexander Aan, an atheist in Indonesia jailed for two years because he declared that he did not believe in God. CSW visited him in jail twice, and campaigned for him. That example – a Christian organisation defending a jailed atheist – is one we should all follow.

Inter-faith initiatives – especially at the grassroots level – are essential: to build trust, to begin friendships, to prevent misunderstandings, to foster community cohesion.

Issues surrounding discriminatory legislation need urgent attention. Laws that unjustly restrict religious freedom or, worse, fan the flames of intolerance are at the root of the problem. Blasphemy laws, restrictions on the construction of places of worship, laws restricting religious conversion or inter-religious marriage all contribute to a climate of intolerance and should be reformed or repealed.

There is a host of other issues related to freedom of religion or belief. In China, the practice of forced organ harvesting has come to light, and evidence suggests that religious minorities are the primary victims.

Issues of citizenship arise – the abominable and inexcusable dehumanisation and persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar is a crisis that must be addressed.

I welcome the establishment of the international panel led by Kofi Annan to investigate the crisis in Rakhine State, and hope that the government of Myanmar will act to restore citizenship to those who are entitled to it and continue the work of restoring dignity to the Rohingyas and peace to the country.

Violence and extremism are not specific to any one group of people or any single religion; they are not particular to Muslims, Arabs, Asians, Africans, Europeans.

Do I need to remind you that the worst barbarities ever inflicted on humanity, First and Second World Wars, were carried out by civilised Christians – and not by Arabs or Muslims?

Indeed, recent history is marred by wanton killing; the 1971 Bangladesh-Pakistan war that claimed the lives of millions; the Khmer Rouge's 'killing fields' of Cambodia that killed an estimated 2-3 million; the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the Sri Lankan Civil War, or the ongoing conflicts in the DRC, Sudan and South Sudan.

In Myanmar, Buddhist supremacists wage an ethnic and religious cleansing war on Burmese Rohingyas and other Muslims who have inhabited Myanmar for generations.

Eighty-four percent of the world's population identify with a particular religion. Yet freedom of religion and belief remains under threat.

Today, 77 percent of the world's inhabitants live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religious freedom, while the increase of anti-terrorism legislation and use of profiling by law enforcement agencies following 9/11 have left many of our citizens feeling unwelcome in the place they were once proud to call

home.

Some 19 countries punish their citizens for apostasy, and in 12 of those countries it is punishable by death. At the same time, we are witnessing the highest displacement on record as 65.3 million people around the world have fled their home due to conflict or persecution. Among them are nearly 21.3 million refugees.

Yet as the necessity to heed our international commitments, including the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is most vital, we are falling inexcusably short.

As many take the dangerous journey to Europe in search of safety, with the large majority remaining in neighbouring countries (82%), they have been met with further hardship.

This influx has fanned the flames of an already rising surge of bigotry and violence targeting Muslims and Jews.

From verbal harassment to vandalism to violent assaults, anti-Muslim bigotry has increased in many Western European cities as xenophobic nationalist political parties and groups, including neo-Nazis, fostered hatred against recent and older immigrants.

Violence, intimidation and calls of "Go Home" against Europeans in England and non-white/Caucasian Britons, have surged following the Brexit referendum result in the United Kingdom.

At a time when Europe's human rights architecture and common vision is most important, there has been a crisis of political leadership.

My country, once beset by a brutal occupation and 24 years of conflict with Indonesia, is now free, at peace, and on a sound economic and development path. The protection of human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief is integral to this success.

The story of Timor-Leste is not remarkable because of what it endured in the quest for independence, but rather its leaders and peoples' choice to pursue a pathway of reconciliation and friendship with Indonesia.

Indonesia, absorbed in their democratic transition met this conscious and determined approach positively, accepted our friendship and together we have built an exemplary relationship.

As we deal with our current challenges, it is important that we base our decisions on the future we want. It is a test for Europe's peoples and leadership, how this fast changing demographic is managed. Whether you stay true to your commitments and celebrate a newly rejuvenated and vibrant Europe or a Europe divided by racial, religious, social and political sectarianism and hatred.

Timor-Leste has a population of just over 1.2 million people. It is a secular state, though the population is predominantly Roman Catholic (97%), with small Protestant (2%) and Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu minorities (less than 1%).

There are several Protestant denominations including the Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices that they do not view as incompatible with their organised religious affiliation.

The constitution of Timor-Leste provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and specifies

“religious denominations are separated from the State.” It also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs while protecting the right to conscientious objection and freedom of religious instruction.

The constitution additionally protects certain freedoms, including freedom of religion, in the event of a declaration of a state of siege or state of emergency.

Furthermore, police officers receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination, including religious nondiscrimination.

The Catholic Church has played over many years a constructive and effective role in communicating with key sectors of society to prevent and resolve conflict in Timor-Leste. The Church is involved in local mediation processes and non-violent dispute resolution, and has proven particularly effective at resolving conflict and disputes among youth.

Furthermore, political leaders must be the driving force in protecting and promoting the freedom of religion and belief abroad and at home. This is why I applaud your initiative.

In too many countries, leaders attempt to suppress particular ethnic groups, their language and religion, in the name of an artificial national unity – the unity of the majority ethnic group. Cases include Sri Lanka, Turkey, Spain under Franco, Myanmar.

At the same time, fear of the majority has seen many ethnic/religious minority governments rule with a heavy hand or descend into civil war. This was the case with the Sunni in Bahrain, Sunnis in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Alawites in Syria, the Maronites in Lebanon, the white minority rule in Rhodesia and South Africa, the Tutsis in pre-1990 Burundi, or Uganda under Idi Amin who was from the Kakwa tribe.

Ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is a blessing. Leaders must not give in to fear mongering and divisive rhetoric; quick gains at the polls will come at the expense of national and international harmony and prosperity.

Instead, leaders must seek to understand and address the many obvious causes of real or perceived discrimination and exclusion.

They must engage with community and religious leaders to develop strategies and inclusive policies that leave no one behind and embrace difference.

We need to rediscover what the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom calls so powerfully “The Dignity of Difference”, leading to what, in the title of another of his powerful books, he calls “The Home We Build Together”.

I encourage you in your efforts, and I hope that together we can work to stop the spiralling of intolerance and defend freedom of religion or belief for all.