

U.S. Statement on Religious Intolerance
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Mr. Chairman:

It is with deep regret that I note that the Working Group on Religious Intolerance has again failed to make any significant progress on drafting a declaration on the elimination of intolerance and religious discrimination. Even though well aware that the previous twenty years have witnessed similar failings, several developments had led me to believe that this year might be different.

First of all, religious discrimination and intolerance to religious belief and practices are a direct contravention of the UN Charter.

Second, the General Assembly explicitly instructed the Human Rights Commission to give priority to the declaration with a view to its completion. The resolution received genuine support from a broad spectrum of countries. Third, the world is experiencing a renewed commitment to religious belief. Perhaps this was most obvious in the recent events in the Near East, with the resurgence of the Islamic faith. But it is also being felt in my own country, by the active search of our young people to find moral guidance in religion, and, it has been demonstrated by the selection of a Pope from Poland.

Finally, as we have already pointed out, the increasing persecution of people of all faiths in many countries requires our urgent immediate action.

Despite the above developments, we have again failed to make progress on the declaration. We should all acknowledge this fact and its cause. Clearly, it is not because all countries share a desire to promote religious freedom but differ concerning how best to do so. Instead, certain delegations are deliberately obstructing movement. What else could explain the unwillingness of these delegations to break the several-year deadlock concerning Article 1 by incorporating Article 18 of the International Covenant in Civil and Political Rights, a treaty which each of those delegations is bound to respect? What else could explain the unwillingness of these delegations to accept a statement that religious discrimination violates the principles of the UN Charter, the UNHRC and both Covenants -- a statement that is uncontestable if those documents are read. And what else can explain the refusal of these same delegations to allow the areas of disagreement to be brought explicitly to the attention of the Human Rights Commission by bracketing language? The principle of consensus is being exploited by a few to prevent a reaffirmation of freedom to practice religion.

Mr. Chairman, before he became Pope, John Paul II wrote,

"One can understand that a man may search and not find; one can understand that he may deny; but it is not understandable that a man may have imposed on him 'it is forbidden for you to believe'."