

Adoption of the Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief: a Major Step Forward in EU External Policy

EPRID (25 June 2013) The **European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination** (EPRID) welcomes the adoption of the **EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion and Belief** by the EU Foreign Affairs Council on Monday 24 June 2013.

The Guidelines were developed by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU Member States in consultation with civil society, including EPRID. For EPRID, the Guidelines represent a significant step forward in institutionalising the EU's recognition of the crucial importance of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and its commitment to prioritize this right in the EU's internal and external policies. *"With these guidelines, the EU reaffirms its determination to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief as a right to be enjoyed **by everyone everywhere**,"* the Guidelines state, recalling that freedom of religion or belief is interrelated and interdependent with civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and encompasses *"theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief."* The Guidelines on FoRB are the first-ever instruments of external policy on this issue. Guidelines on the promotion and protection of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, were also adopted on the same day.

"Freedom of religion or belief is a litmus test for other human rights and fundamental freedoms" said EPRID Board member Mr Christel Lamère Ngnambi. *"EPRID believes that respect for FoRB contributes to people's social wellbeing and has a positive impact on stability, democracy and religious tolerance. **Promoting freedom of religion or belief is therefore not only a moral or legal obligation, but also a strategic political choice. The adoption of these Guidelines today gives a strong signal that FoRB is now a priority for the EU,**"* he said. EPRID, a Brussels-based platform consisting of faith-based and secular organisations founded in 2006, made initial proposals in 2010 for the EU to develop such an instrument.

The new Guidelines provide wide-ranging, practical tools around the world for EU officials, delegations and Member State embassies on understanding, monitoring, and promoting freedom of religion or belief, as well as raising awareness of this right in third countries. They strengthen the EU's capacity to defend religious freedom both by reacting to violations of FoRB, and addressing the structural causes that lead to these violations. This will involve various activities such as monitoring and assessment, demarches and public diplomacy, political dialogues, EU and member state visits, and financial instruments, including trade agreements, with the possibility of suspending

cooperation and financial assistance where violations of freedom of religion or belief occur.

The Guidelines also identify the need to increase the EU's training capacity on FoRB, mandating the EEAS, in cooperation with civil society, to develop training materials for staff in the field and at EU headquarters. The EEAS and the Council Working Group on Human Rights (COHOM) will assess the implementation of the Guidelines after a period of three years, notably on the basis of reports submitted by EU Heads of Mission and consultations with civil society.

Whilst EPRID applauds this major move in the external policy of the European Union, the new EU Guidelines on the protection of freedom of religion or belief, however eloquent they may be, can never become a reality unless they are followed by practical implementation and monitoring processes. This is why EPRID particularly commends the call for training on FoRB for EEAS civil servants and EU delegations in third countries. Likewise, European institutions need to promote best practices in the defence of this human right and ensure that related EU funding supports the protection and promotion of FoRB. EPRID and its members, many of whom have expertise in FoRB education and training, intends to support the EEAS in developing training materials to this effect, keeping the momentum of the Guidelines drafting process.

Alongside these efforts, EPRID will continue to remind EU institutions that freedom of religion or belief cannot be derogated from, even in times of public emergency. *"It is regrettable that the Council decided not to include this universally-recognised principle pertaining to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief in the final text of the Guidelines,"* Mr Ngnambi said. *"Freedom of religion or belief does not finally depend on the favours of the state and its officials, or the changing will of majorities. Likewise, it is far more than freedom for the religious: it is a core right for all human beings that cannot in any instance be taken from them altogether."* EPRID also aims to promote the role of the European Parliament (EP) in the promotion and protection of FoRB, especially through international visits of EP delegations to third countries.

EPRID is a network of civil society organisations, religious bodies and individuals operating at EU level and focusing on religious intolerance and discrimination. Members include: **Association Internationale pour la Défense de la Liberté Religieuse / Bahá'í International Community / Christian Solidarity Worldwide / European Evangelical Alliance / Human Rights Without Frontiers / Open Doors International / Quê Me: Action for Democracy in Vietnam.**

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EU Guidelines:

[**http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf**](http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf)