



Ministry
of Foreign Affairs
Republic of Poland



2020 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief

Warsaw, November 16–17, 2020

NGO Component – General and Thematic Sessions

United in Dialogue during Covid-19 pandemic

General Session

Background:

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon of a global scale. Its both, short- and long-term consequences can be hardly predicted in any sphere of public and private life. Not surprisingly, the pandemic challenged the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief. At the same time, it increased the scale of existing problems faced by persons belonging to marginalized and vulnerable groups– among them, members of religious minorities. As during the ongoing pandemic many spheres of public life moved to a virtual format, the current health crisis reinforced the significance of human rights protection in the digital context and its interlinkages with other fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief. Therefore, the dynamic situation related to healthcare requires states to put all efforts into strengthening the protection of persons belonging to religious minorities, with a view to be better prepared for different pandemic scenarios and its consequences. This as a result will have a positive impact on the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all members of the society, including of religious communities.

The general session will provide an opportunity to discuss those and other human rights, related matters in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. With a view to a more practically oriented discussion, we would like participants to reflect on concrete measures facilitating protection of religious communities especially in times of pandemic. Therefore, during the general session the following questions are going to be addressed:

- What are the main priorities of international governmental and non-governmental organizations and their plans with regard to protection and promotion of the freedom of religion or belief during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What initiatives can be undertaken by international organizations in order to amplify the voice of religious minorities and the challenges faced by them in times of pandemic?
- How can these activities be supported or strengthened by a broad cooperation among all stakeholders? What is the role and importance of the multilateralism in this process?
- What best practices or recommendations can be presented to the governments in order to highlight the promotion of FORB and protection of religious minorities in the COVID-19 context?

Panel Discussion:

Moderator: **Mr Thomas Garrett**, Secretary General of the Community of Democracies

Panelists:

- **Mr Ahmed Shaheed**, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Director,
- **Mr David Harris**, CEO, American Jewish Committee
- **Ms Gayle Manchin**, Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Religions