

## **Speech H.E. M.J.M. Verhagen, Minister of Foreign Affairs of The Netherlands**

Your Majesty, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to address you today at this inter-religious conference in the inspiring Peace Palace. It gives me great pleasure to see so many people of different religions and beliefs gathered here from every corner of the world.

I would like to thank Justice and Peace Netherlands for organising the conference. Human rights are central to Dutch foreign policy, so I very much welcome an initiative to promote faith in human rights among people of different religions and beliefs.

Today's conference is a significant event on a significant day, because today we celebrate a major landmark in the history of human rights. Sixty years ago, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – thus setting in motion the development of the international human rights legal system as we know it today. In 1948, in the wake of a devastating world war, the 58 UN member states shared an aspiration towards a more equitable and just world. For the first time in history, the international community embraced a set of universal rights and freedoms as a defence against oppression and discrimination.

The Declaration has inspired many international conventions, declarations and resolutions. It has been incorporated into the constitutions and laws of many countries. Translated into numerous local and national languages, it is the most widely cited human rights document in the world. It transposes important values, such as justice, equality, human dignity and liberty, into rights to which everyone is entitled. These are the birthright of all human beings; regardless of where they were born or to what cultural or religious tradition they belong. They reflect our common humanity, from which no person may be excluded.

Universality – the idea that human rights apply to all people, in all places, at all times – was the basic principle underlying the 1948 Declaration. In terms of religion or belief, this means that it makes no difference whether someone is a Muslim or a Hindu, a Christian or a Jew, a Buddhist or a humanist, an agnostic or an atheist. Everyone's rights and freedoms deserve to be upheld and protected. In other words, no restrictions may be placed on human rights in the name of religion.

There are people who argue that human rights can be interpreted differently within different religious traditions. I believe that such relativism seriously undermines the international human rights legal system. So I am very glad that you, as representatives of different world religions, are endorsing the Universal Declaration today and proclaiming that your religions recognise and support human rights and fundamental freedoms for everyone, irrespective of religion. You are telling the world that religion and human rights are *not* in conflict, that in fact religion can be a major source of legitimacy for human rights. I wholeheartedly endorse that message.

Universal human rights embody the hard-won consensus of the international community. They also promote cultural and religious diversity, by including cultural and religious rights

in human rights instruments like the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. In other words, the universal conception of human rights actually *safeguards* diversity.

Besides an important human right that guarantees religious diversity, freedom of religion and belief is a significant indicator of the general human rights situation in a country. Because it directly reflects the situation with other freedoms, such as the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration states that ‘everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’. This includes the right to change one’s religion or belief. Governments have a duty to protect the freedom of their citizens to practise or change their religion or belief, or – let me emphasise this – to choose not to have any religious convictions. Inequality before the law and discrimination against and persecution of religious minorities are serious violations of the rights to which every individual is entitled. Protection of these basic human rights should be ensured by law and in practice.

Last September, the Netherlands submitted to the French EU Presidency a draft resolution on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Together with other UN member states, the Netherlands has worked proactively and constructively to pass this resolution. I am happy to say that last month the Third Committee of the General Assembly adopted a final text that is close to our original draft. I attach great importance to this resolution. For the first time, the UN has declared that legal registration practices should not limit anyone’s right to practise his or her religion or belief. Other positive developments are that the resolution recognises everyone’s right to access public services without discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. And it states that no one should be forced to disclose information about religion or belief.

This is a crucial moment to affirm these principles. Because unfortunately, respect for freedom of religion and belief is declining in many parts of the world. The position of religious minorities in particular is increasingly under threat. This is one of the reasons why I pay so much attention to freedom of religion and belief in implementing the Netherlands’ human rights strategy. As I mentioned before, if this freedom is infringed, many other human rights and fundamental freedoms will be as well. I recently discussed my concerns about this with the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms Asma Jahangir. The Netherlands will continue to support her important work. We also systematically raise the issue of individual freedom of religion and belief in our bilateral relations; it always features prominently in my talks with foreign leaders.

I am committed to keeping religious tolerance and the protection of religious minorities high on the international agenda, particularly in the UN and the OSCE. And I intend to keep it high on the Dutch agenda as well. The Netherlands has a long tradition of religious tolerance. People of all faiths who live here should feel free to practise their beliefs as long of course as they respect the rule of law on which our society is founded.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Respect is a concept that is central to *all* world religions, and to major non-religious beliefs such as humanism. But respect does not arise automatically. It demands effort, commitment and a genuine interest in one another. People often fail to make this effort, and that worries

me. Too many people *demand* respect for themselves, but fail to *show* it to others. I see many such examples in the Netherlands, to my regret.

You, representatives of different world religions, are setting a better example today. Your signatures show that you care for the rights of others, that you respect others. By recognising that human rights are what bind us together in this diverse world, you have truly honoured the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on its sixtieth birthday.

Thank you. I wish you every success in your work.