



## Report of the CONGO NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Geneva)

*The NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Geneva) functions as a Sub-Committee of the Special Committee on Human Rights. Meetings of the committee were held on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 16<sup>th</sup> October, and 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008, and 29<sup>th</sup> January 2009, with an attendance between 12 and 15 at each meeting; in all over 30 organisations participated in the seven meetings. The committee maintains an e-mailing list of some 70 names; one member organisation remains in touch by post.*

The Bureau of the Committee having completed its three year term of office, a new Bureau was elected on 5<sup>th</sup> June (following a delay to confirm that no nominations had been lost when the returning officer's computer crashed). Diane Ala'i of the Baha'i International Centre was elected to her second term as Chair; the International Association for Religious Freedom, represented by John Taylor, and Conscience and Peace Tax International, represented by Derek Brett, were elected as Vice-Chair and Secretary, respectively.

The Committee welcomed the extension of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms Asma Jahangir, and looks forward to hosting a dialogue between the Special Rapporteur and civil society when she reports to the Tenth Session of the Human Rights Council in March 2009. The Committee was dismayed to hear that the Special Rapporteur was briefly placed under house arrest in her native Pakistan in the early Summer of 2008, and while deploring any such arbitrary action liable to hamper the work of a UN mandate holder was relieved that the detention ended without in fact interfering with her ability to carry out the work of her mandate, nor in any way compromising her independence, as evidenced by her public statements at the time.

The discussions on the renewal of mandates having interrupted the pattern of annual reporting to the Human Rights Council by the Special Rapporteur, the Committee's attention has focussed, not uncritically, on a number of other items on the Council's programme of work and some events outside the Council. The full potential of the Panel Discussion on "Human Rights and Intercultural Dialogue" during the Eighth Session of the Council, in March 2008, was sadly not realised as, despite representations from the Committee and suggestions from a number of other NGOs, the chosen panellists were all males speaking from specific Christian or Moslem viewpoints, giving the discussion a narrowly inter-religious rather than inter-cultural focus and failing to reflect the full cultural diversity of the world. The contributors to the Expert Seminar organised by the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights in October 2008 on the links between Articles 19 (Freedom of Expression) and Article 20 (Incitement to Hatred) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights delivered a number of very impressive papers and reached a high degree of consensus that these articles reinforced rather

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than conflicted with each other; the Committee however agreed to co-ordinate a letter to the High Commissioner from member organisations deploring that priority in the general debate had been given to interventions by government representatives, above even the contributions of the panellists, and that the handling of NGO contributions had been derisory.

On a more positive note, the Committee has heard with interest the results of the monitoring by members of the freedom of thought, conscience or religion in the Universal Periodic Review process, and has been encouraged by some of the findings.

Respectfully submitted by the Co-Chair of the committee (International Association for Religious Freedom) and the Secretary of the committee (Conscience and Peace Tax International) at the request of the Chairperson, Ms Diane Ala'i of the Baha'i International Community.

17<sup>th</sup> February 2009