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**Promotion and protection of all human rights,
civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Amnesty International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2010]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The role of human rights defenders in challenging discrimination and violence in the name of religion or belief

Amnesty International welcomes the report prepared by the Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief, and in particular the framing of issues of concern to her mandate. The distinction made between discrimination and violence on the grounds of religion or belief, and discrimination and violence in the name of religion or belief is an important one. It helps to separate out areas that are frequently (and often purposely) conflated to the detriment of effective analysis. Discrimination and violence in the name of religion are detrimental to a range of rights, including freedom of religion or belief itself. It is important to have the clarity of analysis that makes it possible to identify and challenge discrimination and violence in the name of religion or belief.

Violations of the rights of women are frequently carried out in the name of religion. Human rights defenders who seek to expose such violations and demand accountability of the perpetrators frequently find themselves targets of threat and attack. They are targeted because of the human rights work they do, and because of the roles they adopt in their communities and in the wider public sphere. Their advocacy is too often portrayed by those in authority - both state and non-state actors - as in opposition to religion, tradition and culture.

Several of the early-warning signs of discrimination and violence cited by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief also adversely affect the work of human rights defenders. These signs include the lack of adequate legislation to ensure freedom of religion or belief, attacks upon individuals based upon their religious affiliation, and lack of accountability for crimes committed in the name of religion or belief.

Amnesty International believes that violence perpetrated against women in the name of religion or belief remains a poorly understood phenomenon that requires greater engagement by states to ensure it is effectively confronted. Threats and attacks against women human rights defenders in the name of religion or belief are often indicative of the level of control exerted by state actors, individuals and groups that discriminate and abuse rights in the name of religion or belief, and in that sense they are another early-warning sign of growing religious intolerance. As a measure to prevent the growth of religious intolerance, any such threats or attacks should be treated seriously by states through prompt and proper investigation and prosecution of alleged perpetrators in accordance with international fair trial norms.

Human rights defenders the world over detect, document and report early-warning signs of intolerance leading to discrimination or violence in the name of religion or belief. Their work is essential in bringing such information and analysis to the attention of human rights mechanisms and the international community more broadly. Promoting and protecting the work of human rights defenders is an essential part of challenging discrimination and violence in the name of religion or belief.

Amnesty International takes this opportunity to thank Ms Asma Jahangir for her contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights as Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief and previously as Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.