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Written statement* submitted by Imam Ali Charity Institution, 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.

[21 August 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Condemnation of Sweden Regarding the Burning of Quran

The Quran is the holy book of Islam and its most sacred text. It is not merely a book but is considered the literal word of God, and Muslims treat it with utmost respect and reverence. Muslims believe the Quran's text has been preserved in its original form since the time of its revelation about 1,400 years ago. As such, Muslims see the burning of the Quran as a desecration of sacred scripture and an unacceptable act.

Burning of the Quran is a humiliation of the faith and beliefs of Muslims, but what is more unfortunate is that this insult to the sanctities of a great population is happening under the guise of protecting freedoms. The growing trend of intolerance and prejudice against Islam and Muslims worldwide poses a daunting challenge. Over the last few decades, harmful stereotypes and prejudices regarding Muslims and Islam have been chronically reinforced by mainstream media, senior politicians, influencers of popular culture and within academic discourse. Simultaneously, numerous discriminatory practices have been implemented in various parts of the world, including restricting Muslims from living according to their belief system, securitization of religious communities, restricting access to citizenship, socioeconomic exclusion and pervasive stigmatization of Muslim communities.

In the name of freedom of expression, at the start of 2023, far-right Danish-Swedish politician Rasmus Paludan, who is known for his Quran-burning protests, set alight a copy of the Muslim holy book outside a mosque, fueling global outcry.

For the second time, an unspeakable act was committed on the day of Eid ul Adha 2023 in Stockholm, Sweden. A man, Salwan Momika, desecrated the Holy Quran in public; The Iraqi refugee, repeating his action on 28 August 2023, set fire to copies of the Holy Quran in front of the Islamic Republic of Iran embassy in Stockholm. The actions that has not only deeply offended the Muslim community worldwide but also criticized the unlimited freedom of expression.

While freedom of expression is a fundamental pillar of any democratic society, allowing individuals to express their opinions, engage in open dialogue and challenge prevailing ideas, this freedom is not absolute and must be weighed against the potential harm it may cause to others. In this case, the harm principle suggests that restrictions on freedom of expression can be justified when speech incites violence, hatred, or discrimination against specific individuals or groups. This is reflected in the passing of a resolution against the desecration of the Quran by the UN Human Rights Council in July 2023.

Such despicable act goes against the principles of respect, tolerance, and freedom of belief. Everyone should have the right to practice his or her religion peacefully. Such a vile act towards Islam's most sacred text is deeply offensive and disrespectful to the beliefs and sentiments of over two billion Muslims worldwide.

Insulting or demeaning other religions solely in the name of "free speech" is deeply hurtful, disrespectful, and can contribute to the discord in society. The west, time and again has proved that their support for freedom of speech is "selective". Where on one hand they allow and support hateful acts like this one to happen while on the other hand they do not allow oppressed individuals and communities to raise their voice against the barbarism they face in countries like the State of Palestine. While individuals may have the legal right to express their opinions, it is crucial to exercise that right responsibly and with sensitivity towards the beliefs and feelings of others and governments must not condone when it is more of a hate speech than free speech.

In a world where understanding and respect for diverse cultures and religions are more important than ever, this incident is a stark reminder of the thin line between free speech and hate speech. It's a wake-up call for nations worldwide to reflect on their commitment to uphold freedom of expression without promoting hatred and bigotry. And to remember that a truly free society is not just about the freedom to express one's opinion, but also about the freedom to practice one's religion without fear or discrimination.

This incident risks alienating Muslims worldwide, who make up about a quarter of the world's population. This act of disrespect not only provokes religious sentiments but also threatens to tarnish Sweden's image internationally.

While it's essential to uphold freedom of expression, it's equally crucial that we do not encourage or endorse hate speech. What Sweden needs now is to seriously reconsider its approach. By conflating the desecration of the Quran with free speech could further fuel religious intolerance and hatred.

Notice that it constitutes not only a violation of human rights, but also an inadmissible recidivism, perpetrated before the passive and permissive gaze of Swedish authorities weighed down by a controversial decision by the Supreme Court, which had ruled against the ban on demonstrations to burn the Quran.

However, to place the desecration of Islam's Holy Book under the umbrella of "freedom of expression" or "demonstration" is nonsense, and has more to do with iniquity than justice.

Religious tolerance, combating discrimination, and fostering a society free from hatred should be the cornerstone of any democratic society. As such, Sweden must take this opportunity to rebuild trust with the Muslim community and set an example for other nations to follow. We hope that Sweden reevaluates its approach and takes concrete steps to rectify the situation.

We deplore and express our deepest concern over the formal legitimization by the Swedish authorities of the burning of sacred books such as the Quran, as well as that of any holy text or symbol of other faiths.
