

## **Ms Cynthia Veliko - Regional Director, OHCHR Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific**

Dr. James Gomez,

Mr. Luis Melgar Valero,

Distinguished speakers, colleagues and friends,

Good morning.

It is a pleasure to join you for the 11th Asia Centre International Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief. I thank the Asia Centre for bringing together such a diverse group of experts, civil society representatives, faith actors, journalists and human rights defenders.

The breadth of this conference reminds us that freedom of religion or belief does not exist in isolation. It is closely linked to equality and non-discrimination, freedom of expression and association, minority rights, and ultimately to the ability of every person to live with dignity and without fear.

Freedom of religion or belief is, first and foremost, a right of individuals. International human rights law protects freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including the freedom to adopt, change or reject a religion or belief. Human rights law does not protect religions themselves from criticism. Rather, it protects people, believers and non-believers alike, from coercion, discrimination and violence, while safeguarding their freedom to manifest their beliefs.

This principle is particularly important in the Asia-Pacific region, which is extraordinarily diverse in religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural terms. Yet religious identity often intersects with ethnicity, gender, migration status and other characteristics in ways that can increase vulnerability to discrimination and exclusion.

For ethno-religious minorities, these challenges can be especially acute. Discrimination may affect access to education, employment, documentation or social services. In some cases, prejudice and exclusion contribute to displacement, violence or persecution. Protecting freedom of religion or belief therefore requires us to look beyond formal legal guarantees and ask who is actually able to exercise these rights equally and safely.

The United Nations human rights mechanisms provide an important framework for this work. The Human Rights Council's Special Procedures, treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review help identify violations, clarify States' obligations and promote accountability. They also remind us that freedom of religion or belief is deeply interconnected with other rights, including freedom of expression, minority rights, gender equality and protection from discrimination.

We must also address hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. International human rights law requires us to strike a careful balance: responding effectively to genuine incitement while ensuring that restrictions are not misused to suppress legitimate expression or target minorities. The Rabat Plan of Action remains an important guide, emphasizing that criminal sanctions should be reserved for the most serious cases, while education, dialogue, responsible leadership and independent media play a crucial role in addressing the root causes of intolerance.

These challenges increasingly have a digital dimension. Online platforms can amplify hatred and harassment at unprecedented speed and scale, while surveillance technologies and automated systems may disproportionately affect religious and ethnic minorities. Responses to these challenges must remain firmly grounded in human rights standards.

Another growing concern is transnational repression. Human rights defenders, journalists, dissidents, refugees and members of religious or ethnic minorities may continue to face threats even after crossing borders. Surveillance, harassment, threats against family members and misuse of legal or administrative measures can create fear far beyond those directly targeted.

A person who has fled persecution must be able to practice their religion, express their beliefs and engage with their community without fear. States must not only refrain from transnational repression themselves but also protect individuals within their jurisdiction from such acts. The principle of non-refoulement remains fundamental: no one should be returned to a place where they face a real risk of persecution or serious human rights violations.

Civil society and human rights defenders are central to these efforts. Across Asia, they document violations, support vulnerable communities, counter hate speech and promote dialogue, often in increasingly difficult circumstances. Protecting freedom of religion or belief also means protecting the civic space in which they operate.

At the same time, this region offers powerful examples of coexistence, solidarity and dialogue across religious and belief communities. Through initiatives such as OHCHR's Faith for Rights framework, religious and community leaders are helping challenge hatred, defend vulnerable groups and build trust across divides.

Last year, here in Bangkok, the Faith for Rights community adopted the Bangkok Declaration on Dharmic Perspectives on Faith for Rights. The Declaration highlights how diverse ethical, spiritual and cultural traditions can contribute to dignity, justice, compassion and mutual understanding, reinforcing the principles of universal human rights.

As we begin this conference, let us focus not only on restrictions and violations, but also on the conditions that allow freedom of religion or belief to flourish. This requires more than tolerance. It requires equality, respect for diversity, institutions capable of protecting minorities, accountability for violations, and societies in which no one is forced to choose between their identity, their beliefs and their safety.

OHCHR remains committed to working with States, civil society, religious and belief communities, human rights defenders and other partners across the region to advance these objectives, and to supporting the use of the UN human rights mechanisms as practical tools for strengthening laws, policies and institutions.

I wish you all an excellent next two days.

Thank you.