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Distinguished panellists, dear participants,

Good morning.

It is a great pleasure to represent the European Union today at the 11th International Conference on Religious Freedom in Asia: Representation, Restriction, Rights.

On behalf of the European Union, I would like to extend our warm greetings and express our strong support for this important gathering, and for the valuable work that Asia Centre is doing to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief in Asia. The EU is proud to support this initiative.

Allow me also to begin on a more personal note. I have only recently arrived in Bangkok, after several years working at the Delegation of the European Union to China. During that time, freedom of religion or belief was one of the important issues we regularly addressed in our exchanges on human rights, including in the successive EU-China Human Rights Dialogues.

That experience reinforced for me a simple but important point: freedom of religion or belief is never an isolated issue. It is deeply connected to the protection of minorities, to freedom of expression, to civic space, and to the ability of individuals and communities to preserve their identity, practise their faith or belief, or choose not to have one, without fear.

The European Union remains firmly committed to freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental and universal human right. This includes the freedom to have, adopt, change, or not have a religion or belief, and the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief, individually or in community with others, in public or in private.

This commitment reflects the EU's core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These are not abstract principles. They are essential to protecting pluralism, ensuring equal treatment and safeguarding the dignity of every individual. Where these values are upheld, diversity can flourish, and communities can live together in mutual respect.

In promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, the EU is guided by the principles of the universality, indivisibility, interrelatedness and interdependence of all human rights — whether civil, political, economic, social or cultural.

Freedom of religion or belief does not stand alone. It is closely connected with other fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of expression, as well as freedom of assembly and association, and the principle of non-discrimination.

Protecting freedom of religion or belief therefore also means protecting the wider civic space in which people can speak, organise, participate, worship, debate and live according to their convictions without fear.

At a time when religious intolerance, discrimination, hate speech, violence targeting individuals and communities, and restrictions on civic space are rising in many parts of the world, defending freedom of religion or belief is more urgent than ever.

The EU's commitment is grounded in a strong legal framework. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Article 10 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights affirms the same right, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest it in public or in private.

The EU's external action is guided by the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief, which make clear that this right applies equally to all persons everywhere — including those with theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as those who do not profess any religion.

This is also why freedom of religion or belief is not only a legal or institutional question. It is also about the daily experience of individuals and communities: whether they feel safe, whether they are treated equally, whether they can participate fully in society, and whether their voices are heard. The EU's support for this conference reflects our strong belief in international cooperation and in the essential role of civil society in advancing freedom of religion or belief.

This conference matters because it creates space for dialogue, for the exchange of good practice, and for practical responses to real and pressing challenges. It also highlights the importance of partnership — between the EU, civil society, faith-based actors, media, academics and other stakeholders.

In this regard, I would also like to underline the relevance of the EU's Global Gateway approach. Global Gateway is the European Union's offer to partner countries to support sustainable connectivity and investment, including in digital, transport, energy, climate, health, education and research.

But Global Gateway is not only about infrastructure. It is a values-based approach that goes hand in hand with human development, social cohesion, democratic values, good governance and transparency.

Respect for fundamental human rights is therefore key. Sustainable partnerships and long-term investment are stronger when societies are inclusive, peaceful and rights-respecting. In this sense, promoting freedom of religion or belief contributes to the broader objective of building societies where all people can participate and contribute on an equal basis.

Protecting freedom of religion or belief requires exactly this kind of cooperation: principled, inclusive and sustained.

Let me conclude by reaffirming the European Union's strong support for freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental human right. The EU will continue to work with partners to promote inclusive, rights-based societies grounded in democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I encourage all participants to make the most of this opportunity: to engage in constructive dialogue, to share good practices, and to develop practical and innovative responses to the challenges we face.

Together, we can make a difference in promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief for all.

Thank you.