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# COVID-19 and Religious Minorities Pandemic Statement

JOINT STATEMENT

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

AUGUST 20, 2020

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We, the undersigned members of the International Religious Freedom Alliance (Alliance) call for the full respect for the human right to freedom of religion or belief in line with relevant international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The crisis facing the international community is of global proportions, and any measures enacted in response to COVID-19 should not be used as a justification to silence, target, or harass any members of civil society, including human rights defenders, journalists, and media workers. Even during pandemics, states are accountable for the

obligations and commitments they have made to respect human rights, like freedom of religion or belief, that take on heightened importance in a time of national crisis and that encourage active efforts to control the pandemic.

States should not limit the freedom to manifest religion or belief to protect public health past the point necessary, or close places of worship in a discriminatory manner. To the extent that states are taking measures in response to COVID-19 that limit the freedom to manifest, either individually or in community with others, one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching, they should do so only to the extent that these restrictions are established by law and necessary for a limited number of purposes, including public health.

In addition, we call upon governments, elected and appointed officials, and religious leaders to avoid language that scapegoats certain religious and belief communities. We are concerned by the spike in dangerous rhetoric that demonizes the religious "other," including anti-Semitism and the blaming of Christian and Muslim communities and other vulnerable religious minority groups for spreading the virus, as well as the targeting of those who hold no religious beliefs.

The Alliance is particularly concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on religious minorities. As a shared and important principle, we hold that governments should never

limit or penalize an individual's right to believe or not believe and any decision to change one's belief. Members of religious minority groups are among the most vulnerable, and they have been subjected at times to verbal abuse, death threats, physical attacks, and discrimination in attempting to access public services, and in all too many cases, vital health services have been denied entirely.

We encourage governments to take proactive steps to ensure individuals in minority religion and belief communities are safe, protected, and receive health services in an equitable and non-discriminatory manner. In addition, it is critical that states establish effective strategies and channels of communication to provide accurate, accessible, transparent, and reliable information to both the public at large and to members of minority religion and belief communities. Restrictions related to COVID-19 should be lifted as soon as they are no longer necessary to protect public health from the threat of COVID-19.

Co-Signatories: Albania, Armenia, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, United Kingdom, United States of America