24 March 2011

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and as Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance pursuant to General Assembly resolution 60/251 and to Human Rights Council resolutions 6/37 and 7/34.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency’s Government information we have received concerning the burning of a copy of the Qur’an by church members of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida. Their initial plan to burn copies of the Qur’an on 11 September 2010 has already been subject of our allegation letter dated 8 September 2010, to which we have not yet received a reply from your Excellency’s Government.

According to new information received:

On a website, the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida, publicly announced that it would hold a mock trial entitled “International Judge the Qur’an Day” on 20 March 2011. In an online poll, 14 out of 15 people reportedly found the Qur’an guilty of “inciting murder, rape and terrorist activities” and that it was “under suspicion of the direct or indirect murder of millions of people around the world”.

On 20 March 2011, a copy of the Qur’an was soaked in kerosene and set on fire by pastor Wayne Sapp under the supervision of pastor X. Around 30 people attended this event in Gainesville and photos of the mock trial were subsequently posted online.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, we would like to appeal your Excellency’s Government to take all necessary steps to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief in accordance with the principles set forth in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion
or Belief and article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and article 18 of
the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Furthermore, we would like to refer to General Assembly resolution 64/164, in
which the Assembly urges States “to step up their efforts to protect and promote freedom
of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and to this end: [...] (h) To exert the utmost
efforts, in accordance with their national legislation and in conformity with international
human rights law, to ensure that religious places, sites, shrines and symbols are fully
respected and protected and to take additional measures in cases where they are
vulnerable to desecration and destruction; [...] (k) To take all necessary and appropriate
action, in conformity with international standards of human rights, to combat hatred,
discrimination, intolerance and acts of violence, intimidation and coercion motivated by
intolerance based on religion or belief, as well as incitement to hostility and violence,
with particular regard to members of religious minorities in all parts of the world; (l) To
promote, through education and other means, understanding, tolerance, non-
discrimination and respect in all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief by
encouraging a wider knowledge in the society at large of the history, traditions, languages
and culture of the various religious minorities existing within their jurisdiction”.

We would also like to refer to the Durban Programme of Action, which in
paragraph 211 “urges leaders of religious communities to continue to confront racism,
racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance through, inter alia, promotion
and sponsoring of dialogue and partnerships to bring about reconciliation, healing and
harmony within and among societies, invites religious communities to participate in
promoting economic and social revitalization and encourages religious leaders to foster
greater cooperation and contact between diverse racial groups”. Furthermore, paragraph
106 of the Durban Review Conference Outcome Document “reaffirms that the
eradication of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance should
aim not only at promoting equality and eliminating discrimination but also at promoting
interaction, social harmony and integration, respect for tolerance and diversity among
ethnic, cultural and religious communities”.

We urge your Excellency’s Government to take all necessary measures to
guarantee that the rights and freedoms of members of the Muslim community in the
United States of America are respected and protected.

Moreover, it is our responsibility under the mandates provided to us by the Human
Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention. Since we are expected
to report on these cases to the Human Rights Council, we would be grateful for your
cooperation and your observations on the following matters:

1. Are the facts alleged in the above summary of the case accurate?

2. Has a complaint been lodged with regard to the burning of copies of the
Qur’an in Gainesville?
3. Please provide the information on any initiatives taken by your Excellency’s Government in this regard, including preventive ones.

We would appreciate a response within sixty days. We undertake to ensure that your Excellency’s Government’s response to each of these questions is accurately reflected in the reports we will submit to the Human Rights Council for its consideration.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Githu Muigai  
Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

Heiner Bielefeldt  
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief