

Deeply concerned about the situation of religious minorities

*Interview with Ms. Rita Izsak –*

## **the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations for Minority Issues**

**Liviu Olteanu (LO):**

**LO. I would like to start this interview by asking you about the mandate you have at the United Nations. First of all explain the position of “Special Rapporteur” and for our readers, tell us please about “minority issues.”**

Rita Izsak (RI):

Firstly, it is a real privilege to hold the post of United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues. I am the second holder of the post which was created in 2005. I am one of over 50 human rights mandate holders appointed by the Human Rights Council and it is my responsibility to address minority issues and human rights concerns affecting minorities globally. In some respects I advocate for minority rights all over the world within the United Nations system. People often ask me who exactly are minorities. Well, my work is based on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, which means that I consider problems facing these four categories of groups. In fact, the issues of women, people with disabilities, sexual orientation and political groups do not fall under the scope of my mandate on minority issues. As a Special Rapporteur I have certain tools and activities that I can use to do my work. Some of them involve direct engagement with specific countries to address challenges facing minority groups. Based on information that I receive, I can write to any country to raise concerns with them and request the government to give me an official response. One of the most important tools that I have is to conduct official visits to countries to see the situation for myself and talk to all stakeholders, including minority communities and their representatives. Unfortunately I have to receive an invitation from a

government which is not always quick to welcome me. However, when they do, it can be a very constructive opportunity and I have the opportunity to draft a report and recommendations on how each government could improve its treatment of minorities and minority issues. Another important aspect of my work is to develop general recommendations which could be applied in all states, for example in such fields as how to improve the participation of minorities in all aspects of life and how to help ensure that minorities benefit from development and other national policies and programs. And I have a special responsibility and privilege to guide the work of the UN Forum on Minority Issues, an annual platform of dialogue and discussion with about 500 participants every November in Geneva. The overall objective of my work is to promote the rights of minorities and equality for all minority groups, no matter what their origins and national, ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics.

**LO. You have the possibility to visit many countries of the world looking at different segments of the minority issues. To what conclusions are you coming regarding the global problems of the minorities? Some details please...**

**RI. Sadly I would have to report that minorities in every region of the world continue to face discrimination, social exclusion, marginalization, and in some cases threats and violence on a daily basis. Of course some situations are worse than others and I am particularly concerned about situations where minorities face persecution, violence and mass atrocities – where they are targeted for violence because of who they are. But often the problems of minorities exist in other areas even if they don't face violence. My predecessor and I have now conducted official visits to over 16 countries globally and we have found certain trends relating to the situation of minorities that exist in almost all those countries. For example, minorities frequently lack participation in political life at every level and are poorly represented in decision making bodies. This means that their issues and concerns are often not fully considered or are completely neglected. When this is the case, it can have an impact on many other rights and the full enjoyment of rights and opportunities for those belonging to minorities, for example in development, education or social and cultural issues. We frequently**

find that minorities are excluded or discriminated against when they seek employment or in other spheres of economic life. When people of African descent, Roma or religious minorities seek employment in European countries, for example, it is common for them to experience discrimination or to have their applications rejected because of their skin color, their religion, name or their address. Minorities tend to be amongst the poorest people, in the poorest countries and in the richest countries in the world, who frequently live in the least developed neighborhoods, have low incomes and have the least access to services, water and sanitation or healthcare. There are so many challenges facing minorities globally that it is impossible to list them... however I firmly believe that where countries implement minority rights the situation begins to change for the better and minorities begin to see a shift in their situations towards non-discrimination and equality. What is essential in all countries with minorities is the political will for change and to address discrimination in law and in practice.

**LO. One important part of the “minorities” represents “religious minorities”. What about the “religious minorities” and what do you think are the important achievements or needs of religious minorities in the international arena?**

RI. I must say that I am deeply concerned by the situation of religious minorities globally and that has led me to place a particular focus on the issues of religious minorities in my recent work as the UN Special Rapporteur along- side some of my counterparts such as the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt. **I receive more information relating to serious violations of the rights of religious minorities than any other category.** I am frequently shocked to see the brutality of attacks and violence against individuals and groups on the basis of their faith or belief. But the violations of their rights extend into all areas of rights, civil and political, and economic social and culture. ere tends to be an emphasis on the problems associated with freedom of religion and the ability for minorities to freely practice their faith. In fact the wider minority rights of religious minorities are frequently neglected and I am trying to raise awareness of those issues, for example the right to participate equally in all aspects of society, including social and political life. I also think that it is important to note

that in some cases, conflicts are framed as being ethnic or religious conflicts, but other issues and problems have caused these conflicts, sometimes relating to political issues, land rights, access to resources, corruption and lack of good governance. I can certainly say with confidence that I have witnessed a greater attention to the issues of religious minorities at the international level and I have tried my best to contribute to that attention through my own work. This is why in 2013 I decided that the UN Forum on Minority Issues would focus on protecting and promoting the rights of religious minorities. Nevertheless, despite increased international and UN attention to religious minorities, we need to keep up the momentum and make better progress towards protecting religious minorities and challenging states to do better.

**LO. Do you believe that the people, UN, COE, EU and OSCE are talking much more today about “religious liberty and religious minorities” because it is a *sensitive* issue? Why?**

RI. I do hope that it is true that such important institutions are talking more about religious minorities and issues of religious freedom. It is when these issues are discussed openly and sincerely at the highest level and the lowest level that problems are revealed and can start to be addressed. We cannot shy away from issues because they are sensitive, indeed it is precisely those issues that we must address and I am therefore happy to see an increased attention to religious minorities. Dialogue is vitally important and it is equally important that influential bodies such as the United Nations create the spaces for such discussions to take place and, where necessary, challenge states to live up to their human rights and other commitments. I think that important and sensitive debates on such issues as defamation of religion and hate speech have resulted in a greater understanding of the challenges and the sensitivities and have helped to take us forward towards addressing them appropriately. We have learned a lot and we are continuing to learn. You mention some of the European bodies, but I would also like to see the issues of minorities, including religious minorities, taken up more directly in other regions, including by regional organizations in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

**LO. What influence do you consider religious minorities have for**

## **peace and worldwide security? Why?**

RI. I think that religious leaders have a vital role to play in efforts to ensure peace and security, first and foremost in their own societies, but also on the international and global scale. I would like to see leaders speak out more often against religious hatred and incitement to violence. Their influence is great and they must use it to defuse tensions and to help build bridges of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. Religious minorities by their very nature tend to be numerically smaller and socially and politically non-dominant and so it frequently falls to the leaders of majority faiths to play a leadership role. However, I believe that all faiths, large or small, have at their core a message of love, peace, forgiveness and harmony and so all faiths have a role to play in projecting those messages, not just to their own congregations and followers, but to the whole of society. Religion should and can be a force for good, nationally and internationally, but in too many situations it is a dividing force. I have been deeply impressed by some inter-faith initiatives that I have witnessed, for example on my recent visit to Nigeria, where Muslim and Christian leaders are working together to address problems and promote peace and understanding. Sometimes these are very local initiatives, but they are an example to us all and they should be welcomed, supported and expanded. I would like to see the same messages being conveyed at the international level and I truly believe that if those messages are sent they will be a force for peace and security worldwide.

## **LO. Which are the global and regional trends and attitudes toward religious minorities?**

RI. it is a difficult question to address and some research bodies, such as the Pew Research Center and others, are doing excellent work to reveal such trends which will help us to understand better where attention needs to be focused. They have conducted studies which reveal, for example, that members of religious groups face harassment in over 80 percent of countries worldwide. We hear a lot about Islamophobia in Western and non-Islamic countries, and equally about Christianophobia in Islamic countries particularly in the post 9-11 era and in the context of the “war on terror”. I hope that we can begin to emerge from a period of

heightened inter-faith tensions and distrust into a new era of understanding and dialogue across faiths, but much needs to be done to build trust and encourage the conditions for that dialogue and understanding to take place. In some countries anti-minority sentiments and far-right ideologies have come to the fore in recent years creating a hostile environment for religious minorities. We should not forget that in some regions religious minorities have been the victims of recurrent violence and atrocities and that has been a worrying trend that seems to be on the rise in countries including Pakistan, Iraq, Central African Republic and Nigeria. Another trend which I am concerned about is discrimination against “non-traditional” faith or belief groups including such faiths as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahá’i, Pentacostal Churches and numerous others. In some regions religious freedoms are granted to some orthodox or traditional faith groups but not to others that are considered illegitimate or “sects”. International law requires that all faith and belief groups are treated equally but in practice discriminatory attitudes persist against some whose beliefs are different and not officially recognized by the state.

***LO. e Majority versus Minority, and the principle of Democracy versus the principle of Non-Discrimination.***

a. Based on your position as Independent Expert, how do you think that these items, “contrasts” can be harmonized?

***b. Which are the limits and where are they or where can we find a border to avoid the conflict and the discrimination between them?***

RI. Firstly, I would say that I do not see a conflict between the principle of democracy and the principle of non-discrimination. In fact the two go very well together and a healthy, functioning democracy in which all citizens have a voice helps to ensure an environment of non-discrimination in most cases. Of course there are challenges and sometimes democracy surprises us in the choices that the public make, for example towards support of far-right groups. But where human rights and the rule of law are protected and hate speech is prohibited, democracy generally provides a solid foundation for non-discrimination and minority rights. Nevertheless we should never be complacent and

even in the most mature democracies problems and discrimination exist and must be challenged. It demonstrates to me that in all countries we must be constantly monitoring the health of our democracy and our society and identifying the problems as soon as possible. We must constantly strive to ensure that all in our societies are appropriately represented and have a voice. Equally, the phrase “majority versus minority” sounds as if it is a contest to be won by one side or the other. An important point to make about minority rights is that they are really about establishing equality and unity in diversity and a situation in which the majority and the minority can live together in harmony and equality. If we frame the debate as one of majority versus minority we are already creating an adversarial position and so I would much prefer to talk about majorities *and* minorities and ultimately our objective is to achieve diverse societies in which that distinction no longer matters because all are equal.

**LO. On January of 2014, you and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt joined with other official inter- national representatives of COE, ECtHR, EP and of Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Spain, etc. at the International Conference hosted in Madrid at the Human Rights Institute and Law Faculty, University Complutense. The topic was: “After the Edict of Milan, human rights, religious liberty and religious minorities between balance and challenges. Religious liberty and religious minorities.”**

**a. What about that International Conference? b. I would like to ask you regarding the Conference’s format, structure, panels, participants, results?**

RI. It was a pleasure to attend the Madrid conference and have an in-depth discussion with experts coming from various backgrounds. It is very important to address the challenges of religious minorities and identify possible solutions with academia, government representatives, international organizations, independent experts and NGOs together as we all have a particular role to play. Some of us are more efficient on the local level, bringing the messages of people in trouble, some of us have the knowledge to analyze such concerning situations from a national or

international legal point of few and some of us are in the position to take concrete actions or put some pressure on the decision makers. I believe that the Madrid conference brought together some of the best advocates for religious freedom and religious minorities and I do hope that our cooperation will continue. I also need to express my appreciation to the organizers for making sure that we can have an informal setting on the second day to continue with our important exchanges and discussions while also learning about and enjoying rich Spanish culture.

**LO. After the Madrid Conference, your UN colleague, professor Heiner Bielefeldt the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief noted and emphasized (see all at: A/HRC/25/NGO/121):** *"I attach great importance to the design of the Madrid Conference...which really sets an example, is really something we should copy, we should establish that on a regular basis in fact...We have human rights obligations at different levels: national, regional and international and religious beliefs and human rights develop in different directions and can mutually undermine each other. We have the Council of Europe approach, the EU approach, various national approaches, and the UN approach. Still I think as a matter of fact these different institutions some- times are worlds of their own. We need coordination..."*

**a. Do you agree with Heiner Bielefeldt's comments? How do you evaluate these important and practical observations by the UN expert on freedom of religion or belief? b. According with your expertize on minorities issues, HOW and WHO can accomplish this *Coordination* so necessary today? Should it be the UN or other organizations?**

RI. I fully agree with the comments of my colleague and friend, Heiner. Indeed all these institutions come with their own mandate and responsibilities and it is understandable that they all want to do something about the same problems that arise at a certain time in a given locality. However, if not harmonized, this can do more harm than good. But we don't have to go that far, even within our very own UN system, I often experience uncoordinated actions when it seems that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. It would be essential to

connect the dots and make sure that the policies and approaches of various institutions do compliment and not hamper each other or duplicate efforts unnecessarily. I think it is not rocket science to establish this – we should just reach out to each other more often and in a more systematic way. For example, my last country visit took me to Ukraine. I am glad to say that I was in regular contact with OSCE and CoE and of course UN field offices, including OHCHR or UNHCR, to make sure my report becomes a complementary one to the other reports and focuses on aspects and areas that needed more attention.

**LO. Today, do you believe the “*Religious Liberty and “Religious Minorities”*” issues are more linked to the side of “balance” or of “challenges?” Why?**

RI. There are undoubtedly many challenges ahead of us relating to the rights of religious minorities and ensuring freedom of religion and belief. It is important for all stakeholders – states, political leaders, religious leaders and, perhaps most importantly ordinary people, to continue to strive to achieve harmony or “balance” as you say. It is possible to achieve and when we see that balance working in practice we find those of different faiths living side by side with each other, respecting each other’s faiths, enjoying each other’s celebrations and holidays, learning about and cherishing the things that they have in common... rather than focusing on the things that divide them. I am optimistic because I see that reality in places around the world and I know that it is possible to achieve it and maintain it. However it needs to be fostered and built over time and there are those who actively incite against it. If we are to move towards the side of balance and harmony, the voices of hatred need to be counterbalanced with other moderate voices and messages of peace and respect. Education is also vitally important to achieve it and our education systems must be examined to ensure that the messages that young people are receiving are those positive messages which are contained in most or all faiths...love, hospitality, and respect for those who are different or have different beliefs. No child is born hating; they are taught to hate.

**LO. We can appreciate that the UN has important Declarations in this regard: *e UN Declaration on the rights of persons belonging to***

*national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities from 1992 which provides that states “will adopt the necessary measures to ensure that persons belonging to minorities can express their characteristics and develop their culture, traditions...” or we have the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief from 1981 which highlights: “the right of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief shall include, inter alia, the following freedoms: (i.e. art 6h) “to observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one’s religion or belief”. As in worldwide, in Europe too, there are many religious minorities with different religious traditions, which have ceremonies and keep different days of rest. In this regard, what do you think should be done concretely to avoid discrimination by legislation and practice?*

RI. Such standards that you mention offer us all, including states, important guidance on what the rights of minorities are and on the obligations of states to protect and promote those rights. I would like to see those international standards better reflected in domestic anti-discrimination and equality laws to ensure that they are fully implemented in practice. In Europe, for example, non-discrimination and labor directives require member states to meet minimum standards, including relating to ensuring equality for those of different faiths in the workplace. I think that the provisions of such laws are broad, but clear in their directives to states to ensure the enjoyment of aspects of religious life for minorities, including their days of rest, holidays and ceremonies. However the reality is far from ideal in many states and there are many that fail in their obligations or do not recognize them at all. So many countries now are multi- faith societies with citizens of many different faiths with different traditions. We must admit that it can be a challenge for states to accommodate the diversity that they have in their midst and ensure that they are not discriminating against any person on the basis of their faith. Equally it can be a challenge for employers to manage the requirements of a multi-faith workforce with different prayer, diet and other traditions. But there are good practices to learn from and measures that can be put in place to allow flexibility in the workplace. While it is not always easy and sometimes we must find compromises on all sides, we must strive as societies to ensure that we create welcoming and

accommodating environments for all to practice and enjoy all aspects of their faiths.

**LO. You wrote in the “*Note by Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Rita Izsak, on guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities*”, submitted at the HRC Forum on Minority Issues, Sixth session on 26-27 November 2013:**

*“Where good practices in legislation and policy are implemented, religious minorities are able to practice their religions in full equality, and can exercise and enjoy all of their rights and participate fully in all spheres of life. Positive practices include the establishment of comprehensive anti-discrimination and equality legislation, as well as mechanisms and institutions to address discrimination and encourage constructive interfaith dialogue, understanding and exchange. Such measures play an important role in preventing tensions and promoting equality and social stability.”(A/HRC/FMI/2013/2).*

**a. How can this recommendation be applied from local to international levels? b. What about the trends in the Middle East and North Africa, in all the Islamic countries?**

**c. and the attitudes in Europe?**

RI. I’m glad that you quote that passage since I think it is a very important message and encapsulates my views on how states can prevent and resolve tensions. It is a message that is valid in any region of the world. We must create the conditions in which rights are protected and not just rely on good will to ensure peace and equality. But to put something down in law, while important, is only part of the answer and very often in my experience the law is not translated into practice. I have put an emphasis on action and the need to make the law reality through policy and institutional structures and mechanisms that implement it in practice. I recommend that states go much further than just establishing good equality law. They should put in place the institutional bodies with specific mandate on minority rights or religious affairs, such as Human Rights Ombudspersons, national human rights institutions, government departments or offices and consultative and advisory bodies. Such bodies and institutions help to ensure that governments know about and

understand the issues of minorities, including religious minorities, and can respond to them appropriately. They should be inclusive and have staff or members from minority communities who understand the problems and can raise the concerns of minorities. I think that inter-faith dialogue is essential and I believe that Governments, together with religious leaders and communities, have a responsibility to encourage that dialogue, especially in countries where historic tensions have existed or new problems are emerging between those of different faiths. This is equally true of those states in the Middle East and North Africa, some of which have gone through immense social and political changes in recent years. While in some respects this has been seen as positive, we are also now realizing some of the problems that have also emerged, including in some cases new threats and attacks on religious minorities. Those states and others, with strong and enduring religious traditions must continue to live up to their commitments to protect the rights of religious minorities and must guard against any negative trends or regressive steps. Europe too must continue to strengthen its protection measures and acknowledge that there remains much to do to in European countries to ensure minority rights.

**LO. All people need to have a day off every week, a *work-free day*, which should be used for family, friendship, worship, sport or solidarity. In January 2014, the European Parliament in Brussels hosted an interesting debate –the II Conference- organized by European Sunday Alliance (ESA), co-sponsored by some members of the European Parliament (MEPs), regarding the proposal of a *work-free Sunday* for the EU.**

**The proposal created concern for some religious minorities such as Muslims, Jews and Seventh Day Adventists, (there are millions in Europe) which keep Friday (Muslims) or Saturday as Sabbath for their religious day (Jews and Adventists). Proposed on that occasion was a “*Pledge for a work-free Sunday and decent work ahead of the European elections 2014*” signed by different MEPs. In that Pledge is written: “*As a current or future member of the European Parliament I pledge: To ensure that all relevant EU-legislation both respects and promotes the protection of a common weekly day of rest for all EU citizens, which shall be in principle on Sunday, in order to protect***

*workers' health and promote a better balance family and private life and work."*

**Regarding this EP initiative, the MEP Hannu Takkula stresses: “We support the principle of safeguarding the opportunity for a weekly day of rest because everyone needs a proper break in the working week. Sunday-keepers too have every right to rest and worship on the day they feel is right. Legislation must never discriminate against people on religious grounds. A law setting up Sunday as the universal work-free day would do just that”. He emphasized too, that “freedom of religion and belief is a core European value. This principle must be raised and taken seriously in all discussions deliberating the role of a weekly day of rest. The European Union must guarantee everyone equal rights of freedom to celebrate the rest day of their convictions.”**

**a. UN Independent Expert Ms. Rita Izsak, do you agree with MEP Takkula that an EU legislation for a “work-free Sunday” can affect and discriminate against religious minorities?**

**b. How can this kind of discrimination be avoided and what do you recommend or should you do to defend the religious minorities related to the legislation on “work-free Sunday”?**

RI. Let me say that I think it is legitimate for a country or a region which has a majority faith and historical religious tradition to reflect the core tenants of that faith in society and social life. For countries with a predominantly Christian history, Sunday is widely recognized as the traditional day of worship and rest and I think that it is normal for those societies to continue those traditions. In predominantly Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Catholic countries this is equally true. It is not discriminatory to do so the difficulty comes in managing diverse societies in which different, minority religions exist with different worship and rest traditions. An accommodation needs to be found that recognizes and protects the rights of those belonging to different faiths to also practice and enjoy their religions. If a Muslim community in a predominantly Christian country lives in a particular region or represents a high percentage of the population in a locality, for example, some states have achieved such an accommodation by granting different

degrees of cultural, social and sometimes political autonomy to that region, and allow the religious minority to exercise greater control over their own affairs. This can result in local differences including relating to religious or rest days. Where a religious minority is more dispersed throughout society, different solutions need to be found, for example, allowing Muslims to take a day off work on Friday instead of Sunday and finding solutions in terms of education for religious minorities. In our increasingly diverse societies, solutions need to be flexible to ensure rights, but equally societies and governments cannot be expected to change the fundamental social and historical traditions of their society. In fact this would inevitably lead to tensions. What they must do is consult with religious communities, understand their needs and concerns and respond to the greatest extent possible to ensure that minorities can enjoy their rights.

**LO. In the context of your report submitted to the 25th Session of UN HRC in Geneva, what initiatives and steps do you believe can be done from the side of states to put into practice the recommendations in favor of religious minorities?**

RI. I am so pleased that you have raised the report and recommendations of the Forum on Minority Issues which addressed the rights of religious minorities at its sixth session in November 2013. I am really proud of what was achieved by that event and of the recommendations that it produced. The Forum meets every year to discuss a different thematic subject and prepare recommendations in a very inclusive way. Over 500 people attended that event from all regions, UN member states, civil society, religious leaders, academics and many others. Collectively we came up with a series of extremely important recommendations which can be found on the website of the Forum on Minority Issues. They cover such issues as how to implement international standards in domestic legislation and provide suggestions for policies and programs for the protection of religious minority rights and how to improve consultation with and participation of religious minorities. Two important sections of the recommendations cover prevention of violence and protection of the security and interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange. Having produced this important resource, the challenge now is to put them into practice and encourage their implementation at the national level...so our

job is only half way done. It will be my job as well as others in the UN system to now engage with states and deliver this important tool to them. I've been encouraged by the positive response of several states to the recommendations when I presented them to the Human Rights Council and I will be working hard to follow-up on them in the future. Many states were there in the Forum helping to formulate these recommendations and so I believe that they can and should feel ownership over them and that they are a positive and constructive contribution.

**LO. We know that the Council of Europe is a pioneer of human rights from its beginning. But at the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe hosted in Strasbourg between 7-11 of April, the French Rapporteur Rudy Salles presented on behalf of the “Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights”, a Resolution and a Recommendation on: “Protection of minors against excesses of the sects”. Different European churches, religious minorities groups and NGOs rejected the proposals of French Rapporteur Salles on the the proposals have created a strong debate on determining what the terms “sects” and “excesses” mean. e European deputies from Norway, UK, Moldova, Ukraine, spoke of the need to define “sects” and they came up with the suggestion to change the word “sects” with the term “minorities”, which is used at the UN. The Rapporteur rejected the proposals not accepting to use the UN terminology of “minorities”. The Resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly against the “excesses of the sects” was finally voted on with some amendments, but the recommendation was rejected.**

**In this Assembly we have seen strong opposition from two groups: on the one hand, the French rapporteur and the French MEPs; on the other hand, other members of parliament.**

**a. Your feedback please? b. How can the initiatives of the UN be coordinated with the initiatives of COE or EP, OSCE on the same issues, while avoiding any form of discrimination against the religious groups and religious minorities?**

**RI. As governments and societies we may not agree with the beliefs of**

some people, but we must uphold their right to freely hold and manifest those beliefs. I am concerned by the over use of the term “sects” and its application to some faith and believe groups that are long established, have millions of follow- ers, and are entirely legitimate in their beliefs and activities. I think that we have to exercise caution in using this term which has highly negative connotations as being associated with manipulation of individuals, excesses, brainwashing and other criminal acts. Some use the term to denigrate legitimate faith or belief groups that they simply don’t like, agree with or trust. It is important to recall that we all have the fundamental right and freedom to believe what we want and to follow a faith of our choosing. Governments have a responsibility to protect individuals from criminal acts and it is true that some groups or individuals have taken advantage of vulnerable people and committed crimes for which they should be prosecuted. But those groups that function and follow their faith or beliefs entirely according to the law should not face restrictions, harassment or bans. However, often such minority groups report problems in exercising their religious freedoms. I do refer to most of such “non-traditional” faiths as minority groups. I think that the term “sect” is problematic because of its pejorative understanding and negative connotations that immediately give the impression of wrongdoing and exploitation. In some countries the use of this term and the consequent negative impression of them has even led to persecution, attacks and violence against individuals and group members by law enforcement actors and others.

**LO. What global role do you think civil society should have, the NGOs on the defense of human rights, religious liberty and religious minorities? What feedback do you have on the initiatives, projects and the activities of the *International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty (AIDLR)* in favor of human rights and religious freedom for all people, especially after your participation in the Madrid International Conference and looking at its initiatives on the international, regional and national levels? What message would you like to give to the readers of *Conscience of Liberty* journal?**

RI. I think that the role of civil society and human rights defenders are hugely important in the protection of all human rights and the rights of religious minorities. I have immense respect for the hundreds of

organizations and individuals around the world who sometimes put their own lives in danger to protect human rights and to speak out against oppression and violence. They do not get the recognition and the support that they deserve and I urge governments to protect them and to engage with them to help them do their vital work. It concerns me that many face an oppressive environment and threats to their work and safety...even from their own governments. Without the work and information that I receive from civil society and NGOs on a daily basis the UN could not do its work to protect human rights, and myself and my fellow Special Rapporteurs could not do our work that is based so much on theirs. At the international level in the UN conferences, for example, we get just a glimpse of what the NGOs are doing – we see the tip of the iceberg. Their main work is going on at the national and local levels, often working with communities and initiating creative projects and programs, frequently with little if any funding. I will give you just a small example of what is going on around the world. I was recently in Nigeria in regions which had seen communal violence, but I found there initiatives to rebuild peace. Alliances between Christian and Muslim leaders are promoting dialogue and mediation in community conflicts as a tool to achieve peace and foster inter-religious dialogue. In Jos, the “Women Without Walls” Initiative, was founded by Christian and Muslim women leaders and is working on community projects targeting women and youth. An education for peace project run solely by one young woman in Bauchi has been working with hundreds of children to foster values of understanding, trust and mutual acceptance across ethnic and religious divides. My message to them and to the many others who are doing this work, including the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty (AIDLR), is to continue your work because your message and your example are there to inspire us all. Thank you.

**LO. Thank you so much Ms. Rita Izsak, the Special Rapporteur on minority issues for your interview and I wish you many victories worldwide for human rights and minorities and religious minorities.**