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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF:
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union,
a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 December 1999]

1. The Commission on Human Rights, in its resolution 1999/39 adopted at the fifty-fifth session, noted “the request of the Special Rapporteur [on religious intolerance] to change his title to Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and decide[d] to consider, at its fifty-sixth session, changing the title”. This request was made by the Special Rapporteur in his last report (E/CN.4/1999/58, para. 122). He recommended “that a more neutral and encouraging title, such as ‘Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,’ should be used. The present one, with its reference to religious intolerance, antagonizes certain interlocutors and sometimes makes dialogue difficult. A different title could embrace all aspects of freedom of religion or belief. It must also be consistent with the mandate, covering not only religion but also belief and intolerance, as well as discrimination, and reflect the balanced dialogue-oriented approach followed by the Special Rapporteur in his work, in accordance with the resolutions governing his mandate”.

2. This request is consistent with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. General comment No. 22 on article 18 adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 1993 reads: “Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms belief and religion are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reasons, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community” (A/48/40, vol. I, annex VI, para. 2).

3. The Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief was held from 12 to 15 August 1998 in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The goal of the Conference was to build an international coalition and to develop a plan of action to strengthen the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance and, therefore, the implementation of article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18 of 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.

4. The Oslo Conference was attended by representatives of Governments, religious communities (Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, etc.) humanist beliefs, academic institutions and NGOs. The Conference adopted the Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in which it recommended that “Commission on Human Rights change the title of the Rapporteur to Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief”.

5. The participants urged the organizers and sponsors of the Oslo Conference “to review the discussions and recommendations of the Conference, with the purpose of creating an ‘Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief’, inviting support and participation by governments,

religious or belief communities, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations". In August 1999, The Oslo Coalition opened an office and appointed an International Advisory Council to carry out the 10 substantive provisions of the Oslo Declaration, including the title change for the Special Rapporteur.

6. As the worldwide umbrella organization of nearly 100 humanist rationalist and secularist organizations from 34 countries, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and member of The Oslo Coalition, urges the Commission on Human Rights at its fifty-sixth session to grant the request of the Special Rapporteur to change his title to 'Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief' (or 'Special Rapporteur on religion or belief'), in order to be consistent with his mandate.
