



An account of what the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief has done during the 20th parliamentary term (2022-2025)

MANDATE AND TASKS

In January 2022, Frank Schwabe MdB (Member of the German Parliament) was appointed, following a decision by the Federal Cabinet, to the post of Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief for the 20th parliamentary term. The Commissioner is a member of the German government. The position is based at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The German Cabinet's mandate for the Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief comprises the following tasks:

- monitoring global freedom of religion or belief using a systematic country-based approach;
- engaging in international dialogue on issues around freedom of religion or belief; and
- drawing up a report by the German government every two years on the global status of freedom of religion or belief.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The human right to freedom of opinion, conscience, religion or belief, to give the right its full title, is enshrined for example in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These are the most important international standards.

Germany also guarantees freedom of religion or belief in Article 4 of the German Constitution (Basic Law). This includes freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest and practise one's religion or belief. That also includes the freedom to convert to another religion and the freedom not to have any religion or belief (negative freedom of religion).

The human right to freedom of opinion, conscience, religion or belief does not protect a religion as such, it protects each person as an individual. Religions or traditions should not be misused in order to violate or qualify human rights.

THE 3RD REPORT ON THE GLOBAL STATUS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The Commissioner observes and analyses the status and development of freedom of religion or belief in many countries around the world. In [The Federal Government's Third Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), which the Commissioner presented in November 2023, there are thus 41 country chapters. The methods used to draft these chapters were further developed in order to be able to make a better comparison of countries with one another and of developments within a country compared to previous reports. The basis for fulfilling this monitoring mandate consists of reports and of exchanges with representatives from

religious communities, civil society actors, government representatives, international partners and German missions abroad.

The Report builds on the work done by the Commissioner's predecessor Markus Grübel, but there are also some aspects where it has been developed further, for example having 41 country chapters instead of the previous 30.

The Third Report explores new ground with its thematic focus on the **freedom of religion or belief of Indigenous Peoples**. This can be regarded as pioneering work, because there was and still is the belief that Indigenous spirituality has nothing to do with freedom of religion or belief. For the first time, therefore, together with the report section, which is finalised in consultation within the German government, a scholarly assessment is being published as well. The assessment explores the specific human rights issues relating to Indigenous religiosity, and does so more comprehensively and thoroughly than could ever be possible in a government report.

Through the human rights perspective on Indigenous Peoples, the focus is consistently directed towards human beings – as individuals and in community with others – who should be able to decide for themselves, in freedom, about their personal and communal development preferences. The human rights approach is aimed at empowering people who continue to be variously affected by racism, land grabbing, displacement, involuntary assimilation and the destruction of their living spaces. In addition to the above, there is also always the threat to their spiritual ideologies (“cosmos visions”) and practices, which are in many cases inextricably tied to their land and the natural environment. However, the focus on human rights is also at the same time a course correction away from romanticised notions of Indigenous culture that reduce Indigenous Peoples to a traditional role as “stewards of nature” or turn them into a blank canvas on which to project anti-capitalist yearnings. Applying the human rights lens to the spirituality of Indigenous Peoples is thus also yet another practical test of the universality of human rights.

The second thematic focus of the Report is devoted to **religion, religious freedom and sustainable development**. For example, in many places the only way that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved is by working with religious communities, which are a strong segment of civil society. The experience of numerous projects has taught that society as a whole can benefit from the commitment and know-how of religious communities, for example in healthcare, in peace work in crisis regions or in working with minorities. The Report recommends continuing to use this potential and expanding this cooperation wherever possible.

INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE AND THEMATIC PRIORITIES

The Commissioner significantly expanded cooperation and networking with international partners from civil society, governments and businesses. This applied both to bilateral cooperation and to active engagement in international forums like the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICG-FoRB), and cooperation with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) and with the Article 18 Alliance/ International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), which Germany joined in 2024 at the suggestion of the Commissioner. The office of the Commissioner is actively involved in the Steering Committee of the Article 18 Alliance and, together with the United Kingdom, co-leads a working group on humanitarian assistance and sustainable development.

The Commissioner also assisted the **International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)** – which was founded and is supported by the BMZ – in setting up its network and developing further. PaRD is a unique alliance with more than 170 members from civil society, religious communities, science and academia, governments and multilateral institutions. Many civil society actors from Germany are substantially involved in the work of PaRD and raise its profile in regard to freedom of religion and belief as well.

With the conference on “**Spiritual heritage and inherited conflicts – Indigenous People and their Religious Freedom**” in November 2022, the Commissioner shone a spotlight on a topic that had previously received little international attention. Representatives of Indigenous Peoples and religious players from, among others, Canada, Ecuador, Guatemala, India, Kenya and Russia, and representatives from the United Nations provided important stimuli for the work of the Commissioner. These stimuli also played a role in the choice of focus for the Commissioner’s 3rd report. The important role played by instruments like the Convention on the Protection of Indigenous Peoples (ILO 169) and the Act on Corporate Due Diligence in Supply Chains in this regard was made clear.

Against the background of liberal democracies in Europe which are under pressure, the Commissioner invited European religious representatives to a conference in May 2024, where the **potentials of religious communities for strengthening democracy** were discussed. The discussions clearly showed the binding force that can emanate from religious communities and the ways that inter-religious dialogue processes can be a blueprint for whole-of-society dialogue processes.

In the autumn of 2024 the Commissioner was the host, together with the BMZ, of the [International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) in Berlin, which focused on **artificial intelligence** (AI) and freedom of religion or belief. The Conference was attended by high-level government delegations from 30 countries, members of parliament, and representatives of religious communities, civil society, academia and the business community. The Conference put a special focus on the impact which the design and use of AI has on freedom of religion or belief, the role played by social media in this context, and ways in which AI is used for surveillance of religious minorities and transnational repression. During the Conference it was decided to set up a follow-up process to look at ways of better harnessing the potential of artificial intelligence for freedom of religion or belief and developing joint responses in order to limit negative impacts. The first concrete results of this follow-up

process were dialogue formats with tech companies and international AI initiatives, a side event on the margins of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and an insights paper with recommendations for how governments and businesses might protect freedom of religion or belief online.

On 9 September 2024, the Commissioner organised an expert discussion on the topic of **freedom of belief** to which he invited interest alliances and other commissioners. On the basis of this exchange, an information brochure was elaborated by the Commissioner on the specific concerns of belief-based associations and non-religious people, which has been much requested by humanist associations.

At the initiative of the Commissioner, the German government is providing funding via the BMZ, in 2024 and 2025, for a staff position at the office of the **UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief**, Prof. Nazila Ghanea, to support her mandate.

REGIONAL AND COUNTRY PRIORITIES

The Commissioner was active in numerous **individual cases** in order to support people in various countries who had been threatened, attacked or arrested because of their religion or belief. He visited many countries in order to get an impression of the situation with regard to freedom of religion or belief and met with a range of different actors.

The Commissioner focused in particular on the situation of religious minorities, especially **Christians and Yazidis in the Middle East**. Both of these religious minorities have been massively affected in the last 20 years by displacement and migration from the Middle East region. Their future in the Middle East is uncertain. During visits to **Iraq** in 2023 and 2024, the Commissioner emphasised to representatives of the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government the need to uphold religious freedom and to investigate and address crimes by the so-called Islamic State, and he warned against the silent exodus of religious minorities from the country. Furthermore, the Commissioner conducted an intensive dialogue with the diaspora communities in Germany.

Together with Yazidi and Christian representatives, and also government representatives, the Commissioner set up a round table on the future of religious minorities in Iraq. At several meetings in Berlin, in Iraq itself and digitally, the various options for more intensive cooperation were discussed. Further exchange on fighting hate speech targeting Yazidis and other religious minorities was agreed. The launch of a transitional justice process was also agreed, together with support for creating local administrative structures in Sinjar, which has traditionally been the home of the Yazidis.

In January 2024, the Commissioner headed a delegation that visited **Guatemala**. The visit was timed to coincide with the inauguration into office of the 52nd President of Guatemala, Bernardo Arévalo. The thematic focus was on Indigenous religious freedom in Guatemala. Religious actors (Mayas, churches) and freedom of religion play a politically key role in issues relating to the democratic transition in Guatemala and with regard to the transformation to sustainability in all its dimensions, especially when it comes to conserving biodiversity in the Guatemalan biotope bridges, addressing the issues of equality, intersectionality and diversity, and tackling the reconciliation of a split society.

In February 2025, the staff of the Commissioner participated in a visit to Brasília, Mato Grosso do Sul and São Paulo. The early general election meant that the Commissioner was not able to participate personally in the visit. The topics covered were Indigenous spirituality, FPIC (free, prior and informed consent), ILO 169, land conflicts and decolonisation.

Because the 20th legislative period ended early, it was not possible to carry out other visits that had been planned, such as visits to India, Pakistan and the Holy See.

The Commissioner particularly addressed in meetings and announcements the situation with regard to freedom of religion and belief in **Ukraine** following Russia's attack. Focal points here were how Russia has been using religion as an ideological instrument in conducting its war on Ukraine, the

situation in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia and developments in legislation in Ukraine that affect religious actors.

During his visit to **Nigeria** in August 2022, the Commissioner focused on the need for interfaith dialogue formats when it comes to upholding freedom of religion or belief. Nigeria is increasingly affected by Islamist religiously motivated terrorism. Furthermore, there have also been violent clashes between Islamic and Christian ethnic groups, which although religiously charged owe their origins more to conflict over resources. Experience shows that dialogue formats used in the areas concerned that involve the participation of various religious actors have a better chance of peacefully resolving conflicts and strengthening social cohesion. The Commissioner has advocated for the continuation of such formats.

The increasingly **religious tendencies of nationalist movements**, especially in **South Asia**, and the worsening situation with regard to freedom of religion or belief in countries like India and Pakistan were also a focus for the Commissioner and were raised in various meeting formats and public statements.

PUBLICATIONS AND STATEMENTS

The Commissioner issued several publications in various languages: including, in addition to the Federal Government's Third Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief, for example publishing the book "Indigene Spiritualität als Menschenrechtsthema. Ethnologische, juristische und politische Aspekte" (Indigenous spirituality as a human rights issue. Ethnological, judicial and political aspects), and an information brochure on his work and on humanism and freedom of belief. The Commissioner also expanded his internet presence through a website in English and expressed his views in social media, in contributions to newspapers and books, and through press releases. He gave numerous interviews to German and international media outlets and was a guest speaker at home and abroad, commenting on various aspects of freedom of religion or belief.

LOOKING AHEAD

In accordance with the mandate given to him by the German Cabinet, the Commissioner is preparing a 4th report on the global status of freedom of religion or belief covering the period from 2023 to 2024.

For the country portion of the 4th report, ideas have been developed for systematically improving the way that the status of freedom of religion or belief is presented, so that a better comparison between reports is possible.

Possible focal topics that have been discussed for a 4th report are the rights of women and girls, artificial intelligence and the political misuse of religions. Thought is also being given to making topics that have already been covered a permanent feature of the report, since they are still currently relevant. That is the case, for example, with regard to blasphemy legislation or Indigenous spirituality.

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