

## Background information: The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief and FORB

An excerpt from this background information appeared in [the Stephanus Post of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag](#) (PDF).

United Nations Special Rapporteurs are individuals who have been appointed since 1982 to work on the basis of the UN Human Rights Council's (UNHCR) Special Procedures Mechanism. Their mandate covers either the human rights situation in a particular country or a topic. In exceptional cases, the UNHRC also appoints a working group with one representative from each of the five regions of the world.

The 37 current rapporteurs are appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. However, they are independent of the UN and any government or institution and are therefore not paid. Even if they have regular, standardized reporting obligations and have to deal with individual complaints in addition to official inspection missions, they are in principle independent in their focus. Although they receive a certain amount of personnel administrative support in Geneva, they otherwise have to organize their own inspection missions. Country rapporteurs are appointed annually or confirmed as often as needed. Topic rapporteurs are appointed for three years, and their mandate can only be extended once.

There has been a Special Rapporteur for "Freedom of Religion or Belief" (FORB) since 1986. This resulted when the UN General Assembly adopted the "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief" in 1981. It was the first UN instrument devoted exclusively to religious freedom. The title Special Rapporteur on Religion Intolerance was renamed Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2000. The work focuses on country inspection trips, which a country must agree to, processing of individual complaints, preparing semi-annual thematic focus reports, and public appearances worldwide.

The current officeholder is still Heiner Bielefeldt, a German philosopher, theologian and historian, albeit if only as the acting officeholder. He has been Professor of Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg and was previously Director of the German Institute for Human Rights in Berlin. He was appointed in June 2010 as successor to the Pakistani lawyer Asma Jahangir and confirmed in March 2013 for a second term until 2016. Heiner Bielefeldt's successor has already been elected but cannot take office until she can hand over her current UN office relating to Iran.

### Background information: FORB

FORB is the common abbreviation for Freedom of Religion or Belief. The short form Religious Freedom or Religious Liberty, on the other hand, is not official language of the United Nations or the European Parliament, since these terms can easily be understood as if non-religious worldviews were to be less protected. Therefore, the UN Special Rapporteur on Religion Intolerance was renamed Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in 2000.

Even if the English word “belief” can also mean “faith,” this refers to non-religious faith in addition to religion, which is more clearly reflected in the German “Religion und Weltanschauung.” The German catchphrase “freedom of religion” always includes not only the freedom to belong to a religion and to practice it but also freedom from religion and the freedom to have a non-religious world view. This includes, for example, humanism in its various forms as well as communism and anthroposophy’s self-understanding.

There may also be convictions that cannot be clearly assigned to one of the two categories, such as the Chinese Falun Gong movement. In international law, as in German law, religions and world views are on the same footing with regard to the protection of human rights. Both international law as well as German constitutional law refrain from the question of whether a religion worships a god, several gods, higher beings, etc., or whether it has a different form of metaphysics, such as Buddhism, or has none at all and justifies its ultimate values differently.

By the way, this also applies to the question of religious change. If, for example, a German leaves the church and joins a non-religious worldview, this is nevertheless a change of religion which an employer, for example, is not allowed to use as a basis for dismissal. Leaving the church without damage to one’s social position has only become possible through freedom of religion.