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Coalition to Defend Free Speech: UN Vote Threatens Freedom of Expression

December 18, 2008 (New York) — The Coalition to Defend Free Speech condemned today's vote at the UN General Assembly to approve a resolution urging nations to take action against speech defamatory of religion.

The resolution, sponsored by Uganda on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), as well as by Belarus and Venezuela, asks all countries to create legal and constitutional systems to outlaw speech which is an "incitement to religious hatred."

"The resolution is the latest in a continuing assault on freedom of expression and speech," said Coalition Honorary Chair Floyd Abrams. "Freedom to practice one's faith or not to, to praise a religion, criticize it or ignore it is essential to our concept of liberty and human rights."

The resolution "strikes a blow to fundamental freedoms of expression and belief," said Paula Schriefer, director of advocacy at Freedom House. "International human rights law recognizes the freedom of religion, but not freedom for a religion or a belief itself to be free from criticism."

"The passage of this resolution is not so much a danger to the diplomats working in New York today. However, Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Christians in Orissa, India, and Bahais in Iran have one more reason to fear for their lives as the UN lends legitimacy to the criminalization of their peaceful speech," said Angela C. Wu, International Law Director of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

Although purportedly universal in intent, the resolution singles out only Islam and Muslims by name as targets of "an overall campaign of defamation of religions."

The Coalition noted that there has been an erosion of support for the resolution from a majority of UN member states last year to a plurality this year. "We are heartened by the record opposition," said

Coalition Co-Chair John Wohlstetter of American Jewish Congress.

“While we deeply regret today’s vote, we look forward to the day when the vast majority of nations rally to defend the rights of speech and discourse, no matter how unpopular such speech may be with those it targets” Mr. Wohlstetter said.

Issued by The Coalition to Defend Free Speech on behalf of

Honorary Chair Floyd Abrams

Co- Chair John Wohlstetter

American Jewish Congress, American Values, The Becket Fund, Democracy Coalition Project, Freedom House, Dr. Morton Halperin, International Quranic Center, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of the U.S., and The Rutherford Institute.

