

**Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered the following remarks announcing the establishment of the Office of Religious Freedom:**



Thank you very much. Thank you, first of all, Jason, for that kind introduction, and also for the work you've been doing, I know Jason has been a very passionate advocate for the initiative that we're announcing today. Thank you as well to our master of ceremonies today, our host because he's the Member of Parliament for this area, the Honourable Julian Fantino who has been a great addition to our team in Ottawa. I also want to thank all of my colleagues from both Houses of Parliament who have come to be here with us today for this very important announcement. Special greetings to Member of Parliament Bev Shipley who moved the motion in the House of Commons to get a vote to establish the Office of Religious Freedom. And thank you as well to our host here today, National General Secretary Dr. Aslam Daud and National President Lal Khan Malik of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Canada, thank you. Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to start today by expressing my gratitude, to join with Jason to express my gratitude, to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community here in Vaughan. I'm grateful for your generous hospitality but even more I'm grateful for the outstanding example that you set. This community has experienced, as Jason mentioned, the terrible cruelty of persecution, persecution on the basis of religion. In spite of that, your belief in tolerance and harmony endures. In this you make an inspiring contribution to our values. You strengthen Canada's commitment to diversity and pluralism. And you remind your fellow Canadians that the freedoms we enjoy are precious, and must never be taken for granted. So as your Prime Minister, I thank you on behalf of all Canadians for strengthening and enriching the fabric of our country.

Ladies and gentlemen, around the world, violations of religious freedom are widespread, and they are increasing. In Iran, Bahá'ís and Christians face harassment, imprisonment, and, in some cases, death. In Pakistan, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Shiites Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus are vulnerable to persecution and violence. In China, Christians who worship outside government-approved boundaries are driven underground and their leaders are arrested and detained while Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners are subjected to repression and intimidation. Elsewhere we watch in horror as sanctuaries are destroyed and believers are attacked and in some cases slaughtered, Shia Muslim pilgrims in Iraq, Coptic Christian adherents in Egypt, Christians at worship in Nigeria, the list, appallingly, goes on and on. In the face of these injustices and atrocities, Canada will not be silent. Indeed, Canada has not been silent. Under our Government, Canada has spoken out consistently and emphatically. Without fear or favour, Canada defends human rights around the world. And we have not only

spoken out; we have also taken action. And we have rallied support for religious freedom, for example, among the leaders of the G-8, of the Commonwealth and at the Francophonie.

And we are also providing safe haven in Canada for some 20,000 Iraqi refugees, many of whom are Chaldean Catholics, driven from their ancient homeland under the threat of death. But we are compelled to do more by the sheer number and gravity of the offences against this fundamental right around the world and the assault it implies on democracy itself. The cause is just. The need is urgent. And our responsibility is clear. As Canadians, as citizens of a free country, we have a solemn duty. As Sir Wilfrid Laurier once said, And I quote, we should always remember this: 'Canada is free and freedom is its nationality.' Ladies and gentlemen, the freedom to worship according to one's own conscience is at the root of our personalities and therefore, at the root of all of our liberties. That is why I am deeply honoured to be here today, in a place where those once persecuted can now freely worship. In this country whose hallmark is toleration of diversity and respect for human dignity, I am deeply honoured ladies and gentlemen, to announce the official establishment of Canada's Office of Religious Freedom. I am also further delighted to announce Canada's first Ambassador of Religious Freedom, he is a scholar, a man of principle and deep convictions, please welcome everybody, Dr. Andrew Bennett. To be housed in the Department of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Bennett will monitor religious freedom around the world. He will promote it as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy. And, Dr. Bennett will help ensure that the protection of religious freedom informs the policies and programs of the Government of Canada. Dr. Bennett, you have my best wishes and full support as you set forth on this most important mission.

Ladies and gentlemen, I know that this audience requires no convincing on the need for action in defence of religious freedom. But there are some who, while generally supportive, would not have thought to make it a priority, and there are a few who may believe this is of interest to only a limited number of Canadians and the communities most affected. Let me address this directly. There is a crucial and historical link between respect for religious pluralism and the development of democracy itself. And that is why we shall continue to champion freedom of conscience and freedom of religion throughout the world. And, today, as many centuries ago, democracy will not find - democracy cannot - find fertile ground in any society where notions of the freedom of personal conscience and faith are not permitted. Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, who was one of the greatest human rights champions in our history, noted these realities when he introduced his original Canadian Bill of Rights. To remind you what he said: 'I am a Canadian, a free Canadian, free to speak without fear, free to worship God in my own way, free to stand for what I think is right, free to oppose what I believe wrong, free to choose those who shall govern my country. This heritage of freedom I pledge to uphold for myself and all mankind.' Indeed, it is 'this heritage of freedom' that Prime Minister Diefenbaker spoke of, that has drawn so many millions to our great country. And, it has been in defence of this heritage of freedom that so many Canadians have given their lives, in so many struggles against tyranny and oppression around the world. Throughout history and in our own day, governments that violate religious freedom are also prone to impose themselves in every other

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sphere of life. In contrast, the great tradition of which Canada is a leading example, is founded on the recognition of what Prime Minister Diefenbaker called 'the sacred personality of man'. It is the tradition of limited government under the rule of law, a government limited by its profound respect for the inviolable dignity of the human person and, thus limited, a government dedicated to promoting the freedom and prosperity of the people it serves.

Our Government is dedicated to this purpose, and we will work with other countries and all peoples of goodwill, to promote the principles we share. In closing, ladies and gentlemen, I want to tell you a little bit about a personal encounter I had, one that speaks to the fundamental importance of our initiative today. I am privileged, in the course of my service as Prime Minister, to encounter many, extraordinary individuals and, from time to time, even among all of these extraordinary people, someone is exceptional. One such person I met in my office on Parliament Hill in 2011. He was the Minister of Minorities of Pakistan, Shahbaz Bhatti. He worked tirelessly to defend the vulnerable not only his fellow Christians, but also Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadi Muslims, and all other minorities. He did so knowing that it placed him under a constant and imminent threat to his life. He was an honourable and humble man. Shahbaz and I discussed the threats faced by religious minorities, and the need for Canada to do more. Only three weeks later, while traveling to work in Islamabad, Shahbaz Bhatti was assassinated. Those of us who met him, and certainly his family and friends, will continue to mourn his loss. But his legacy, is, I believe, a legacy of hope, hope for those who are persecuted for their faith, hope for those who believe we can make a difference, hope that if there is goodness enough to inspire one man to speak out even in the most harrowing of circumstances, there is goodness enough to inspire all of us to do our part. Unlike Shahbaz, most of the countless men and women who are persecuted for their faith are not known to us by name. But to them we say, Canada will not forget you. When you are silenced, we will speak out. We will use our freedom to plead for yours. And, we will not rest until the day you can exercise, fully and without fear, your birthright as members of the human family.

Thank you.

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