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RELEASE OF SUBMISSION: YES

PUBLICATION ON DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE WEBSITE: YES

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION RESTRICTIONS: NONE

ORGANISATION INFORMATION

Church in Chains is an independent Irish charity that seeks to be an Irish voice for persecuted Christians worldwide – with a particular focus on China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

Church in Chains is a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade NGO Standing Committee on Human Rights.

This submission has been written by David Turner (Director).

Church in Chains welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Review of Ireland's Foreign Policy and External Relations. Our submission may be summarised under two key headings that reflect our views about the future direction of Ireland's Foreign Policy as it relates to the issue of religious freedom:

1. Human rights should remain central to Ireland's Foreign Policy.
2. Protection of religious freedom around the world should become a key priority of Ireland's Foreign Policy.

1. Human rights should remain central to Ireland's foreign policy

The Public Consultation Document for this Review refers to the fact that Ireland has "a long tradition of support for effective multilateralism, based on the UN; the promotion of human rights, including through our membership of the UN Human Rights Council".

When addressing the 13th Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade NGO Human Rights Forum in November 2013, Minister Eamon Gilmore also referred to this long tradition saying, "Human rights have been a central concern of our foreign policy since independence." He also said, "Ireland's new policy on international development, 'One World, One Future', which was launched in May, reaffirms the centrality of human rights to Ireland's foreign policy and the aid programme." Minister Gilmore went on to refer to Ireland's election, for the first time, to the UN Human Rights Council in November 2012 saying, "This was a major endorsement of Ireland's international standing, and in particular, of our advocacy of human rights across the globe."

Church in Chains is concerned, along with many other NGO's working in the field of human rights, that in practice, human rights is being moved from its central position to the periphery of Ireland's foreign policy. Our concerns are based on the following:

(a) The framing of the Public Consultation Document – the only reference to “human rights” is the one quoted above whereas the document contains 16 references to “economic”.

(b) The priority given in the Public Consultation Document to “Economic Diplomacy”. The wording used in this section reflects the central position that economics now holds in Ireland's foreign policy and suggests that Ireland's foreign policy has been substantially reduced to economic diplomacy.

This shift in Ireland's foreign policy has been observed for some time and was clearly signalled by the change of the name of the Department to Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade when the current government was formed in March 2011.

The questions suggested for consideration under the “Economic Diplomacy” section of the Consultation Document also demonstrate the de facto superior position of business, economics and trade in Ireland's foreign policy, viz. “How can our foreign policy and economic diplomacy support economic development and growth?” and “How can our Embassy network continue to respond to the needs of business?”

If Ireland's foreign policy is to be specifically directed to “support economic development and growth” and our embassy network to “respond to the needs of business” and expected to be “active on a daily basis identifying export and inward investment opportunities”, it seems to leave little space (other than in clearly defined international fora) for “advocacy of human rights around the globe”.

(c) The silence of Irish government ministers about human rights during bi-lateral meetings with government ministers of countries where there are grave violations of human rights.

This shameful silence was seen most recently during the visit of An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, and Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Richard Bruton, to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. It was also clearly displayed during the visit of the Chinese President (then Vice-President) Xi Jinping to Ireland in 2012.

(d) The relegation of human rights to a small and overworked group of officials in the Human Rights Unit of the Department. This small, dedicated group, whose resources have been reduced in recent years, has to take the lead in a number of international fora including the UN Human Rights Council and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The Unit also works hard to engage with human rights NGOs in Ireland including organising the annual Human Rights Forum and the NGO Standing Committee on Human Rights. With many other responsibilities it leaves little opportunity for the unit to engage in “advocacy of human rights around the globe”.

The above concerns lead us to conclude that there is an urgent need to act to keep human rights central to Irish foreign policy.

Church in Chains proposes that the following steps be taken:

1. The Director of the Human Rights Unit to be given a more prominent role within the Department and to be included in all discussions on the development of Ireland's foreign policy including this Review.
2. Each of Ireland's embassies to be tasked with producing a short annual report about human rights in their host country or region. These reports to be collated and published annually by the Human Rights Unit.
3. A clear briefing on human rights issues to be given to government ministers in advance of visits to countries where there are grave violations of human rights (and in advance of visits to Ireland of government ministers from such countries). These briefings to be simultaneously published on the Department's website.
4. A more prominent position for human rights on the DFAT website.
5. Additional staffing and resources to be given to the Human Rights Unit so that Ireland can continue to engage effectively in "advocacy of human rights around the world".

2. Protection of religious freedom around the world should become a key priority of Ireland's foreign policy

Ireland has historically played a role in defending religious freedom around the world but this has never been translated into continued, determined action to advocate effectively on behalf of millions of people around the world whose rights to freedom of religion or belief are routinely ignored, denied, suppressed and violated.

In recent years, Ireland has restricted its advocacy of religious freedom to its involvement in international fora such as the UNHRC or the OSCE. When egregious violations are brought to the notice of the Irish Government by NGOs such as Church in Chains, the Government frequently responds by stating that Ireland acts in concert with our EU partners on such issues.

However, Ireland's membership of the EU should not preclude it from taking a lead in advocacy of religious freedom. Many other EU member states take independent action in this area – in addition to their EU involvement.

If Ireland's foreign policy is to truly reflect Ireland's values, defence of religious freedom should become a key priority. Ireland's history contains painful episodes when religious freedom was denied to its people e.g. Penal Laws. Thankfully, such episodes are in the past and Ireland is now one of the freest countries in the world in terms of freedom of religion or belief (FORB). This freedom is enjoyed by adherents of a wide diversity of religions in an inclusive society where respect and tolerance (including for those who profess no religious faith) is widespread.

A comparatively large percentage of Irish people (in Western European terms) practise their religion regularly and would desire that the same respect and tolerance and freedom that they enjoy be experienced worldwide.

Church in Chains is concerned that the values represented by this large segment of the Irish people is not currently adequately reflected in Ireland's foreign policy. In recent years, priority has been given to other worthy human rights causes but, it seems, little attention has been given to promoting religious freedom.

Ireland did play a role in the preparation of the EU's Guidelines on FORB which were adopted during Ireland's presidency of the EU (in June 2013). However, while Minister Gilmore stated that freedom of religion or belief would be one of Ireland's priority issues on the UN Human Rights Council, the only evidence of action on this issue was Ireland's co-sponsorship of a thematic resolution on Freedom of Religion or Belief in March 2013.

In the past three years, there has been an increasing international awakening to violation of freedom of religion – especially in the wake of the Arab Spring. The persecution of Christians, particularly in the Middle East, has been highlighted by many international figures – such as Pope Francis and Britain's Prince Charles – but this issue has not generated any significant public response from Ireland, which has greatly disappointed Church in Chains and other concerned groups. This concern was reflected in a recent editorial in the *Irish Catholic* newspaper, which concluded by asking, "Who will speak up for persecuted Christians?"

While Church in Chains' primary focus is on persecuted Christians, we advocate strongly for religious freedom for all and recognise that all religious communities could point to examples where followers of their beliefs suffer discrimination and other violations of religious freedom.

Church in Chains proposes that the following steps be taken:

1. Freedom of Religion or Belief to be explicitly mentioned as a key human rights priority in the new Foreign Policy document.
2. A meeting to be held between the Minister, Department officials (including the Director of the Human Rights Unit), NGOs and experts working in the field of religious freedom and Irish religious leaders to identify the main areas (countries/issues) of concern.
3. A realistic action plan to be drawn up by Department officials for Ireland to implement. Suggested actions could involve:
 - (a) A major speech on the topic by Minister Gilmore, who has stated that freedom of religion or belief would be one of Ireland's priority issues on the UN Human Rights Council.
 - (b) Ireland's embassies to be tasked with producing a short annual review about religious freedom and related human rights in their host country or region. These reviews should be published annually by the Human Rights Unit (as part of a report on human rights proposed under Section 1.2 of this submission).

3. (c) Working with NGOs and independent experts to deliver FORB training to Department officials and FORB briefing to newly-appointed ambassadors and other key DFAT officials.

(d) Press releases on the occasion of incidents of grave violations of religious freedom.

(e) The identification of issues to be raised at EU level.

4. The inclusion of a FORB section under the Human Rights section of the DFAT website – to include content such as the EU FORB Guidelines; press releases etc.

5. One official in the Human Rights Unit to be dedicated (part or full-time) to FORB. This would provide continuity in policy implementation and the build-up of expertise in the area. At the very least, one official could be tasked with liaising with Irish NGOs and experts working in the field of religious freedom to identify important issues.

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