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## **CSW Welcomes New European Union Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the decision on June 24 by European Union (EU) Foreign Ministers in Brussels to adopt Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, a commitment that was made in the EU Human Rights Strategy one year ago.

As the 10th set of EU human rights guidelines, the document outlines priority areas and operational tools for the promotion of religious freedom, with the aim of equipping the EU to support individuals and communities who face infringements to this right, addressing violations when they occur and preventing future incidents. As the guidelines are public, they can also serve as a tool for third parties to hold the EU to account on its own commitments.

During the Swedish EU Presidency in 2009, the EU adopted its first Council conclusions on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which were followed by Conclusions in 2011 as a response to violent incidents on religious grounds in the Middle East and Africa. Following the Arab Uprisings, questions of religion or belief in authoritarian regimes, fragile states and societies in transition came to the fore with an explicit need for the EU to develop policy on how to respond to these complex issues and developments.

In adopting the Guidelines, the EU acknowledges that religious freedom violations, committed by state and non-state actors alike, are widespread and complex, affecting societies and individuals everywhere, including in Europe. It also clarifies the EU's own position towards religion or belief, not aligning itself with any specific view or conviction, but upholding the right of the individual to choose, change, adopt, or abandon a conviction according to one's conscience.

CSW's Senior Advocate at the EU Sofia Lemmetyinen said, "CSW welcomes the EU's important contribution to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Religious freedom is neither about excluding religion or belief from our societies, nor about promoting any particular belief, but ultimately about creating an environment conducive to the development of democratic, peaceful and pluralist societies, where individuals are allowed to think, seek, doubt,

and believe freely, and where they can manifest their inner convictions alone or in community with others. We hope the EU will continue to repeat this message and live up to this promise both within its borders and in its global partnerships.”