

Speech by Deepak Obhrai, MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs
Bill M-382, Religious Freedom
April 22, 2013

Mr. Speaker,

It is my pleasure to rise today to support my colleague, the Member from Lambton—Kent—Middlesex. This is an issue of great importance to me, both in my role as a Member of Parliament and as Parliamentary Secretary, so I am very pleased to be able to take a few minutes to discuss this motion - which speaks to the question of human rights, and to Canada's uniquely placed role in standing up for those who are persecuted based on their religious belief.

It is clear, Mr. Speaker, that our government has been incredibly vocal on the issue of freedom of religion or belief around the world. We have made it a key objective of our foreign policy to protect and promote this universal right. As the Prime Minister has said - "there is a crucial and historical link between respect for religious pluralism and the development of democracy itself."

To this end, our government has spoken out consistently and we have spoken out emphatically.

During the most recent UN General Assembly, the Minister of Foreign Affairs co-sponsored a High-Level Side Event entitled "Freedom of Religion or Belief: An Individual's Choice".

This past December, through our High Commission in London, Canada co-hosted the third meeting of the Istanbul Process with the UK and Wilton Park which examined best practices in domestic implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 on "Combating Intolerance and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief for All Through Inter-Religious Cooperation".

And, we are proud to have been a co-sponsor of an EU-led United Nations Human Rights Council and United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the elimination of religious intolerance.

Mr. Speaker, the repression of religious freedom is widespread, and it is increasing.

We are deeply concerned about the situation in various parts of the world where individuals, including Ahmadis, Baha'is, Chaldeans, Christians, Copts, Falun Gong practitioners, Jews, Muslim Rohingyas, Sufis, and Zoroastrians - among others - experience difficulty in their ability to worship and practice their faith in peace.

We strongly condemn all attacks on places of worship, whether at temples, synagogues, shrines, mosques, gurdwaras, or churches. Canada cannot, and will not, condone such cowardly acts. It is of utmost importance that every individual is able to practice their faith in safety and security.

Our advocacy on the issue of religious freedom has been steady and on-going. Mr. Speaker, as others have already mentioned, we have established the Office of Religious Freedom within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Under the leadership of Dr. Andrew Bennett as Canada's first Ambassador of Religious Freedom, the Office will promote freedom of religion or belief as a core human right; it will encourage protection of religious minorities; and it will promote Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance around the world.

The Office will advance policies and programs that protect and promote freedom of religion and belief, and it will focus on advocating for Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance abroad. In other words, it will reflect the very best of Canadian society, and it will show the world that we are determined to work for the day when everyone enjoys the rights and privileges that come with living in a free and democratic society.

In addition to creating the Office of Religious Freedom, our government will also continue to stand by those who strive to make a difference in the world. It is why we established the John Diefenbaker Defender of Human Rights and Freedom Award, to recognize individuals who show exceptional leadership in defending human rights and freedom. As you may know, that Award was bestowed last year

on Shab haz Bhatti, a tireless defender of religious minorities in his homeland of Pakistan. Tragically, Mr. Bhatti paid the ultimate price for his dedication and courage. But his life should serve as an example that, despite the risks, we must defend the rights of the afflicted and give voice to the voiceless.

Mr. Speaker, the world needs to hear that voice – today more than ever.

Time and time again, Canada has spoken out against discrimination and violations of freedom, including freedom of religion. We will continue to stand for what is right, not what is easy, and to defend the principle of freedom of religion and conscience, both in Canada and around the world.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss this motion, which I am proud to support.

Thank you.