

When a religious freedom problem arises...

PROVIDED BY EEA STAFF TO EEA MEMBERS AND NETWORKS

IMAGINE

Imagine Christians in your nation are arrested by the authorities. Or your nation's government declares it will introduce a new law which will drastically curtail religious freedom. Your phone starts ringing. People expect the Evangelical Alliance to be able to sort the situation. What are you going to do? This simple guide can help you respond well and get the support you need.

Obviously the most important thing is to pray and keep praying. But there are also many actions you can try. And there are many people who may be able to help you with prayer, advice or advocacy. These include other National Evangelical Alliances, the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) Socio-Political team and World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Geneva team, religious freedom specialists and friendly politicians and journalists.

There are various levels to consider. This paper lists them and shows how they are all important and play their part.

Your first reaction may be to ask for prayer and initial advice from EEA. See Step 4 below explaining what EEA can do but also what is essential to make this possible. One thing is for sure: you will always be asked to gather and check all the facts and consider what response is appropriate.

STEP 1: GATHER AND CHECK ALL THE FACTS

Take enough time to be sure. In the confusion or emotion of a situation, even trusted friends can convey details which are not totally accurate, do not make sense, or they pass on information they have heard from others but have not checked themselves. Try to be a neutral investigator. Consider the 6 W's: What, When, Where, Who, Why, Which source.

- Be open minded as you investigate. Christians can bring about trouble upon themselves because they act unwisely. They may still need assistance, but your approach will be different
- What exactly has happened / is being planned?
- When? Where? Involving who? Is the incident part of a pattern?
- What is or could be the impact? Are there other faiths or groups that are affected by the incident or draft law?
- What are the reasons and motivations for the action? Why is it happening now? Are there background issues (e.g. historical and/or political) that you need to consider, which may not be immediately related to the problem but are actually very relevant?
- (Where relevant) What is the expected (judicial or parliamentary) procedure and timeframe?
- What do other information sources say about all of this? Check out different points of view to try to ensure that information is accurate. Get copies of relevant written texts.
- What other actors are (already) involved? Who is saying what about the developments? Who might be an ally for you?
- Which are/could be the sources providing you the information?

If you think you might need help from friends abroad, start translating key documents.

STEP 2: WORK OUT THE RESPONSE STRATEGY

It is always wise to

- Ask people to pray.
- Provide advice and practical and spiritual support to any individuals or churches involved.
- Talk with others, including lawyers and religious freedom experts, to work out the wisest response. Consider contacting the EEA socio-political team for advice or contacts.
- Monitor the situation and gather more information.
- Take time to work out what is the most strategic response for the immediate problem but also for the wider situation. You must discern what kind of response is appropriate - small scale, quiet, larger or more public.
- Consider whether international support would help or make matters worse. Is there a particular country or institution your government is more likely to listen to?
- Choose the right spokespeople for the audiences you need to influence and to liaise with any partners, including international friends. Consider working in collaboration with allies (including non-Christians).
- Consider what human rights law protects you, including the [European Convention on Human Rights](#)

STEP 3: INFLUENCING THOSE WHO HAVE THE POWER TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION

Influencing needs careful preparation of irrefutable evidence and persuasive arguments, with the appropriate language and people involved. Also, bear in mind any relevant dates regarding what is coming next. Sometimes it is impossible to be absolutely sure of the facts. Where there is any doubt, be honest about it and consider language like “It appears that...” so that you never exaggerate.

Normally start with quiet influencing. But, if this fails and you discern that it is right to go further, public campaigning can involve peaceful demonstrations, petitions, letter writing, social and mass media, legal challenge and, lastly, pressure from friends abroad. Be careful in selecting the right means of communication. Not all publicity is good publicity.

STEP 4: GETTING HELP FROM INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS

Support from international friends is **only** possible when there are clear communication channels. Therefore, it is essential that

- The local Christians organise themselves so that there is, ideally, a taskforce that coordinates efforts and one person with whom EEA communicates. This spokesperson will keep EEA informed of developments (or saying “no change”) and can respond swiftly to requests from NGOs, governments & journalists.
- Detailed information is provided. See the questions in Step 2. Please also provide relevant legal documents. We understand that providing information, including translations, is time consuming. It can also be difficult when the situation is developing all the time. However, it is impossible for partners to ask, for example, another government to make official representation to your government when the facts are not accurate and sure. They simply will not help. Or, if they do but feel embarrassed because they do not have all the relevant information, they will never listen to a future request to help again.

- Updates are sent regularly. Without these, your government can say, “Don’t worry. We listened. We have intervened to sort the problem.” Allies would not be able to refute this comment.

Support from international friends is possible. This is what EEA and WEA can do. They will only act with permission of the National Evangelical Alliance as the NEA is the local expert

- EEA’s socio-political team can give advice. Where time permits, EEA will give more support to local Evangelical Alliances who feel unable to do much campaigning themselves.
- EEA can issue a call to prayer to its members and the Christian media.
- EEA may be able to get involved in advocacy, including at the European Union institutions or the Council of Europe.
- EEA may be able to activate other National EAs and religious freedom specialists to campaign for you or give advice. We are in good relationship with many specialists.
- The World Evangelical Alliance’s Geneva office can work with you to contact the office of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and/or to prepare and present a public report commenting your nation’s religious freedom record when your nation’s turn for its “Universal Periodic Review” comes up (every 4.5 years).

WHEN A RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROBLEM ARISES...

...It can be tempting to rush to act or just to ask for help but not actually make it possible for this assistance to be given. We hope that this simple guide will help you respond effectively and receive appropriate support from EEA and other partners.

If you wish to know more or ask for advice, please do get in touch.

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