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Agenda Item 2:

Legal framework and key concepts

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Madam Chair, distinguished delegates, we need to consider the multi-faceted nature of the human rights of religious minorities. Immediately relevant are non-discrimination and equality, other minority rights standards and the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The right to acquire citizenship is also important. One need only look at the plight of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar to understand the crucial nature of this right.

Given that religious practice can be personal or in groups, both the right to privacy and the right to freedom of association are vital to religious minorities. And the right to conversion is an integral part of the freedom of religion or belief. Thus, MRG would urge the Forum to take a truly comprehensive approach when affirming the relevant human rights standards.

Madam Chair, paragraph 21 of the draft recommendations states that governments must review legislation that has a direct or indirect discriminatory impact on religious minorities. I wish to highlight certain cases that are of particular concern to MRG:

Across Central Asia, religion laws have put into place registration requirements that are extremely bureaucratic and complex; alleged infringements can lead to fines and imprisonment.

Thus, governments should review the discriminatory impact of official procedures. We would suggest that the draft recommendation already mentioned be amended to reflect this.

In Pakistan, the notorious anti-blasphemy legislation remains in place, despite the fact that unfounded allegations made by private citizens regularly lead to

harassment, arrest and imprisonment of innocent people, including members of religious minorities, such as Christians and Ahmadis. The laws continue to allow for the death penalty. Those found innocent remain at risk of mob violence.

France and Belgium have instituted bans on the wearing of full-face veils, leading to fines. These have been followed by similar local initiatives. These bans raise questions regarding the freedom of religion or belief of Muslim minority women. They risk forcing women to stay away from public places, and contribute to a further stigmatisation of Muslim minorities across Europe.

The particular needs of religious minority women lead MRG to suggest that the very welcome draft recommendations can be strengthened by specific inclusion of women throughout, especially *inter alia* paragraphs 25 – 27, 31 and 51.

Finally, states must consider what signals are sent to the broader population. Even if their legislation contains non-discrimination provisions, laws such as those mentioned send a message to majorities that religious minorities can be treated differently and may be fair game for harassment and discrimination.