



Report on the Side Event Religious Persecution and Refugee Protection: Response to the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief's Report

On October 22nd, 2025 the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the Refugee Highway Partnership (RHP) convened a hybrid side event on Religious Persecution and Refugee Protection at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York. The event, in support of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief's report, brought together faith leaders, NGO representatives, diplomats, and UN advisors.

The event began with an introduction from Karen Chong, partnerships coordinator with the WEA New York office to the UN. Gordon Showell-Rogers, Global Leadership Team Facilitator with the RHP, then framed the testimonies that followed as demonstrating why reforms to asylum and migration policies are matters of life, safety, and dignity. Five video testimonies, recorded specifically for this event and provided by Philoi Global, revealed the compounded dangers facing Christian asylum seekers.

Sami* spoke about the double persecution he and his family face being both Rohingya and Christian. Rendered stateless by the Rakhine state in Myanmar and targeted for being Rohingya, he and his family narrowly escaped Myanmar. Now, Sami and his family are vulnerable to persecution due to their ethnicity, their legal statelessness, and because of their religion as fellow community members target them because of their Christian faith. Despite being UNHCR-registered refugees, Sami and his family have no access to safety or hope for their resettlement.

Jasmine,* a young Christian Iranian woman spoke on the difficulties of accessing education as a refugee and the compounding vulnerabilities she experiences. Years have now passed since she and her family first fled Iran and she has spent years of her childhood growing up in limbo. Her testimony acutely highlighted the pain of protracted displacement: "refugeehood is not a choice. We are refugees, people with dreams, faith, and aspirations who have been forced to leave our homes. We are not just seeking refuge but wanting to actively participate in a safe, healthy, and humane society."

Lena*, an Iranian Christian woman who suffered great persecution, torture, and imprisonment before fleeing, shared boldly how: "the love of Jesus is deeply rooted in the heart of many Iranians, and we boldly share Christianity with people despite the risk or threats." Even after

fleeing Iran, Lena shared how life in their host country is difficult and “conditions are unspeakable” where they are deprived of access to medical care and access to employment.

Nara*, a young Christian Afghan woman who fled Afghanistan with her younger brothers after the rest of her family was taken in by the Taliban shared how they “are the forgotten ones.” Four years after fleeing Afghanistan, she and her brothers are far from safety as they live in fear of deportation.

And finally, Ameela*, another Afghan Christian woman expressed her fears of living in a host country that is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and has been involved in forcibly deporting Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan.

For all five, their lives remain in limbo with overwhelming concern of deportation back to the countries they fled. Despite UNHCR registration, they have no access to adequate protection—they live in fear of returning to their home countries where severe persecution and potentially death sentences await, their experiences layered with intersecting vulnerabilities.

Following their powerful testimonies, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ms. Nazila Ghanea emphasized how violations of freedom of religion or belief intersect deeply with violations of other human rights. For people on the move— asylum seekers, refugees, the stateless—these rights are systematically overlooked.

Three critical themes emerged from the testimonies and address:

First, the overlapping vulnerabilities religious minorities face while fleeing—their persecution doesn't end when they escape; it often follows them into host countries.

Second, the fear of *refoulement* to home countries where severe persecution or death awaits. Particularly as host countries (signatories and non-signatories to the Refugee Convention alike) violate the principle of non-refoulement when they deport people at risk of religious persecution.

Third, resettlement is often nonviable. Less than 1% of refugees ever get resettled while refugees wait sometimes for longer than a decade to receive an answer on their resettlement cases.

Following Ms. Nazila Ghanea's address, Jude Simion who serves on the global leadership team of the RHP and Executive Director of Philoi Global, highlighted the overlapping vulnerabilities Christians and other religious minorities face in seeking asylum as host countries increasingly implement hostile, rights-violating policies to deter refugees. “Their suffering is not only the result of displacement, but also systematically rooted ethnic and religious ideologies in their host countries.”

The event concluded with three urgent recommendations echoing the Special Rapporteur's report:

1. Strengthen legal safeguards against refoulement for those facing religious persecution
2. Build more transparent and fair refugee status determination processes that are sensitive to religious minorities, particularly where managed by host governments
3. Enhance dialogue between UN member states, UNHCR, UN human rights mechanisms, and faith-based organizations to ensure asylum protections are robust and responsive

The event achieved its core objective: connecting the lived realities of Christian asylum seekers with UN human rights mechanisms and establishing meaningful dialogue between member states, civil society, and faith-based organizations.

With 25 in-person attendees and 35 virtual participants—including diplomats, faith leaders, and NGO representatives—the gathering demonstrated significant cross-sector engagement. Ms. Nazila Ghanea's presence and extended engagement with attendees during the Q&A and networking session underscored the importance of sustained dialogue. Critically, holding the event prior to the Special Rapporteur's formal presentation to the Third Committee later that week signaled a collaborative commitment to centering the voices of those most affected in UN policy discussions.

As a partnership between the WEA and RHP, the event demonstrated the power of collective faith-based advocacy on behalf of those without access to decision-making spaces. In an era of increasingly hostile environments for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, this event prioritized their stories and lived experiences as the foundation for policy recommendations. The testimonies and recommendations now serve as both catalyst and roadmap, equipping advocates to champion protection reforms in spaces where gaps can be closed and ensuring that the voices of Sami* , Jasmine* , Lena* , Nara* , and Ameela* continue to shape advocacy efforts ahead.

The event was hosted with the in-person support of Karen Chong and Johanna Chen from the WEA (with the New York office and Geneva office to the UN respectively); Gordon Showell-Rogers and Chris McQueen (with the RHP); and supported virtually with the help of Janet Epp Buckingham director of the WEA Geneva office to the UN and Richard Kirenga with the WEA New York office; and Jude Simion (with the RHP and Philoi Global). The event was made possible due to the generous donations from Philoi Global and private donors.

*Names changed for security reasons, but their testimonies are all true.