



Foreign &  
Commonwealth  
Office

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08 January 2016

Dear Corin

**FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF: 1209-15**

Thank you for your email of 7 December 2015 asking for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000. You asked for:

*electronic copies of the following:*

*\*Minutes of the first meeting (June 15, 2015) of the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICGFRB)*

*\*Any reports and/or memoranda about the ICGFRB written from June 1, 2015 to July 1, 2015.*

I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information which you requested.

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does hold information relevant to your request.

Please find attached the information that the FCO can release to you. Some of the information has been withheld using section 27 – international relations. Section 27 is a qualified exemption and is subject to a public interest test.

Section 27(1)(a) of the FOIA recognises the need to protect information that would be likely to prejudice relations between the United Kingdom and other states if it was disclosed. In this case, the release of information relating to third parties could harm our relations with Canada and other members of the International Contact Group.

The application of s.27(1)(a) requires us to consider the public interest test arguments in favour of releasing and withholding the information. We acknowledge that releasing information on this issue would increase public knowledge about our relations with the government of Canada and the other countries involved in the International Contact Group. However, s.27 (1) (a) recognises that the effective conduct of international relations depends upon maintaining trust and confidence between governments. If the United Kingdom does not maintain this trust and confidence, its ability to protect and promote UK interests through international relations will be hampered, which will not be in the public interest. The disclosure of information detailing the internal discussions of this group could potentially damage the bilateral relationship between the UK and Canada, and the other countries that are members of this group. This would reduce the UK government's ability to protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief through the International Contact Group, which would not be in the public interest. For these reasons we consider that, the public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing it.

Once an FOI request is answered, it is considered to be in the public domain. To promote transparency, we may now publish the response and any material released on [gov.uk](http://gov.uk) in the [FOI releases](#) section. All personal information in the letter will be removed before publishing.

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I hope you are satisfied with this reply. However, if you wish to make a complaint or if you would like a review of our decision, please write to the FOI and DPA Team, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Room K4.14, King Charles Street, London, SW1A 2AH. E-mail: [foi-dpa.imd@fco.gov.uk](mailto:foi-dpa.imd@fco.gov.uk). You have 40 working days to do so from the date of this letter.

If you are not content with the outcome of your complaint, you may then apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the Information Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the complaints procedure provided by the FCO. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliff House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF.

Yours sincerely,

Human Rights & Democracy Department



We keep and use information in line with the Data Protection Act 1998. We may release this personal information to other UK government departments and public authorities.

### **Canada launches International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICG)**

On 15 June 2015, Canada launched the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICG), bringing together a diverse, cross-regional group of 22 countries as well as [REDACTED] to promote and defend religious freedom around the world. The inaugural meeting marked the successful culmination of more than a year of work by Canada's Office of Religious Freedom. The launch followed a first contact meeting held in London last June 2014, where the concept of the creation of a Contact Group on religious freedom was discussed for the first time, and a preparatory meeting held last October at the Canadian Permanent Mission to the United Nations, on the margins of the Third Committee meetings at the United Nations in New York. By mobilizing a diverse group of countries committed to religious freedom outside of their traditional blocs, and allowing for frank discussion and the pursuit of areas for action, the ICG will provide a useful outlet to address the growing global issue of religious persecution and intolerance beyond traditional multilateral fora.

The ICG was launched by the following 24 members listed alphabetically: [REDACTED]. Half of the country representatives were sent from their respective national capitals, many at senior level, and the other half were ambassadors or their representatives from diplomatic missions to the EU in Brussels.

Following introductory remarks, Canada's Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Andrew Bennett, emphasized the need to work with a diverse group of international partners to address current global challenges to this fundamental human right, as per the Universal Declaration of Human rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The main purpose of the meeting was to formally launch the Contact Group, on the basis of a Concept Note (attached) developed in advance of the meeting. Ambassador Bennett also emphasized the importance of having a broad membership in the Contact Group, reflecting a cross-section of geographical regions and religions of the world, a principle which Canada had insisted on from the beginning. Finally, participants were asked to provide the coordinates of an appropriate contact at their Foreign Ministries so that the Contact Group is able to share information and coordinate actions. The Concept Note was accepted by all participants after a discussion.

The remaining discussion focused on the operation of the ICG and possible areas for engagement and action. As an-example of joint action that ICG members could consider, Ambassador Bennett mentioned his recent visit to South-East Asia (Indonesia and Burma), during which he advocated, along with US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein, for the rights of the Rohingya Muslims and other minority faith communities. Ambassador Bennett closed the meeting by echoing many of the positive reactions he had heard about the creation of the Contact Group and its ability to mobilize its diverse member countries to promote and defend religious freedom. He reiterated the importance of reaching out to countries that are open and willing to take action to address violations of religious freedom in the world through coordinated policy, advocacy, and programming.

The inaugural meeting of the Contact Group led the initiative out of its conceptual phase and ensured buy-in from a broad and diverse group of countries. The flexible, informal, and non-consensus-based nature of the Contact Group should allow for innovative and effective action through the coordination of policy, programming and advocacy responses.