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Freedom of speech carries responsibilities for all

Events of recent weeks have highlighted the difficult question of what should be the legitimate scope of freedom of expression in culturally diverse societies.

While different societies have drawn the boundaries of free speech in different ways, the cartoon controversy shows how, in today's increasingly global media space, the impact of actions in one country can be felt way beyond its borders. Today, more than ever, societies are faced with the challenge of asserting universal human rights principles in an area where there has traditionally been a tendency to defer to the domestic laws of a particular state and the values they enshrine.

Set against the backdrop of the rising climate of intolerance and suspicion between religious and other communities in many parts of the world, including in Europe, two conflicting sets of principles are being advanced in this controversy.

Newspaper editors have justified the publication of cartoons that many Muslims have regarded as insulting, arguing that freedom of artistic expression and critique of opinions and beliefs are essential in a pluralist and democratic society. On the other hand, Muslims in numerous countries have found the cartoons to be deeply offensive to their religious beliefs and an abuse of freedom of speech. In a number of cases, protests against the cartoons have degenerated into acts of physical violence, while public statements by some protestors and community leaders have been seen as fanning the flames of hostility and violence.

The right to freedom of opinion and expression should be one of the cornerstones of any society. This right includes "the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19). For more than forty years, Amnesty International (AI) has defended this right against attempts by governments across the globe to stifle religious dissent, political opposition and artistic creativity.

However, the right to freedom of expression is not absolute -- neither for the creators of material nor their critics. It carries responsibilities and it may, therefore, be subject to restrictions in the name of safeguarding the rights of others. In particular, any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence cannot be considered legitimate exercise of freedom of expression. Under international standards, such "hate speech" should be prohibited by law.

AI calls on the government officials and those responsible for law enforcement and the administration of justice to be guided by these human rights principles in their handling of the current situation.

AI also calls on those working in the media to act with sensitivity and responsibility so as not to exacerbate the current situation. This incident highlights the power and reach of the media and AI calls on those in the

media to apply greater political judgement, taking into account the potential impact of their output and the range of often competing human rights considerations involved.

While AI recognises the right of anyone to peacefully express their opinion, including through peaceful protests, the use and threat of violence is unacceptable. Community leaders must do everything in their power to defuse the current atmosphere of hostility and violence. Culture and religion are of central importance to many people's lives, but they cannot be used as an excuse to abuse human rights.