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Belgium full face veil ban would breach international law

Amnesty International urges the Belgian Parliament not to pass a draft law which would prohibit the wearing of full face veils anywhere in public as the country's Chamber of Deputies prepares to vote on the issue on 22 April 2010.

"A general ban on the wearing of full face veils would violate the rights to freedom of expression and religion of those women who choose to express their identity or beliefs in this way," said Claudio Cordone, Amnesty International's Interim Secretary General.

"At the same time the Belgian authorities must make sure that all women who wear the full veil do so without coercion, harassment and discrimination."

Those who violate the law will be either fined between 15 and 25 Euro or imprisoned between one and seven days, or both. People wearing masks because of the nature of their work or because they take part in festivals are exempted.

Over the last few months there has been growing public debate in Europe on the wearing of full face veils, such as the burqa and the niqab, by Muslim women.

Yesterday, the French government announced that it would shortly be putting a similar draft law before Parliament.

International human rights law guarantees the right to freedom of expression and freedom to manifest their religion or beliefs; these freedoms extend to the way in which people choose to dress.

States must therefore not impose generally applicable requirements that women dress or do not dress in a certain way, and they must protect women from the imposition of such requirements by third parties, including families and communities.

"Women must not be compelled to wear a headscarf or veil, either by the state or by individuals; and it is wrong for them to be prohibited by law from wearing it," Claudio Cordone said.

"However, some clearly defined restrictions on the wearing of full face veils for the purposes of public safety will be legitimate. For example, it will be perfectly legitimate for women to be asked to lift their veils for identity checks."

Amnesty International does not believe that a general ban on the wearing of full face veils in public is necessary or proportionate for any legitimate objective.

See also:

Bans on full face veils would violate international human rights law