

Blasphemy resolution passes U.N. committee

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(RNS) A resolution combating the "vilification of religions" was adopted Tuesday (Nov. 23) by a United Nations committee, but religious freedom advocates who oppose the measure say support for it continues to diminish.

The resolution by Islamic countries is scheduled to be considered by the U.N. General Assembly in December.

The vote -- 76 yes, 64 no, and 42 abstentions -- received fewer affirmative votes than last year, said Freedom House, a human rights group that has worked against the resolution.

"We are disappointed that this pernicious resolution has passed yet again, despite strong evidence that legal measures to restrict speech are both ineffective and a direct violation of freedom of expression," said Paula Schriefer, director of advocacy at Freedom House.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent bipartisan panel, said the measure's diminished support shows some countries think the resolution can do more harm than good.

"Religious intolerance is best fought through efforts to encourage respect for every individual's human rights, not through national or

international anti-blasphemy laws," said USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo.

Days before its passage, the Organization of the Islamic Conference relabeled the resolution as condemning "vilification of religions" instead of "defamation of religions," but U.S. officials and advocates continued to oppose it.

"We are disappointed to see that despite our efforts and discussions on this resolution, the text once again seems to take us farther apart, rather than helping to bridge the historical divides," said John F. Sammis, an official of the U.S. Mission to the U.N., told the committee considering the resolution. "Most importantly, the resolution still seeks to curtail and penalize speech."