

Initiative citoyenne pour les droits des végétariens
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To: Professor Heiner Bielefeldt,
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
c/o Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations at Geneva
8-14 avenue de la Paix
CH-1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland

Subject:
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Dear Sir,

We are a group of individuals residing in France who choose not to eat meat in order to abstain from participating in the exploitation of animals. Through talking with other people who, like us, refuse to eat animals, *i.e.* vegetarians and vegans, we can conclude that those living in France who have made this same choice, regularly face unequal treatment and attitudes such as contempt, disregard and false accusations. We believe these to be acts of discrimination; a phenomenon for which we have coined the expression ‘vegephobia’, for the result is an exclusion and stigmatisation of vegetarian people. As the practice of a vegetarian lifestyle expresses – explicitly or implicitly – a stance concerning the ethical treatment of animals, we believe that vegephobia amounts to an attack on the freedom of belief of vegetarian people. We are writing to you, therefore, in order to bring this issue and several personal testimonials to your attention, in order to give you an insight on the treatment of vegetarian people living in France.

In France, vegephobia is prevalent both as an institutional policy and within society itself.

Vegephobia as an institutional policy

Institutional vegephobia appears in two main areas: health care and anti-”sect” campaigns.

Let us recall the position stated in the “Fact Sheet No. 31: The Right to Health”, published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the World Health Organization,¹ concerning the ‘three types of obligations’ of States:

[...] States should refrain from [...] censoring, withholding or intentionally misrepresenting health-related information [...].

The stance of the French public health authorities is reflected through the PNNS (Plan National Nutrition Santé – National Nutrition and Health Plan), which defines the government’s official ‘nutritional policy.’ A goal of this plan is to ‘make simple, clear and comprehensive information available’ to the general public, in particular via the website mangerbouger.fr a reference to which is legally mandatory on all advertisements for food products. Furthermore, the PNNS serves as a point of reference for professional medical bodies in the health service, as well as social and family services and for institutions serving food to the public (school canteens etc.). As appears from the attached documents, taken from mangerbouger.fr website, the French health authorities emphasize page after page the ‘need’ to consume meat and fish. The messages regarding vegetarian and vegan diets are as a whole very alarmist, outlining a risk of multiple nutritional deficiencies,² whilst providing practically no information on how such deficiencies might be avoided. This is in spite of the fact that the

¹ Section III B, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Factsheet31.pdf>. This interpretation of the right to health comes from General Comment No. 14 (2000): The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health, adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (<http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/%28Symbol%29/40d009901358b0e2c1256915005090be?Opendocument>).

² For example: ‘And veganism? [...] Be aware that this type of diet makes it very difficult to cover one’s needs in essential amino acids, iron, calcium and certain vitamins. To follow a vegan diet over the long term is to put one’s health at risk, particularly in the case of children.’ (Brochure titled “La santé vient en mangeant. Le guide alimentaire pour tous” – “Our Health Depends on What We Eat: The Food Guide for Everyone”, p. 94, <http://www.inpes.sante.fr/CFESBases/catalogue/pdf/581.pdf>).

international medical community³ and medical public authorities of other countries⁴ recognise that it is quite possible to receive adequate nutrition at any age without consuming any animal products.

French medical authorities necessarily know the opinions of the international medical community. By circulating false information as to the possibility of following a diet free from meat and more generally from all animal products, and by systematically refraining from providing the persons concerned with the medical information that could help them follow a diet in line with their beliefs without placing their health at risk, French authorities are in serious breach of the obligation stated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the World Health Organization to refrain from censoring, withholding or misrepresenting health-related information. The victims of this policy are not only the vegetarians, but also the freedom of thought, of speech and of debate of the entire French population on the issue of eating meat.

In the area of anti-sect campaigns, MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires – Inter-ministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Aberrations) regularly publishes documents which list the vegetarian diet among those practices which are likely to lead to ‘sectarian orientations,’ but without demonstrating the link between the two. The 2009 MIVILUDES report states that vegetarian diets are ‘nutritionally deficient, [...] do not easily provide a balanced diet and are dangerous, in particular for children,’ on the sole basis of the PNNS, which in turn do not appear to be based on any scientific evidence. Then we have the MIVILUDES 2010 brochure “Protecting Young People from Sectarian Orientations”, which states that ‘The fact that a minor is constrained, due to the ideological convictions of their parents, to adopt an inadequate diet excluding many varieties of food (cooked food, animal protein) may be evidence of a risk of a sectarian abuse.’

³ See in particular the position of the American Dietetic Association, according to which, ‘appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes.’ (<http://www.eatright.org/About/Content.aspx?id=8357>).

⁴ See for example the documents available on the site of the Italian Ministry of Health, in particular “Adulto e anziano” (http://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pagineAree_1000_listaFile_itemName_8_file.pdf) and “Gravidanza e allattamento” (http://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pagineAree_1000_listaFile_itemName_7_file.pdf).

Ms Asma Jahangir, UN Special Rapporteur from 2004 to 2010, presented a report on France in 2005 in which she observed the existence of ‘some areas of concern’ in the French anti-sect policy, and that ‘the policy and measures that have been adopted by the French authorities have provoked situations where the right to freedom of religion or belief of members of [certain religious groups or belief communities] has been unduly limited.’⁵ Her predecessor, Mr Abdelfattah Amor, stated that the role of the State must be to ensure that the activities of groups and individuals with different opinions comply with general laws, rather than to develop a specific policy against ‘sects’; and that such a policy suggests an attempt by the State to act as the guardian of people’s conscience and to censor certain opinions, and that this amounts to an attack on citizens’ freedom of conscience. In the case of vegetarianism, we have observed that the accusation of representing a sectarian practice has the effect of denying and stifling the expression of the real ethical and political beliefs of people who feel that eating animals is unjust.

Vegephobia within society

Vegephobia amongst the general population appears in privacy (within the family) and in communal environments (at the workplace, in recreational environments, etc.) in the form of mockery, aggression and the denial of vegetarians’ rights to eat properly and without having to renounce the convivial aspect of eating in common. While rarely creating incidents serious by themselves, these attitudes result in daily micro-aggressions that make it difficult to reject the consumption of meat and difficult to express the beliefs that found such a rejection.

Vegephobia within society and institutional vegephobia are intertwined, each founding and justifying the other. Social vegephobia finds its justification in institutional vegephobia, which founds the description of vegetarians as unhealthy people, both physically (deficiencies) and mentally (as members of sects). In return, it is only because vegephobia is so prevalent amongst the general public that authorities can get away with spreading so absurd information on the issue of vegetarianism on the level of health and on that of beliefs (the accusation of

⁵ « Civil and Political Rights, Including the Question of Religious Intolerance », report submitted by Asma Jahangir, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Addendum 2, Mission to France (18 to 29 September 2005).

sectarianism). Social vegephobia, therefore, finds its legitimacy in institutional vegephobia while at the same time serving as its alibi.

In order to indicate the context which favours, and perhaps in part explains, this institutional vegephobia, we wish to point out that France is one of the most hostile European countries towards animal welfare. The fact that in France the production of foie gras is encouraged and indeed seen as an object of national pride, while being banned in several countries of the European Union on account of the suffering it implies for force-fed animals, is a telling example.

The four complaints that we are hereby lodging bear witness to the existence of and harm caused by national vegephobia. You will note, in reading them, that vegetarians receiving hospital treatment in France have no choice but to consume a restricted diet. Others are summoned to take their children to a state doctor every month, despite the children being followed by other doctors and despite there being no particular pathology, and are obliged to put up with numerous derogatory remarks and jibes on the part of health service staff.

We are aware of many other such cases, which we are unfortunately unable to bring to your attention due to the fact that the majority of those discriminated against have simply accepted their situation, or in particular when the problem is linked to the workplace, are afraid of possible repercussions, and therefore refuse to give a written testimony.

In bringing to your attention the obstacles that vegetarians confront in their daily life, we hope to raise awareness of the fact that freedom of belief is mistreated in our country when it comes to dietary choices. In a judgment delivered on 7 December 2010, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Poland violated the right to religious freedom by refusing to provide vegetarian meals to a Buddhist detainee.⁶ The obstacles set by French authorities to the possibility of following a vegetarian or vegan diet – both in institutional catering at schools, hospitals, workplaces, etc. and in the circulation of incomplete and misleading information about the nutritional aspects of these diets – represent a massive violation of the freedom of conscience of persons wishing to adopt this way of eating.

⁶ Jakóbski v. Poland (ECHR, 4th sect., 7 December 2010, application no. 18429/06) (<http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?action=html&documentId=878023&portal=hbkm&source=externalbydocnumber&table=F69A27FD8FB86142BF01C1166DEA398649>).

We hope that you will examine the dossier that we have brought to your attention in detail and that this will lead you to contacting the French government in order to discuss the violations of the freedoms of a number of citizens residing in France. We also hope that you will put forward recommendations to the French government as to how these obstacles can be overcome.

Yours sincerely,

Cécile Bourgain

Sara Fergé

David Olivier

Agnese Pignataro

For the Initiative citoyenne pour les droits des végétariens