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PRESS RELEASE

Veil Bans Shroud Freedom of Expression

London 17.12.10: In a report released today, ARTICLE 19 finds general prohibitions on wearing full face veils - such as those adopted in France and Belgium - to be incompatible with states' human rights obligations on freedom of expression, freedom of religion, the right to non-discrimination and equal treatment.

In the report titled *Bans on the Full Face Veil and Human Rights*, ARTICLE 19 analyses national laws banning the public wearing of the Islamic veils from a freedom of expression perspective. The study was undertaken by ARTICLE 19's legal team to contribute to the current debate in a number of states in Europe and beyond on the prohibition of wearing the full face veil in public. The report argues that governments should review and repeal any existing laws banning the wearing of the full face veil or refrain from adopting such legislation.

"Debates relating to the introduction of bans on the wearing of full face veils in public need to be viewed within the context of broader regional and international debates on prohibitions or regulations of religious symbols, which are part of debates concerning the position of religion in the public sphere," says Dr Agnes Callamard, Executive Director ARTICLE 19.

Throughout 2010, national laws banning the public wearing of the Islamic veils were adopted, proposed and debated across a number of European states. A number of governments are seriously considering proposing concrete laws on the banning of the full face veil, including in the Netherlands and Italy. There has also been a parliamentary proposal in Spain and prominent politicians have called for a ban in Austria and Switzerland.

In Belgium, where only 0.09% of the Belgium population wears a full face veil, the lower house of the legislature moved to endorse a nationwide ban on the public wearing of full face veils in April 2010. In France, the Senate approved a legislation banning the wearing of full face veils in public places, on 14 September 2010.

"In France, where only 0.003% of the population wears a full face veil, the ban creates an impression around the world and, in particular, in majority Muslim states, that Europe is intolerant of its Muslim populations," continued Callamard.

The right to non-discrimination and equal treatment, particularly with respect to women, has been used both to justify and argue against the bans. On the one hand, the bans have been

justified on the basis that they protect the autonomy, dignity and rights of women, particularly those who would not like to wear the veil but who are pressurised or face violence if they refuse to do so. On the other hand, others argue that the introduction of prohibitions on the full face veil both infringe the rights of women and discriminate against Muslim women who choose to wear the full face veil.

ARTICLE 19 believes that EU Member States should ensure that national bans on the full face veil do not conflict with the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights, EU law on the prohibition of discrimination and the principle of equality between men and women.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information or to set up a media interviews with spokesperson, please contact ARTICLE 19 press office, communications@article19.org or call +44 207324 2510 or +44 (0) 7515 828 939.
- For the full report see: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/bans-on-the-full-face-veil-and-human-rights.pdf>
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.