



NEWS RELEASE

**From Baroness Sarah Ludford
Liberal Democrat MEP for London**

Sarah Ludford Mobile: +44 7711 553587
Zoe Mayne - London Office: +44 20 7288 2526
Email: sludfordmep@cix.co.uk
www.sarahludfordmep.org.uk

For immediate release, 18th February 2005

Contact Sarah Ludford MEP 44 (0)7711 553587 or Zoe Mayne 44 (0)20 7288 2526 / 07764 606314

London MEP calls for right to freedom of religious expression

London Liberal Democrat MEP Baroness Sarah Ludford, as part of a cross-party group of 5 MEPs, will table a 'Written Declaration' in the European Parliament on 21st February calling for respect for religious rights and freedoms in France and across the EU. They have worked with the Assembly for the Protection of Hijab (*Protect Hijab*) in developing the text.¹

The declaration calls for the right to wear the Muslim hijab, Sikh turban, Jewish skullcap and Christian cross in state establishments such as schools.

The MEPs believe a ban on demonstration of personal faith to be an infringement of human rights, in particular those guaranteed in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Sarah Ludford, European justice spokeswoman for the Liberal Democrats said:

"Blanket national bans like the French one instituted in the name of secularism may be well-intentioned, but they fail to acknowledge individual identity and the diversity of Europe's population. It would be unhelpful if similar action spread across the EU."

"The whole EU is debating how to promote integration, but as a Liberal Democrat I am clear that forced assimilation is not the answer. In a city as culturally and religiously diverse as London, this is a crucial issue."

"Schools should be left free to reach appropriate and flexible local solutions on uniform policy in consultation with students, parents and community groups. The ban on the wearing of the *jilbab*² at Luton's Denbigh High School (which allows the *hijab* and *shalwar kameez*) does not prevent other schools reaching a different conclusion.'

Abeer Pharaon coordinator of *Protect Hijab* said:

"We call on all MEPs to support the Written Declaration as a show of basic and fundamental freedoms and human rights. For the citizens of Europe this is a challenge for diversity and cultural integration in Europe. Let's lobby MEPs to sign in the next three months so the Declaration is adopted by the European Parliament.

Ends

Notes:

1. See www.prohijab.net
2. The *jilbab* is a long dress that leaves only the face and hands uncovered, whereas the *hijab* covers the head (and sometimes shoulders) only. The *shalwar kameez* is a long tunic worn over trousers.
3. A press conference to mark the launch of the declaration and a campaign to collect signatures will be held in the European Parliament in Strasbourg on February 23rd from 14.30 in the Press Briefing Room, LOW N -1 201.
4. A written declaration in the European Parliament is similar to an 'early day motion' at Westminster, a means for MEPs to make a political statement on a particular issue. To become a resolution debated in the Parliament, at least half of the MEPs must sign within 3 months, otherwise the Written Declaration lapses.
5. The text of the written declaration is attached.

0005/2005**Written declaration on religious rights and freedoms in France and throughout the European Union****The European Parliament,**

- having regard to Rule 116 of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas religious freedom is one of the most basic and most precious freedoms endorsed by the European Union,
 - B. alarmed at the rise of religiously motivated violence in many European countries, especially since 11 September 2001,
 - C. deeply concerned at France's ban on what it calls the display of 'conspicuous religious symbols' in schools,
 - D. believing this ban on the Christian cross, Jewish skullcap, Muslim hijab, and Sikh turban to be an infringement of human rights, in particular Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights,
 - E. considering that gender equality is a fundamental right, and reaffirming the rights of men and women to dress as they wish,
1. Calls on Member States specifically to allow within educational and other state establishments the outward expression in a private manner of individual faith;
 2. Urges the French Government to rethink its ban and investigate ways of improving the opportunities for religious as well as racial minorities to integrate more fully into French society, including through the combating of religious discrimination;
 3. Considers that a debate on this subject should be held in the European Parliament;

4. Instructs its President to forward this declaration, together with the names of the signatories, to the Commission, the Council and the governments of the Member States.