

5/1/2009: Rep. Chris Smith on USCIRF's 2009 Annual Report on Religious Freedom

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U.S. Commission Reports Global Violations of Religious Freedom

Smith: Recent acts by Obama Admin. undermine religious rights

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Congressman Chris Smith said that the annual report released today by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) shows that freedom of religion is increasingly violated in many countries all over the world, and that the State Department has not fully implemented legislation that makes promotion of religious freedom a core U.S. foreign policy goal.

Smith, a leader on human rights issues in Congress and senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who is also Ranking Member on two human rights commissions, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission) and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, said the report highlights the need to fight for basic human rights. USCIRF is a non-partisan federal agency whose Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

"Freedom of religion is under attack around the world, and the situation is getting worse," Smith said. "Hundreds of millions of people simply want to be left in peace to practice their faith as they see fit without fear of persecution, surveillance, or state-promoted prejudice. But ideologues and fanatics are entrenched in many governments and they are all too ready to crush people of faith, or people whose faith differs from their own."

Smith, who was a leader in promoting the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), landmark legislation that required the U.S. government to promote religious freedom as a core foreign policy goal, said the report shows the State Department has not adequately implemented the Act.

"The USCIRF reports that the State Department has not prioritized religious freedom as envisioned by IRFA," Smith said. "We have seen the Obama State Department abandoning religious freedom, or at best de-emphasizing it. The U.S. cannot turn away from its leadership on these issues. Human rights should be a top priority in U.S. foreign policy, but the early signs are that the new administration will downgrade it. In China, Secretary Clinton has already said that protection of the human rights of the Chinese people can't be allowed to interfere with other aspects of our diplomatic relationship."

The USCIRF 2009 Annual Report adds Nigeria to its list of "Countries of Particular Concern" and adds six new countries to its "Watch List" of nations responsible for committing egregious violations of religious freedom. Commissioners detailed abuse in 27 countries, many of which are at the top of the U.S. foreign policy agenda, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Korea, China, Cuba, Iran and Iraq.

Commissioners made recommendations to the Obama Administration, the U.S. State Department and members of Congress regarding ways in which U.S. policy can promote human rights and religious freedom in nations USCIRF identifies as the world's most severe religious rights abusers.

Cuba, a country that has repeatedly blocked Smith's requests for a visa to visit political prisoners, and has recently blocked a USCIRF visa request, remains on the list of Countries of Particular Concern. In Cuba, religious belief and practice are discouraged and tightly controlled. The report said the government has expanded efforts to silence critics of its religious freedom policies and crack down on religious leaders whose churches operate outside of the government-recognized umbrella organization. The government's main interaction with, and control over, religious denominations is through the regular surveillance, infiltration, and/or harassment of religious professionals and lay persons and administrative mechanisms. The government continues to hinder the ability of religious organizations to build new or repair existing houses of worship.

"In places like Cuba, North Korea, China, Sudan, Vietnam and dozens of other nations, innocent people are forced to suffer for practicing their faith," Smith said. "I encourage people everywhere and anywhere to read the report's assessment of all of the countries listed. We here in America who have enjoyed freedom of religion built as a pillar of our Constitution since our country's inception, will see how blessed we are to worship how we see fit."