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The following op-ed article appeared in The Hill publication July 16, 2012:

<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/238199-us-should-pressure-nations-to-rescind-anti-ahmadiyya-laws>

On June 27, along with members of Congress and other guests, I heard a message of peace and freedom from the Ahmadiyya world leader, His Holiness Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, at a Capitol Hill reception co-sponsored by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), of which I am chair, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

Founded in India in 1889, the Ahmadiyya is a peaceful, reformist movement claiming tens of millions of adherents worldwide. While its members oppose violence and support freedom for others, they often face severe violence and other violations of their own freedom.

In Pakistan, the constitution labels them “non-Muslims.” For more than a quarter century, Pakistan’s government has barred the community from calling its own worship centers “mosques,” publicly uttering the traditional Islamic greeting or quoting from the Qur’an, and displaying Islam’s basic affirmation.

Throughout Pakistan, Ahmadiyya are prohibited from sharing their faith with others or publishing or disseminating their own material. They are restricted from building houses of worship and holding public gatherings. And since they must register as non-Muslims to vote, Ahmadiyya who insist they are Muslims are effectively disenfranchised.

Coupled with Pakistan’s blasphemy laws which affect every faith community, these laws have helped foster a climate of violence against Ahmadiyya members. The terrible attack on two of their mosques in Lahore in May of 2010, killing nearly 100 people, was but one example.

Unfortunately, Pakistan isn’t the only country which violates freedom of religion for Ahmadiyya.

In Indonesia, since June 2008, the government has seriously limited Ahmadiyya activity to private worship and prohibited members from telling others about their faith. Since that time, at least 50 Ahmadiyya mosques have been vandalized and 36 mosques and meeting places shut down. In parts of East and West Java and elsewhere, extremist religious groups consider any Ahmadiyya activity “proselytizing” and pressure local officials to close places of worship or ban Ahmadiyya activity altogether.

In Saudi Arabia, Ahmadiyya members have been deported for their beliefs. In Egypt, they have been charged under its blasphemy laws. In 2010, USCIRF’s intervention helped a number of members leave Egypt for safety abroad.

The Ahmadiyya message includes a positive call for world harmony and liberty. It points beyond today’s sufferings to tomorrow’s hopes and possibilities.

Nonetheless, we who believe in peace and freedom must shine the spotlight on these sufferings.

So what can we do?

First, we must realize that the same societies that violate the religious freedom of Ahmadiyya abuse the rights of others. As USCIRF has documented, where Ahmadiyya suffer, Hindus and Christians, Sikhs and Baha’is, Shi’a and other Muslims, often are persecuted as well.

Second, in order to protect the rights of all, including the Ahmadiyya, we who are in Washington must make religious freedom a truly compelling foreign policy priority, woven into every aspect of our relationships with other countries.

Finally, the United States should confront governments which target the Ahmadiyya. It should urge Pakistan to amend its constitution and rescind all anti-Ahmadiyya laws. It should

encourage Indonesia to overturn its 2008 decree and all provincial bans against Ahmadiyya practice. It should press both governments to investigate acts of violence thoroughly and prosecute perpetrators vigorously. And until Pakistan is serious about reform, USCIRF believes that it qualifies as a “country of particular concern” as a severe religious freedom abuser.

The rights of people everywhere to think as they please, believe or not believe as they wish, peacefully practice their beliefs, and express them publicly without fear or intimidation are inviolable. We are proud to stand with the Ahmadiyya community and proclaim together that these and other freedoms are the birthright of humanity.

Katrina Lantos Swett is the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). This article is based on her remarks at the June 27, 2012 event she describes.

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