

## For Your Information

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Member states of the United Nations should ponder an alarming statistic: According to a just-released Pew Research Center study, 75 percent of people live in countries where a bedrock human right is endangered. Not all people enjoy the right to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience leads and live out their convictions openly and peacefully.

As members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, we can attest that a number of United Nations member countries often perpetrate or tolerate atrocious violations — including torture and murder — against the rights of their people to freedom of religion or belief.

In 1948, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by a 48-0 vote. The Declaration includes Article 18, which states the following:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, alone or in community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”

Ironically, some of today’s most brutal violators voted for the declaration when it was first proposed.

Iran is one of them. In addresses before the General Assembly, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has condemned other countries while ignoring his own hideous human rights and religious freedom record. Notwithstanding the recent release of Christian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, whom Iran had sentenced to death for apostasy, conditions have sunk to a level not seen since the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s reign. Mr. Ahmadinejad’s regime has ramped up the detainment, torture and execution of its citizens based on religion. It targets reformers among Iran’s Shi’a Muslim majority, as well as religious minorities, including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha’is and Christians, while its senior officials, including Mr. Ahmadinejad, promote Holocaust denial and other forms of hatred against Jews.

Another supporter of the 1948 declaration and religious freedom abuser is the world's most populous country, China.

China's government continues to persecute people for conducting religious activities it can't control or expressing religious ideas it doesn't like. Conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims remain especially dire. Falun Gong practitioners are jailed, tortured and subjected to inhuman psychiatric tests, and hundreds of Protestant and Catholic leaders are detained each year for refusing to join the state-approved church. Not content to persecute the faithful, China imprisons, tortures and denies legal licenses to human rights defenders who accept their cases.

A third example is Burma. Despite Burma's transition to civilian rule, its democratic reforms are threatened by appalling ethnic and sectarian violence. Burma continues to imprison Buddhist monks and fails to protect non-Buddhist minorities, from Chin Christians to Rohingya Muslims. One of the world's most persecuted groups, the Rohingya have recently endured arrests, rapes and mass displacements by mobs and security forces, leaving more than 700 dead and 80,000 homeless.

While the 1948 declaration isn't legally binding, it represents a concrete statement of principles, a clear standard for every nation. It's time that fellow member states hold flagrant violators accountable.

It's not just about individual freedom. Society's well-being is also at stake. Across the globe, religious freedom is tied to robust democracy, diminished violence and greater prosperity and stability. Nations that abuse religious liberty often are incubators of intolerance, extremism, poverty, insecurity, violence and repression.

In other words, standing for religious freedom is not just a legal or moral obligation, but a practical imperative.

It's time for members of the General Assembly to take this imperative to heart, embracing the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights.

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