

For Your Information

October 19, 2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which I chair, monitors violations of freedom of religion or belief around the world. Earlier this month, I had the privilege of giving the official U.S. statement on USCIRF's behalf at the religious freedom session of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, Poland. Sharing that task with Suzan Johnson Cook, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, I highlighted two issues of concern: obstacles faced by places of worship and continued restrictions on religious rites.

In a number of countries, the process of obtaining approval to construct places of worship is far from straightforward. Barriers to building houses of worship can be cloaked in debates over zoning, architecture, or historic preservation. While these considerations may appear on the surface to be neutral and objective, they can become vehicles for serious discrimination.

Worse still, buildings used for religious purposes can become the targets of physical assault, ranging from vandalism to demolition. Such incidents have taken place even in the established democracies of Western Europe.

In France and a number of neighboring countries, numerous mosques, churches, synagogues and other prayer spaces have been vandalized over the past several months.

Outside of Western Europe, authorities in Tajikistan over the past year have closed mosques and prayer houses of religious groups considered “nontraditional.” Last month, a Pentecostal church in Moscow was looted and destroyed in the middle of the night, reportedly by court order, while local authorities stood watch. The recent attempted arson of an Alevi house of worship in Turkey further underscores the problem. The United States and USCIRF consistently have encouraged Turkey’s government to pass needed reforms that would permit the re-opening of the Halki Seminary and send an unmistakable message of tolerance and inter-communal cooperation.

Clearly, governments must take the necessary steps to protect all religious buildings, as well as expand access to places of worship for every religious community.

At stake is the full freedom of worship, which is one aspect of the broader, fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief. This pivotal right includes the entire spectrum of religious practice, including life-cycle practices such as circumcision – about which there is growing

concern, given recent efforts in Europe to ban religious circumcision.

The German Bundestag set the right example for other countries in its recent and overwhelming vote in favor of the right of circumcision on religious grounds, thereby helping to ensure that this religious practice enjoys full legal protection.

Governments have a responsibility to protect religious freedom or belief in all of its aspects for all individuals. While they cannot prevent every act of intolerance, governments have a duty to address such acts as they occur.

As a core human right, religious freedom matters for billions of people. It's time for governments to protect it fully.

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