

TESTIMONY OF

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OF THE

HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

ON

THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS AS A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON

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I want to thank the Members of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations for holding this hearing today and inviting me to testify on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on *The Persecution of Christians as a Worldwide Phenomenon*. With your approval, I would like to submit my written testimony for the record.

Supporting Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is enshrined with other rights in international treaties and understandings, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Freedom of religion or belief also encompasses other freedoms, including expression, association, and assembly. As it often is the first right taken away, religious freedom serves as the proverbial canary in the coal mine, warning us that denial of other liberties almost surely will follow.

Supporting religious freedom abroad is not just a legal or moral duty, but a practical necessity that affects the security of the United States because it builds a foundation for progress and stability. Research confirms that religious freedom in countries that honor and protect this right is associated with vibrant political democracy, rising economic and social well-being, and diminished tension and violence. By contrast, nations that trample on religious freedom are more likely to be mired in poverty and insecurity, war and terror, and violent, radical extremism. Simply put, violations of religious freedom often lead to violent religious extremism. Unfortunately, all too many governments either perpetrate or tolerate religious freedom abuses.

The U.S. signaled its intent to strengthen its championing of religious freedom overseas with the passage in 1998 of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which created the commission on which I serve. IRFA mandated the promotion and protection of religious freedom around the world as a central element of American foreign policy. The Act was a response to the growing concern about religious persecution worldwide and the perception that religious freedom was an orphan human right on which the U.S. government was inadequately focused.

IRFA put into place several mechanisms to counter religious persecution abroad, including an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom within the Department of State and the bipartisan and independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The Ambassador-at-Large position at State is now vacant. USCIRF urges the Administration to offer a nomination speedily, as the President suggested he would in his remarks last week at the National Prayer Breakfast. And we urge Congress to take up the nomination equally fast. The Ambassador-at-Large is supposed to be the key official inside the U.S. government for coordinating and developing U.S. international religious freedom policy. However, according to a report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) dramatically reduced the rank of the Ambassador-at-Large. This reduction in rank constitutes a major change in the structure IRFA established and a thwarting of congressional intent. USCIRF also recommends that the Obama Administration fulfill IRFA's intent that the Ambassador-at-Large be a "principal adviser to the President and the

Secretary of State regarding matters affecting religious freedom abroad” by ensuring he or she has direct access to the President and the Secretary of State when it is truly needed

USCIRF repeatedly has raised the importance of annually designating “countries of particular concern” (CPCs). Unfortunately, neither Republican nor Democratic Administrations have fully utilized the CPC mechanism as the key foreign policy tool it was intended to be. Neither have designated CPCs in a timely manner nor issued specific Presidential actions based on these designations. For instance, the Obama Administration issued CPC designations only once during its first term, and while the Bush Administration issued several designations, it also allowed the annual designation process to fall off track. However, IRFA requires a CPC designation annually. Such designations enable the United States to raise concerns about systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom at the highest levels with foreign governments and seek improvements in human rights conditions.

USCIRF was created by IRFA as an entity separate and distinct from the State Department -- an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF bases its recommendations on the standards found in the UDHR and other international documents. USCIRF’s work is accomplished through the leadership of its Commissioners, who serve in a voluntary capacity without pay, and the engagement of its professional staff. Far from duplicating the work of the State Department and its Office of International Religious Freedom, USCIRF’s independence gives it a unique freedom to speak publicly about violations of this fundamental right and propose ways the United States can engage positively. To perform this function, USCIRF undertakes research and issues reports, works with Congress, engages with the Executive Branch, meets with high-ranking officials from foreign governments and international organizations, participates in U.S. delegations to international meetings, and helps provide training to Foreign Service Officers and other U.S. officials.

Overview

USCIRF undertakes these activities with the goal of helping promote international religious freedom as a foreign policy priority, as IRFA mandated. A key aspect of our work is to raise awareness of and make recommendations that would address egregious religious freedom violations. One such violation is the worldwide persecution of Christians.

I commend this subcommittee highlighting the gravity of this persecution. Because of your efforts and those of others both within government and beyond, millions of Americans are aware of the egregious mistreatment of individual Christians such as Pastor Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American citizen imprisoned in Iran. Pastor Abedini was sentenced to eight years in prison for daring to live out the full dimensions of his faith under a theocratic dictatorship which seeks monopoly status in the public square for its own beliefs. USCIRF has highlighted his case and continues to urge our government to press the Iranian government to release him immediately.

Unfortunately, the Iranian government’s mistreatment of Pastor Abedini reflects the stark and disturbing reality for many Christians seeking to live out their beliefs in country after country across the globe. There are more than two billion Christians in the world -- which is nearly one-

third of the world's population, and in one-third of all nations, containing 75 percent of the world's population, governments either perpetrate or permit serious violations of the religious freedom rights of their citizens. A recent report of a 6-year study from the Pew Research Center found that Christians were harassed in 151 countries, the largest number of any group surveyed, and in many of these countries the conditions for religious freedom are awful. In other words, given their large numbers and wide dispersion across countries, and given the poor status of religious freedom in many of these states, it is unfortunately no surprise that Christians so often fall victim to persecution.

In addition to these factors, there are other elements that explain not just the fact of Christians being persecuted, but the reasons for their persecution. To a disproportionate extent, Christians in many of these nations signify the "other." They often are members of ethnic or language minorities, or are viewed as linked to the West and Western interests. In many of these nations, Christianity also represents an alternative source of authority, thereby posing a direct threat both to tyrannical governments and extremist private actors.

In the case of governments, Christians and others find themselves in the crosshairs of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes on the one hand and theocracies on the other. Concerning the former, the problem is government's refusal to allow Christianity and other religions to operate freely, if at all, in the public square. Often, such governments allow religions to operate only at the price of a nearly complete surrender of autonomy-- the result being that religious organizations often become little more than appendages of the state. While those religious communities or sects that agree with this arrangement may be left alone, those that refuse often face severe persecution. China is an obvious example of this authoritarian model, while North Korea is an example of an even more draconian, totalitarian version.

In Russia, where the state favors Russian Orthodox Christianity, that status results from the government's decision that it is in its interest to promote Orthodoxy, and the Moscow Patriarchate in particular. In other words, the Kremlin sees religion as ultimately a creature of the state. As in Soviet days, the government views as problematic those forms of religion like Pentecostal Christianity that resist the state's efforts to co-opt it in any way.

Concerning theocracies, the problem is governments' allowing one, and only one, religious view to operate freely in public life. In Iran, for example, the dominant view is the regime's own interpretation of Shi'a Islam. As in the case of authoritarian or totalitarian governments, theocracies tolerate only those religious groups or communities which agree to their stringent rules and regulations, which effectively inhibit these groups' ability to act as truly independent entities.

In these countries, the governments typically have and enforce criminal laws to punish perceived religious offenses, particularly blasphemy. These laws often result in egregious human rights abuses against adherents of minority religions and non-conforming members of the favored religion. For example, Pakistan's criminal blasphemy laws include the death penalty for defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammad and life imprisonment for desecrating the Quran. Blasphemy allegations – which are often false and used to settle personal scores – result in lengthy detentions and violence, particularly against Christians and Ahmadis. Currently, USCIRF is aware of 17 individuals on death row in Pakistan on blasphemy convictions and 21 serving life sentences.

Countless others have been murdered in Pakistan in vigilante violence associated with blasphemy allegations. In Egypt, charges under the country's blasphemy provision have increased since the ouster of the Mubarak regime in 2011, particularly against Coptic Christians, but also against Muslim dissidents and atheists.

In practice, there is often little difference between how these two forms of dictatorship violate the religious freedom of Christians and others. In each case, the government's view, be it secular or religious, dominates the public square and excludes or limits dissenters' ability to communicate and practice their faith.

While in China and Iran governments are the prime persecutors of Christians, in a number of countries the problem is the presence of private individuals or groups who commit violence against Christians with impunity. In Pakistan and Iraq, the perpetrators are violent religious extremists who commit acts of terror against Christians and other religious minorities. In Nigeria these private groups and individuals are not limited to ideological actors, but include groups locked in longtime cycles of violence and retribution. In both instances, the common element is governments tolerating violence against Christians and other victims and failing to protect them and their religious freedom, and failing as well to end impunity and bring the perpetrators to justice.

In my testimony today, I will focus on countries and governments which, by perpetrating or allowing these abuses, continue to rank among the world's worst violators of the religious freedom and related human rights of Christians. I also will highlight prisoners of conscience who have been unjustly imprisoned for their Christian faith. These prisoners from the Defending Freedoms Project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission are profiled more fully in the Appendix -- which I also request be submitted for the record. They have been unjustly incarcerated in violation of fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international human rights instruments and standards. We must shine a light on these prisoners of conscience until they are free, and raise the issue of religious freedom until the countries that imprisoned them comply with the documents they have signed and protect this fundamental human right.

Before turning to a review of the worst perpetrators of violations of religious freedom, I would like again to thank this Committee for holding a hearing on this subject. The persecution of Christians around the world is a growing and searing affront to our consciences and beliefs in freedom of conscience. This examination of what is happening and what our government might do about it is timely and, in our view, of great significance. For Christians struggling around the world for the freedom to practice their faith, you are demonstrating a concern and solidarity that will lift their spirits—and, we hope, notify their governments of how much you care about this subject. Thank you.

The Persecution of Christians by Country

The countries in which Christians are persecuted span the globe and range from nations that many consider relatively stable and prosperous to those that are extremely poor and unstable. The persecutors are state or non-state actors, and in some cases, both. The countries highlighted in this testimony represent this range, and are countries that top USCIRF's agenda.

Burma

While much of the world focuses on notable political reforms in Burma, anti-Muslim activity -- especially the violence, discrimination and trafficking directed against the Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority -- ethnic minority Christians also face serious religious freedom abuses. These abuses reflect the presence of serious religious and ethnic tensions which threaten to undermine Burma's democratic progress.

Christian groups in ethnic minority regions, where low-intensity conflicts have gone on for decades, have faced particularly severe and ongoing abuses. During recent military incursions, ethnic minority Kachin faced restrictions on building places of worship, destructions of religious venues and artifacts, and prohibitions on religious ceremonies. As many as 60 Protestant churches were damaged by indiscriminate shelling during these incursions. Military forces have beaten and arrested religious leaders and kidnapped church members for forced labor. Military commanders in Kachin state issued edicts requiring religious groups to obtain permission one month in advance for reading the Bible, fasting, prayer, and saying the rosary.

The Chin Human Rights Organization continues to compile evidence that government officials encourage conversion to Buddhism through promises of economic assistance or denial of government services, although reportedly such incidents have decreased in recent years. Chin families who agree to convert to Buddhism were offered monetary and material incentives, as well as exemption from forced labor. Burmese Buddhist soldiers are also offered financial and career incentives to marry and convert Chin Christian women.

Burmese Christians living outside of conflict zones reported that conditions recently have improved, with more regular and open contact with the new government and the Religious Affairs Ministry. However, they continue to experience difficulty in obtaining permission to build new churches, hold public ceremonies or festivals, and import religious literature. In some areas around Rangoon, police restrict how often Burmese Christians can gather to worship or conduct religious training, despite a new law guaranteeing the right of assembly.

A government regulation promulgated in early 2008 bans religious meetings in unregistered venues, such as homes, hotels, or restaurants. It has not been strictly enforced in recent years. Limits on charitable and humanitarian activities have existed since 2009 and the government occasionally prohibits Protestants from proselytizing in some areas, particularly among rural Buddhist populations.

The best way the U.S. government can help Burmese Christians is by taking a leadership role to ensure Burma's full transition to democratic rule, holding it accountable for ending human rights violations and advancing religious freedom and the rule of law. The U.S. government should

target ethnic minority areas for political and economic development assistance and provide clear benchmarks for the Burmese government to meet or face re-imposition of some of the U.S sanctions already lifted. Such benchmarks should include: the unconditional release of all religious and political prisoners; an immediate nationwide ceasefire with religious and ethnic minorities; a durable citizenship solution for Rohingya Muslims; accountability for state or non-state actors who engage in violence against religious and ethnic minorities; the reform of laws limiting religious freedom and other human rights; an end to discriminatory policies that result in the closure of religious minority places of worship, inability to repair structures, and censorship of religious materials; and the holding of free and fair elections in 2015.

The U.S. government also should provide technical assistance to support Burmese civil society groups in organizing humanitarian aid, providing refugee protections, conducting human rights documentation efforts (particularly of religious freedom abuses faced by the Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist communities), and offering public advocacy, leadership, and legal training to Burmese in and outside of Burma. Finally, the United States should consider creating a pilot program as an Asian counterpart to the Supporting Eastern European Democracy (SEED) program. This program, Promoting Universal Rights and Rule of Law (PURRL), would support the development of nascent political parties and democratic institutions and render technical assistance to civilian government agencies, legal entities, courts, and the parliament to help support democracy and revise laws that restrict religious freedom, discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities, and limit the freedoms of expression and association.

Central African Republic

A political coup in the Central African Republic in March 2013 has led to a sectarian war and anarchy in this poor African nation. Following the coup, the Séléka, an alliance of largely Muslim fighters from at least four armed rebel groups in CAR's northeast and foreign fighters from Chad and Sudan, freely roamed the country, committing egregious human rights and religious freedom abuses. Séléka soldiers attacked priests, pastors, nuns, church buildings, and other Christian institutions. They targeted predominantly Christian neighborhoods, attacking churches, killing or raping Christian residents, and destroying and looting their properties while protecting Muslim residents and businesses.

In response to the Séléka attacks and fears that Séléka leader and former CAR interim president Michel Djotodia would turn CAR into an Islamic state, a number of self-defense militias known as the anti-balaka were formed in Christian areas in September 2013. The formation of the anti-balaka signaled that fighting in the CAR has devolved dramatically into a religious conflict. Religious tensions in the country have skyrocketed and cities and towns have segregated themselves along religious lines. Both the Séléka and the anti-balaka have engaged in severe human rights and religious freedom violations with routine Muslim-Christian fighting between the militias, as well as targeted killings of Christians and Muslims.

The Parliament's election on January 20th of Catherine Samba-Panza as interim president ten days after the resignation of Michel Djotodia could help end the violence, especially the sectarian strife, a recent phenomenon that most Muslim and Christian leaders find horrifying. Courageous religious leaders working tirelessly for reconciliation require the help of a more robust

international force that can stop the bloodshed. Such reconciliation must be based on respect for all religious communities and include an end to discrimination and the full establishment of rule of law and democratic governance. Once the fighting ceases, religious freedom must be upheld for all, Muslims and Christians alike. Séléka and anti-balaka perpetrators must answer for their crimes, and the government must move ahead toward new elections and a new constitution.

China

As the Chinese government uses its power to curb dissent and harass groups viewed as potential political challenges, religious freedom conditions remain acute. While conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims are worse now than at any time in the past decade, independent Catholic and Protestant groups face arrests, fines, and the shuttering of their places of worship in a government drive to contain their growth. Practitioners of Falun Gong, as well as those of other groups deemed “evil cults,” face long jail terms, forced renunciations of faith, and torture in detention, including reports of psychiatric experiments and organ harvesting.

Independent Protestants and Catholics continue to face persecution for refusing to affiliate with government-approved religious groups. Protestant “house church” groups that refuse to join the state-approved Protestant religious organization are deemed illegal and experience harassment, fines, detentions, and imprisonment. Approximately 900 Protestants were detained in the past year for conducting public worship activities. Seven Protestant leaders also were imprisoned for terms exceeding one year. The Chinese government issued a directive to “eradicate” unregistered Protestant churches over the next ten years, including through force. Police have embraced the plan, raiding meetings, seeking to break up large churches that previously operated openly, and detaining religious leaders.

The Chinese government continued to appoint Bishops without Vatican approval and place them in leadership positions, setting back Vatican-Beijing relations. Dozens of Catholic clergy, including three Bishops, remain in detention, in home confinement, under surveillance, or disappeared. Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin, the Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai, has been missing since he publicly announced his resignation from the state-approved Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) in June 2012.

Religious freedom is directly related to expanding the rule of law, developing civil society, aiding stability and trust-building in ethnic minority areas, expanding the freedom of expression, and bringing China firmly within the international system through assisted implementation of universal human rights obligations. Advancing religious freedom is in China’s domestic and international interests.

For China to take seriously U.S. interest in human rights and religious freedom, these concerns must be woven throughout the architecture of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship and not left only to a U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue. As part of designating China as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), marking it as among the world’s worst religious freedom violators, the U.S. State Department should impose appropriate sanctions specifically targeting officials who perpetrate religious freedom abuses or provinces where religious freedom conditions are most egregious, through travel bans, asset freezes, or other appropriate means. USCIRF also

recommends that the U.S. government raise religious freedom concerns in multilateral fora where the United States and China are members, and develop and distribute proven technologies to counter Internet censorship and protect Chinese activists from arrest and harassment.

Prisoner of Conscience Gao Zhisheng, whom Representative Frank Wolf has adopted as part of the Defending Freedoms Project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, is one of the most respected human rights lawyers in China who has defended religious minorities. He has been subjected to forced disappearance, torture, illegal house arrest and detention as a result of his work. He is currently imprisoned in Shaya county prison in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China, after being sent to prison in December 2011 for apparently violating the conditions of his suspended three-year sentence. Prior to this, his whereabouts had been unknown for almost 20 months. He has been repeatedly tortured since 2006, and continues to be at high risk of further abuse. This award-winning human rights lawyer has handled a number of high-profile human rights cases, including of Christians in Kashgar.

Other prisoners of conscience in China (who have yet to be adopted as part of the Defending Freedoms Project) include:

- Liu Xianbin, a long-time political dissident, organizer of the China Democracy Party and member of an “illegal” Protestant house church. On March 15, 2011, he was convicted of “inciting subversion of state power” and sentenced to a ten-year prison term, with deprivation of political rights for two years and four months.
- Alimujiang Yimiti, a Uighur Christian, began serving a fifteen-year prison term in 2008 for the crime of “leaking state secrets to foreigners.”
- Pastor Yang Rongli, who has been serving a seven-and-a-half-year prison term since 2009 for leading the 50,000-member Linfen Church in Shaanxi province.
- Bishop James Su Zhimin, who was arrested in 1996 for unregistered religious activity. He has not been heard from since, despite repeated international inquiries, though he was believed to have been seen in 2003 in a Baoding hospital. He served as an unregistered Bishop in the city of Baoding in the Chinese province of Hebei. Chinese religious authorities select Bishops over the authority of the Vatican, but Bishop Su recognized only the Catholic Church’s authority in this matter.

Egypt

Among the recent convulsions in Egypt, few shocked the conscience more or were more emblematic of the derailment of the January 2011 revolution than Egyptian security forces’ killing of more than 1,000 demonstrators in August 2013 and the subsequent horrific attacks by extremists and Muslim Brotherhood supporters against the country’s Coptic Christian population, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the Middle East.

As USCIRF reporting has long documented, sectarian violence targeting Copts has occurred with impunity for years. However, during former president Morsi’s year in power, sectarian rhetoric

and incitement accelerated. Conservative clerics and extremists often used incendiary, sectarian rhetoric and incitement without consequence or accountability. Among the most vilified groups are Christians, Shi'a, and Baha'is, all religious minority communities. Moreover, as evidenced by the violence unleashed against Copts since August and the interim government's increased stifling of dissent, the post-Morsi era has gotten off to a similarly bad start. Despite the revolution's early promise of progress, hopes have been dashed repeatedly for a peaceful and inclusive democracy that upholds the rule of law and adheres fully to international human rights standards, including those pertaining to freedom of religion or belief, for every Egyptian.

Since August 14, the day the Egyptian military and security forces dispersed pro-Morsi protesters, violent religious extremists and thugs launched a coordinated and unprecedented series of attacks against churches throughout the country. In August, at least seven Copts were killed and more than 200 churches and other Christian religious structures, homes, and businesses assaulted. In October, four Copts were killed, including two sisters aged eight and 12, when gunmen on motorcycles opened fire at a wedding party outside a church near Cairo.

While the government, before, during, and after Morsi, has failed to bring to justice the perpetrators of sectarian attacks, the courts have continued to convict and imprison Egyptian citizens charged with blasphemy under Article 98(f) of its penal code which prohibits "contempt" or "defamation" of religions. Since Egypt's January 2011 revolution, USCIRF has observed a significant increase in contempt-of-religion cases. While most of those targeted are disfavored Muslims, Christians are disproportionately affected. According to a leading Egyptian human rights organization, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), 63 individuals have been tried for defamation of religion since the January 2011 revolution, and 41 percent of the defendants were Christians, a high percentage when compared to the larger population.

While there has been some renewed hope and optimism within the Christian community following Morsi's ouster and some positive changes to the new constitution that potentially bode well for religious freedom and particularly for the rights of Copts, their situation remains precarious.

Due to Egypt's failure to protect the religious freedom of Copts and other religious minorities, its continued domestic and international support for blasphemy and religious defamation laws, its pursuit of blasphemy cases against its own citizens, from Copts to disfavored Muslims, and its repeated failure to bring their sectarian attackers to justice, USCIRF recommended for three consecutive years (2011-2013) that the United States designate Egypt a country of particular concern, or CPC. USCIRF currently is evaluating recent developments in advance of its 2014 determinations.

Washington should urge repeal of Egypt's contempt-of-religion and related laws in the penal code, as well as discriminatory decrees against religious minorities. It also should urge the lifting of bans on Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, the removal of religion from official identity documents, and the passage of a unified law for the construction and repair of places of worship.

In response to the continued violence against Copts and other religious minorities, the United States should press Egypt to prosecute government-funded clerics, government officials, and others who incite violence, while disciplining government-funded clerics who preach hatred.

Washington also should urge Cairo to counter the violence by bringing the violent to justice, thus weakening the climate of impunity.

Eritrea

President Isaias Afwerki and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. After an initially promising start toward democratization, the Isaias regime has become increasingly insular and repressive as the ailing President has become exceedingly fearful about losing control. The Eritrean government officially recognizes only four religious communities: the (Coptic) Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. The government imposes a number of invasive controls over the four recognized religious groups that blocks their ability to operate freely. Without registration, religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths publicly. Unrecognized groups' places of worship have been closed and public religious activities prohibited.

The government's campaign against unregistered religious activities frequently targets Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. Government officials have criticized "non-traditional" Christian denominations for engaging in evangelism, which they allege is socially divisive and alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions. The regime also fears that co-religionists in the United States could encourage these religious communities to take actions against the government's undemocratic rule. Refugees told USCIRF that government officials often refer to Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians as CIA agents, and that they frequently are discriminated against in employment and housing. Eritrean security forces conduct mass arrests of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, including at prayer meetings.

The State Department, non-governmental human rights organizations, and Christian advocacy groups estimate that 2,000 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea. The vast majority are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. Religious prisoners reportedly have been beaten and tortured, and are prohibited from praying aloud, singing, or preaching, and no religious books are allowed. Released religious prisoners USCIRF interviewed report having been confined in cramped conditions, such as 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks, some located in areas with extreme temperature fluctuations. The refugees also told USCIRF that security forces beat detainees and coerce them to renounce their faith, at times as a precondition of release. Persons detained for religious activities, serving both short- and long-term sentences, often are not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. Reports continue of deaths of religious prisoners who refused to recant their beliefs, were denied medical care, or were subjected to other ill treatment.

The Eritrean government also targets Jehovah's Witnesses. President Asaias issued a decree in October 1994 specifically barring Jehovah's Witnesses from obtaining government jobs, business licenses, and government-issued identity and travel documents. He reportedly viewed them as rejecting the duties of Eritrean citizenship, due to their refusal on religious grounds to participate in the 1993 independence referendum or perform mandatory national military service. Without Eritrean identity cards, Jehovah's Witnesses cannot obtain legal recognition of their marriages or land purchases.

The Eritrean government deposed Patriarch Abune Antonios in 2006 and placed him under house arrest after he protested the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs' interference in his church's affairs. On May 27, 2007, the government installed Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera as the new Patriarch. That same day, Abune Antonios was forcibly removed from his residence and transported to an undisclosed location. Since then, he has been prevented from communicating with the outside world and reportedly denied medical care.

Along with unconditionally releasing Patriarch Antonios and other religious prisoners, USCIRF recommends, in addition to designating Eritrea again as a CPC, continuing the existing presidential action of an arms embargo against Eritrea. In addition, the U.S. government should utilize the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to impose targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions identified as responsible for, or complicit in, serious religious freedom and human rights abuses. USCIRF further recommends that the U.S. government work to limit the Eritrean government's ability to levy and forcibly collect a "diaspora tax" on Eritreans living in the United States; work with international partners to draw attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea; engage in vigorous advocacy of religious freedom at all levels of involvement with the Eritrean government; and condition any resumption of assistance to Eritrea on measurable improvements in religious freedom and human rights conditions.

India

In the past year, USCIRF has received reports that communal violence and attacks against religious minority communities have increased in India, despite its status as a pluralistic, secular democracy. NGOs and religious leaders, including from the Muslim, Christian, and Sikh communities, attribute the increase to India's upcoming 2014 general election and politicians' use of religiously divisive language, and they fear that incidents will become even more frequent as the general election nears and immediately thereafter. Christian NGOs and leaders also report that Christians experience more harassment and violence in states that have anti-conversion laws. In addition, India's record in investigating and prosecuting religiously-motivated crimes remained mixed.

The special structures established for investigating and prosecuting past communal violence in Gujarat (2002) and Odisha (2007-2008), during which Christians were killed and injured and churches destroyed, continue to operate, although at a glacial pace. The country's police force and judicial system are overburdened and have systemic problems reaching beyond the treatment of religious minorities. Nevertheless, lack of political will, political corruption and religious bias also exist within the judicial system and the police force, hampering their ability to protect vulnerable minority communities or provide justice when crimes occur.

Since 2004, the U.S. and India have pursued a strategic relationship based on shared concerns about energy, security, and the growing threat of terrorism, as well as shared values of democracy and the rule of law. The U.S. government should integrate concern for religious freedom into all bilateral contacts with India. It should urge and assist India to increase training on human rights and religious freedom standards and practices for police and the judiciary, particularly in areas with a history or likelihood of communal violence. It also should encourage India to establish an impartial body of interfaith religious leaders, human rights advocates, legal experts, and government officials to discuss and recommend actions to promote religious tolerance and

understanding. Finally, it should urge all political parties and religious and social organizations to denounce publicly violence against and harassment of religious minorities, women, and low-caste members, and to communicate to all members and affiliates that acts of violence or harassment will not be tolerated.

Indonesia

While Indonesia has demonstrated progress in advancing both democracy and human rights overall, serious religious freedom challenges remain, undermining Indonesia's reputation for religious tolerance and pluralism. Religious minorities face troubling levels of intolerance and violence from extremist groups who are able to act with few restrictions. The government also enforces a blasphemy law against religious groups and individuals considered "deviant."

The majority of Indonesia's diverse religious communities operate openly and with few restrictions. Christians make up an estimated 10%, or 28 million, of Indonesia's population. Growing societal tensions have led to harassment, intimidation, and violence perpetuated by groups espousing intolerance and extremism under the banner of Islamic orthodoxy, such as the Islamic Defenders Front. Extremist groups use violence to intimidate Christians and other religious minorities and forcibly close churches. Police and government officials are often passive and sometimes even complicit in the face of violence against religious minorities. In the past year, extremist groups have forcibly closed or destroyed places of worship belonging to Christian, Hindu, Ahmadiyya, and Shi'a religious minorities, sometimes with the acquiescence of local or provincial officials.

There are also problematic laws that contradict the Indonesian constitution's protections for religious freedom—including the imprisonment of individuals for "blasphemy" or "deviancy."

Indonesia's president has said that religious tolerance and pluralism are cornerstones of its democracy. Those foundations are being challenged by terrorist groups and extremist organizations targeting the rights and freedom of Christians and other religious minorities.

The United States must speak clearly that continued religious freedom abuses in Indonesia threaten stability and the rule of law. The U.S. government should publicly assist Indonesia's fight against sectarian and societal violence and religious intolerance and build the capacity of Indonesian institutions, including the police, to protect and promote human rights. The U.S.-Indonesia "Comprehensive Partnership" should have a regular human rights mechanism to discuss ongoing legal restrictions and societal violence targeting religious minorities. U.S. economic assistance programs should prioritize government offices and civil society organizations working to promote religious freedom, counter extremism, teach tolerance and human rights, pursue legal reform, and build interfaith alliances to deal with pressing social, political, and economic concerns.

Iran

Since President Hassan Rouhani assumed power six months ago, the number of Christian prisoners jailed for practicing their faith has increased, with a renewed crackdown on Protestant Christians that has resulted in numerous arrests.

Besides its severe mistreatment of Baha'is, Iran's government continues to discriminate against and repress Christians, both ethnic Christians and Evangelicals and other Protestants, in a sustained and systematic fashion. Estimates of the number of Iranian Christians, including Protestants, vary widely, but none allege that they constitute more than a fraction of one percent of Iran's population of nearly 75 million.

While ethnic Christians, mostly Armenians and Assyrians, are allowed to conduct their own religious services, they are barred from holding them in Persian. In addition, many of their churches have been subject to close surveillance and compelled to report their activities to the government. Tehran also imposes onerous restrictions on renewal of their licenses, and on renovating, buying, or selling their churches or property. In fact, since the 1979 Revolution, the government has refused to allow a single new church in the country to be constructed. Ethnic Christians frequently face legal discrimination such as harsher penalties than Muslims in criminal cases, restrictions on marriages with Muslims, the favoring of Muslim family members in inheritance rights, and the setting aside of certain political or judicial leadership positions for Muslims.

While all of Iran's Christians face a regime that restricts their rights, Tehran reserves particularly harsh treatment for Protestant Christians. Over the past generation, and particularly in recent years, Iran's Protestants have experienced significant growth in numbers and house churches have proliferated. Despite their still small numbers, authorities view the Protestant church community as the most serious competitor of the theocratic government for the hearts and minds of Iranians. Unlike Iran's ethnic Christian population, the vast majority of Iran's Protestants are converts from Islam. While not formally a part of Iran's criminal code, Iranian courts typically treat apostasy as a capital crime, drawing upon Iran's constitution which allows them to invoke Islamic jurisprudence.

While Christians often have been charged with either apostasy or blasphemy as a result of conversion from Islam, the Revolutionary Court also can charge them with political crimes such as acting against national security or contact with a foreign enemy. Such baseless charges may be triggered by a number of innocent religious activities ranging from meetings with Christians from other countries, to associating with Christian organizations that are based abroad, to attending Christian seminars outside of Iran. In recent years, hundreds of Christians, mostly Protestants, have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country. In cases involving offenses based on religious belief, Iranian authorities typically release prisoners, but leave in place the charges against them or their convictions in order to be able to threaten them with re-imprisonment at any future time.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, found in an October report that since 2010 more than 300 Christians have been arrested and detained arbitrarily and as of July, at least 20 Christians were detained or in prison. In a particularly outrageous miscarriage of justice, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-born American pastor, was sentenced on January 27, 2013 by Judge Pir-Abassi, a jurist notorious for perpetrating religious freedom violations, to eight years in prison for "threatening the national security of Iran." His "crimes" apparently included his participation since 2000 in Iran's house church movement and his more recent efforts to raise money for an orphanage. Human rights groups have stated that his trial was

unfair and the whole legal process deeply flawed. While in Evin prison, he spent many weeks in solitary confinement and suffered mental and physical abuse. In November, Pastor Abedini was transferred to the notorious Gohardasht prison outside Tehran which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions. Representatives Bill Cassidy, Trent Franks, Raul Labrador, and Henry Waxman have adopted Pastor Abedini as part of the Defending Freedoms Project.

Another prisoner of conscience the Iranian government has imprisoned is Farshid Fathi, a Christian pastor who ran a network of house churches in Tehran. Pastor Fathi currently is serving a six-year sentence in Iran's notorious Evin prison. Though his crime is being a Christian and spreading his faith, Iranian authorities have cast his Christian activity as "political offenses," arguing that such activities were equivalent to "actions against national security." He also was charged with possessing religious propaganda.

In response to these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations, the U.S. government should continue to designate Iran as a CPC and continue to work closely with allies to apply pressure on the Iranian government through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions with the aim of halting the government's human rights and religious freedom violations. The United States should call on the Iranian government to release all prisoners who have been jailed on account of their religion or belief, and drop all charges against those who have cases pending against them. These prisoners range from a Shi'a cleric and his followers, to a number of Sufi activists, Baha'i and Christian leaders whose sole crime is exercising their internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief. The United States also should continue to bar from entry into the United States and freeze the assets of Iranian government officials identified as having engaged in particularly severe religious freedom violations and, where appropriate, their immediate family members. Finally, Congress should reauthorize for multiple years, and the President sign into law, the Lautenberg Amendment, a lifeline for religious minorities in Iran. The Amendment establishes a presumption of eligibility and allows fast track processing to prevent undue backlogs in countries that host their processing.

Iraq

Over the past few years, the Iraqi government has taken positive steps to improve security for religious sites and worshippers and address some concerns of the country's smallest religious minorities, including Christians. Nevertheless, the government has failed to stem non-state actors' egregious and increasing violence against Iraqi civilians, including attacks targeting religious worshippers, sites, and leaders, as well as individuals for their actual or assumed religious identity. The Syrian crisis has emboldened extremist groups in the country that are linked to al-Qaeda and heightened Sunni-Shi'a tensions, but the Shi'a-led Iraqi government often has exacerbated the situation by acting in a seemingly sectarian manner.

The primary victims of violence in the past year were members of the Shi'a majority, including pilgrims celebrating important holidays, but all Iraqis were at risk. Members of the smallest minority communities, including Christians, Mandaeans, and Yazidis, continue to experience violence, intimidation, and discrimination, particularly in areas disputed between the central government and the Kurdistan regional government. Although they reported fewer violent incidents than in past years, these groups continue to report that they feel a perpetual sense of fear.

These ancient communities' numbers in recent years have been reduced due to their fleeing the country; their flight has threatened their continued viability in Iraq.

The Christian community, once estimated to number between 800,000 and 1.4 million, is now said to stand at 500,000 or less. Christians in Iraq include Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East members, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), Protestants, and Evangelicals. The worst single attack on Iraqi Christians in recent years was the October 31, 2010 hostage siege at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Baghdad, during a mass, which left more than 50 people dead, including two priests, and more than 60 injured.

Some Christians have hailed the Iraqi cabinet's January 2014 announcement supporting in principle the creation of three new provinces, including one in the largely Christian Nineveh Plains, as having the potential to stop the emigration of Christians, though the details of the plan and its implementation remain to be seen. Many members of the smallest minorities also have urged reforms to provisions in Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution that give Islam a preferred status. They argue this favoritism towards Islam provides a potential justification for discrimination against non-Muslims.

The United States government needs to encourage and help the Iraqi government be a government for all Iraqis, regardless of their religion, sect, or belief. All U.S. military or security assistance should be accompanied by training for the recipient units on universal human rights standards and how to treat civilians, particularly minorities. The U.S. government also should ensure that religious freedom and minority rights are part of the negotiations between the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) and the Iraqi government on disputed territories, and should press the KRG to address alleged abuses against minorities by Kurdish officials in these areas. U.S. programs should focus on promoting religious freedom and tolerance, fostering human rights compliance and the rule of law, and improving minorities' ability to organize and effectively convey their concerns to the government. Development assistance should prioritize areas where marginalized communities are concentrated. USCIRF currently is evaluating recent developments in advance of its 2014 determinations. The Commission recommended in 2013 that Iraq be designated a CPC.

Kazakhstan

Christianity is the second most practiced religion after Islam in Kazakhstan. Orthodox Christians constitute about 25% of the population. Other groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Mennonites, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jews, Buddhists, Hare Krishnas, Bahais, Christian Scientists, Scientologists, and members of Grace Church, New Life Church, and the Unification Church.

The government of Kazakhstan controls all religious groups through its restrictive 2011 religion law. The law sets complex registration requirements for religious organizations, bans all unregistered religious activity, restricts the activities of registered groups, and provides penalties for violations, including monetary fines, suspensions, or liquidations. Religious groups have described the re-registration process as burdensome and arbitrary. It was reported that in the city of Almaty, of the 666 registered Protestant religious associations, 462 were re-registered and the

remaining 204 “will be liquidated.” Before the October 2012 registration deadline, the government conducted raids on registered and unregistered communities, including Baptist and Protestant communities. The Kazakh government also supports “anti-sect centers” which promote intolerance against certain religious communities, particularly some Protestant groups.

A Presbyterian Pastor, Bakhytzhan Kashkumbayev, of the Grace Church in the Kazakh capital, Astana, was arrested and detained in May 2013. He is 67 years old and in poor health. The pastor’s arrest is seen as part of government efforts to penalize any Muslim who becomes a Christian.

In October 2013, then-USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett met with Pastor Kashkumbayev’s family in Astana. Three days later, after nearly five months’ detention – including one month in a psychiatric hospital where he was injected with the psychotropic drug haloperidol – an Astana court ordered him transferred to house arrest. Just minutes after he was freed from prison, however, the pastor was re-arrested and faced additional charges of “extremism.” His trial began on January 22, 2014. By the end of the first court session, the two extremism-linked charges were dropped. His trial remains ongoing, and he denies all wrongdoing.

USCIRF wrote letters to the Kazakh President and Committee on Religious Affairs advocating for the pastor’s release, but never received responses. Yet, on January 24, 2014, “Kazakhstanskaya Pravda,” which is in effect the government newspaper, referred to the Commission’s letters, among other advocacy on the pastor’s behalf. The hostile article concluded: “It makes one wonder – why all this concern for a lowly pastor convicted of a criminal offense? Is it because his sentence could become a verdict of guilt for all the different pseudo-religious associations with foreign sponsors who are taking away the health and wealth of our citizens? Or could it be because more unseemly methods that these organizations use to brainwash acolytes will emerge?”

In order to promote freedom of religion or belief in Kazakhstan, the U.S. government should press the Kazakh government to allow religious groups to operate freely without registration and to amend the religion law to bring it into compliance with international norms. It also should urge the Kazakh government to cease police raids of religious meetings, as well as the issuance of fines, property confiscation, detentions and imprisonment of participants and religious leaders, and to release and drop the charges against Pastor Kashkumbayev. In addition, the United States should urge the Kazakh government to agree to visits by UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Independence of the Judiciary, and Torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for such a visit.

Nigeria

For more than a decade, USCIRF has reported on the continuing violations of religious freedom and religion-related violence taking place in Nigeria. In 2009, USCIRF recommended for the first time that the U.S. government designate Nigeria a CPC for the government’s failure to address at both state and federal levels ongoing, egregious and systemic religious freedom violations that have resulted in more than 16,000 deaths from sectarian violence since 1999. Almost universally, individuals identified as perpetrators have not been prosecuted and the Nigerian government, at the state and federal levels, has proven unable or unwilling to address the violence and its underlying causes. Sectarian violence continues today with reports of Fulani Muslims attacking

Christian villages in the middle of the night in Plateau and Kaduna states, killing and wounding hundreds. Human Rights Watch estimates that these killings and retaliatory attacks have killed 2,000 to 3,000 in the past several years. USCIRF believes that the majority of those killed were Christian.

In the past three years, Boko Haram has become the primary perpetrator of religiously-related violence and gross religious freedom violations. The rise of Boko Haram has exacerbated Muslim-Christian relations throughout Nigeria. Boko Haram rejects the secular state and seeks the universal implementation of what it considers “pure” Shari’ah law to resolve the ills facing northern Nigerian Muslims. The terrorist organization’s targets include churches, individual Christians, Muslim critics, and persons engaged in behavior deemed “un-Islamic,” as well as northern elders, schools, police stations, government buildings, newspapers, and banks. Since January 1, 2012, Boko Haram’s religiously-motivated attacks have included more than 50 church attacks that often have taken place during services to maximize the casualties. Hundreds of Christians have been killed either during church attacks or in individual targeting. The January 2014 attack on a St. Paul’s Roman Catholic Church in Adamawa State is a stark reminder that Boko Haram continues to target Christians.

USCIRF recommended in 2013 that Nigeria be designated as a CPC. USCIRF has recommended this status since 2009. USCIRF also urges the U.S. government to address the religious elements of both the ongoing sectarian violence in the Middle Belt and the Boko Haram violence to better engage with the Nigerian government at all levels and with key religious leaders. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, as defined in section 405(c) of the International Religious Freedom Act, which would set forth commitments the government would undertake to address policies leading to violations of religious freedom. These commitment should include, but not be limited to: vigorously investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to justice perpetrators of all past and future incidents of sectarian violence; developing effective conflict-prevention and early-warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels; developing the capability to deploy specialized police and army units rapidly to prevent and combat sectarian violence; and taking steps to professionalize its police and military forces’ investigative, community policing, crowd control, and conflict prevention capacities. USCIRF also recommends that the U.S. government encourage and support Nigerian government efforts to provide additional security personnel to protect northern Christian minorities and clerics and Muslim traditional rulers who denounce Boko Haram attacks, and consider creating a witness-protection-like program.

North Korea

The North Korean government tightly controls all religious activity and perpetuates an extreme cult of personality venerating the ruling Kim family. Individuals engaged in clandestine Protestant activity or “fortune telling” are arrested, tortured, and even executed. Thousands of religious believers remain imprisoned in North Korea’s notorious penal labor camps, including refugees repatriated from China. The political transition to Kim Jong-un has increased pressure on those engaging in clandestine religious activities or possessing illegal religious materials and on asylum-seekers in China. Though nuclear security or “basketball diplomacy” issues dominate

the headlines, the North Korean government remains both a serious regional threat and a threat to North Korean citizens who fail to sufficiently honor the Kim family's personality cult.

In North Korea, all unapproved religious activity is brutally repressed as a direct challenge to the Kim family. The growth of Protestantism spread from China is viewed as a particular security threat. Individuals caught transporting Bibles or those engaged in missionary activity face imprisonment, torture, and execution. USCIRF has received information that there have been recent executions of individuals caught transporting Bibles. North Korean police infiltrated Protestant churches in China and set up fake prayer meetings to catch worshippers.

North Korean refugees, particularly those who convert to Christianity in China, remain in severe danger if forcibly returned from China. Returned refugees are subject to interrogation about their religious belief and affiliations by special police and border guards trained to uncover religious belief or connections with South Korean religious groups. Most of those returned will be punished, and those viewed as security threats will be severely punished. Punishment has included beatings, torture, detention, forced labor, sexual violence, and in the case of women suspected of becoming pregnant in China, forced abortions or infanticide.

Negotiations with North Korea on nuclear non-proliferation should be rooted in a broader security framework that includes human rights and humanitarian concerns. The U.S. government should clearly signal that future political, diplomatic, or economic inducements will require improvements in both human rights and nuclear security issues and work with democratic allies in the region to put such a plan into action. The U.S. government also should fully implement the North Korean Human Rights Act and use funds from the Act to: expand access to information and new media to counter government propaganda within North Korea; remove any obstacles that hinder additional resettlement of North Koreans in the United States; and build a cadre of experts and potential leaders among North Korean refugee populations through scholarship, leadership, educational, and other programs in the United States.

In addition, the U.S. government should give priority to raising the forced repatriation of North Koreans with Chinese officials, urging them to stop deporting North Koreans until China's laws are brought into line with international standards. The United States should support South Korea's efforts to bring refugee issues before international human rights fora and call for China, by name, to fulfill its obligations to protect refugees.

Pakistan

Pakistan represents the worst situation in the world for religious freedom for countries not currently designated as "countries of particular concern" by the U.S. government.

The government of Pakistan continues to engage in and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. In addition to government repression, sectarian and religiously-motivated violence is chronic and the government has failed to protect members of religious minority communities, as well as the majority faith. Christians often bear the brunt of the twin pincers of governmental and societal persecution, but other communities suffer as well, especially Shi'as, Ahmadis, and Hindus.

For these reasons, USCIRF has recommended annually since 2002 that Pakistan be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC. A quick read of the State Department’s own reports on Pakistan can lead to no other conclusion.

Christians repeatedly have been targeted for violence. In September, splinter groups from the Pakistani Taliban executed twin suicide bombings on the All Saints Church in Peshawar as Sunday services were ending. More than 80 Christians were killed, marking it as the worst attack on Christians in the nation’s violent history. Entire Christian villages were destroyed in 2009 and in 2013, with no one held to account. The Pakistani Taliban brazenly took credit for the 2011 murder of Minister for Minorities Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, leaving flyers at the crime scene in an upscale part of Islamabad. The murderers now are on trial, but the Pakistani Taliban is threatening retribution. Overall, Pakistani authorities have inconsistently brought perpetrators to justice or taken action against societal actors who incite violence.

Pakistan’s repressive blasphemy laws and other religiously discriminatory legislation, such as the anti-Ahmadi laws, foster an atmosphere of violent extremism and vigilantism. The country’s blasphemy law -- used predominantly in Punjab province but also nationwide -- targets Christians, members of religious minority communities, and dissenting Muslims. USCIRF is aware of at least 17 individuals on death row and 20 more serving life sentences, statistics unmatched anywhere else in the world. The blasphemy law, along with anti-Ahmadi laws that effectively criminalize various practices of their faith, have created a climate of vigilante violence. Hindus have suffered from the climate of violence and hundreds have fled Pakistan for India. Other chronic conditions remain, including the poor social and legal status of Christians and other non-Muslim religious minorities.

Given these laws, the climate of violence, and other factors, promoting respect for freedom of religion or belief must be an integral part of U.S. policy towards Pakistan, and designating Pakistan as a CPC would enable the United States to press Islamabad to undertake needed reforms.

The forces that threaten Pakistani and U.S. security interests largely are motivated by a violent extremist ideology that rejects international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief. To make religious freedom a key element in the bilateral relationship, the U.S. government should include discussions on religious freedom and religious tolerance in U.S.-Pakistan strategic dialogues. The U.S. government also should urge Pakistan to protect Christians and other religious minorities from violence and actively prosecute those committing acts of violence; unconditionally release individuals currently jailed for blasphemy; repeal or reform the blasphemy law; and repeal anti-Ahmadi laws.

One of the most potent living symbols of Pakistan’s egregious religious freedom abuses is Prisoner of Conscience Aasia Bibi, a Catholic mother of five who was a farmhand from a village in Punjab province. In June 2009, an argument arose with her fellow laborers over whether the water she brought was “unclean” because she was Christian and they Muslim. Later coworkers complained to a cleric that Bibi made derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad. Police investigated her remarks, resulting in her arrest and prosecution under Section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code for blasphemy. On November 8, 2010, a district court in Nankana Sahib, Punjab, sentenced her to death, the first such sentence for blasphemy handed down against a woman. Bibi remains

in custody while she waits for the Lahore High Court to hear her appeal. Representative Joseph Pitts has adopted Aasia Bibi has part of the Defending Freedoms Project.

Russia

Religious freedom conditions in Russia continued to deteriorate over the past year. There are increasing signs of an official policy that favors the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church over other religious communities. Government officials obstruct the construction or rental of buildings for worship, particularly for allegedly “non-traditional” groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Pentecostal congregations, the Evangelical Christian Missionary Union, Orthodox groups not part of the Moscow Patriarchate, and Old Believer communities.

During a September 2012 trip to Russia, USCIRF heard reports of Ministry of Justice officials requiring certain Protestant churches and new religious groups to submit extra registration data or refusing to register such groups. Officials can bring court cases to ban religious groups found in violation of Russian law. While the Salvation Army was re-registered in Moscow in 2009, it had to litigate to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to obtain that result. Its re-registration was the first Russian remedial action in response to an ECtHR ruling, but the Jehovah’s Witnesses were not re-registered after a similar 2010 ruling. Despite a 2009 ECtHR finding that the 15-year-existence rule for registration violated the European Convention on Human Rights, the Church of Scientology continues to be denied registration, and that rule was cited in a 2010 refusal to register an Armenian Catholic parish in Moscow.

Lack of registration can have dire consequences. In September 2012, police presided over the demolition of the unregistered Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church near Moscow. According to Forum 18, the Pentecostal community had tried to register this church unsuccessfully for over 15 years. A Moscow city spokesperson defended the destruction as due to a court order.

The Russian government has used a 2012 law on unauthorized public meetings against religious communities. For example, a Pentecostal pastor was fined for holding a religious service.

The application of Russia’s anti-extremism law also threatens religious freedom. The law defines extremism in a religious context, as “propaganda of the exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens according to their attitude towards religion or religious affiliation,” and does not require the use or threat of violence. A Russian court at any level may rule material extremist, which results in it being banned throughout Russia. Under the Extremism Law, the mass distribution, preparation or storage with the aim of mass distribution of texts ruled extremist could result in a four-year prison term. As of December 2013, 2,173 items (mostly Muslim texts) were on the banned list. Sixty-eight Jehovah’s Witnesses texts also have been deemed extremist, and Jehovah’s Witnesses face prosecution for possessing this literature.

A recently-enacted blasphemy law also opens the door to criminal prosecution of disfavored Christians and other groups. The new law, which was enacted in July 2013, punishes public actions that disrespect or insult religious beliefs. Such actions undertaken in a place of worship

are subject to fines of up to USD 15,000 and up to three years of imprisonment. Doing so elsewhere carries up to one year of imprisonment and fines of up to \$9,000 USD.

The U.S. government should make freedom of religion or belief a key human rights and security concern in the U.S.-Russia relationship by, for example, creating in the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission a working group composed of legal experts on international norms on freedom of religion or belief. It should press the Russian government to reform the extremism law to ensure that it is not applied to peaceful religious communities and amend the process for banning books. It also should re-program funding from the now-defunct USAID Russia program to other programs benefitting Russian civil society, including practical programs on tolerance and on freedom of religion or belief.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government continues to ban most forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam; prohibits any public non-Muslim places of worship; and periodically interferes with the private religious practice of non-Muslim expatriate workers in the country. Non-Muslims are not allowed to acquire Saudi nationality and no non-Muslim places of worship are permitted in the country.

In March 2012, Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh was quoted in the Arabic press as saying it is "necessary to destroy all the churches of the region" in response to a visiting Kuwaiti delegation who asked him if churches should be banned in Kuwait. For years, Saudi government officials have argued that places of worship other than mosques cannot exist in the Kingdom because Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest sites: Mecca and Medina. In addition, government officials pointed to a hadith (oral tradition) from the Prophet Muhammad which says that only Islam can exist on the Arabian Peninsula, although other Islamic experts contend that this hadith can be interpreted differently.

In 2012 and 2013, Saudi officials reiterated the government position that non-Muslim expatriate workers are permitted to worship in private. However, what constitutes "private" worship remains unclear. The Saudi government has said that as long as non-Muslims practice their religion in small groups in private homes, no security entity would interfere, since no law prohibits non-Muslims from practicing in this manner. During a USCIRF visit last year, some non-Muslim interlocutors, including expatriate Christians, said they are able to worship in rented compounds with as many as 300 or more participants. In one case, the congregation voluntarily affirmed to Saudi authorities that they do no proselytize and do not permit any Saudi citizens to attend their gatherings.

Saudi officials also stated to USCIRF during its 2013 visit that no one is arrested for private worship, but some gatherings are raided because foreign workers' residency permits have expired. Some expatriate workers dispute this assertion. Saudi authorities continue to subject expatriate workers from South Asia and several African countries to surveillance and raids. Outside the compounds populated by foreign workers, where private worship is allowed, expatriate workers continue to fear government interference with their private worship. This interference can occur for many reasons, such as a worship service being too loud, having too many attendees, including too many vehicles in front of a compound, or occurring too often at the same place.

During the year, there continued to be public reports of incidents in which Saudi authorities entered and raided private homes where non-Muslim expatriate workers were worshipping in private. Several other cases were not publicized in order to secure releases.

USCIRF has concluded that the Saudi government's full implementation of policies it confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions would diminish significantly the government's institutionalized practices that negatively affect freedom of religion and belief. Religious freedom in Saudi Arabia has not been a U.S. priority in the bilateral relationship and, as a consequence, the U.S. government has inadequately held to account the Saudi government on its implementation of these reforms to advance freedom of religion and belief in the Kingdom. The U.S. government should continue to designate Saudi Arabia as a CPC and should replace the indefinite waiver of action with a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should advance and complete reforms, including those confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions. The U.S. government should call, at the highest levels, for the release of prisoners convicted and imprisoned on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, or sorcery. In addition, Congress should require the State Department to issue a public report on the Saudi government's efforts and results achieved in implementing reforms related to freedom of religion or belief.

Sudan

Sudan continues to be governed by an amended version of the Interim National Constitution (INC) while members of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) draft a new constitution. President Omar al-Bashir and several NCP leaders continue to promise that the new constitution will be based on the government's interpretation of Shari'ah, despite calls for separation of religion and state and full recognition of religious freedom. Currently, all Sudanese, including Christians and followers of traditional African religions, are subject to the government's interpretation of Shari'ah (Islamic law), including criminal provisions in the 1991 Criminal Act making apostasy from Islam punishable by death and prohibitions on "offences of honor, reputation and public morality," including undefined "indecent or immoral acts," which can carry corporal punishments such as flogging.

Christians routinely face discrimination. Local mobs have attacked several churches and the government has demolished or threatened to close several since South Sudan seceded in 2011, on the grounds that these churches were Southern, not Sudanese. In 2013, several human rights organizations reported that South Sudanese humanitarian workers employed at Christian organizations were arrested and deported to South Sudan for alleged proselytizing. While Christian groups are allowed to engage in humanitarian activities and promote Muslim-Christian cooperation, they are not permitted to share their beliefs with others. In contrast, government policies promote conversion to Islam, such as by allowing the use of humanitarian assistance to induce conversion and providing early release to prison inmates who memorize the Qur'an.

USCIRF recommended in 2013 that Sudan be designated a CPC for its systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom and currently is evaluating its recommendation for 2014. The Commission believes that religious freedom must be an integral part of U.S.-Sudan policy. Resolving the debates over ethnic and religious identities and beliefs are central to ending the fighting throughout Sudan and ensuring lasting peace. USCIRF recommends that, before

normalizing relations or lifting existing sanctions, the U.S. government require that the government of Sudan abide by international standards of freedom of religion or belief, including by repealing the apostasy law, Shari'ah-based morality laws, and laws and practices which discriminate against non-Muslim minorities. The United States also should urge the government of Sudan to hold a transparent, inclusive national drafting process with civil society leaders and representatives of all relevant political parties to ensure that Sudan's new constitution includes protections for freedom of religion or belief, respect for international commitments to human rights, recognition of Sudan as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural nation, and support for indigenous efforts to influence the process positively.

Syria

In Syria, the plight of Christians, as well as other religious minorities like the Alawites, is acute. Christians are caught between the persecution of terrorist organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda and the brutal repression of the Assad regime, which will never be a true protector of their rights.

Since the civil war started, more than 90 Christian churches, monasteries, shrines and buildings have been destroyed or severely damaged. During the conflict, the Assad regime and terrorist organizations have targeted religious leaders, including Christian religious leaders and laity, as well as Sunni Clerics who support the opposition or have left the ruling Baath Party. Two senior Christian clerics, Greek Archbishop Boulous Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Bishop Yuhanna Ibrahim, have been missing after being kidnapped more than six months ago, reportedly by rebels. Nothing certain is known about their current status nor is there any information about the identity of those responsible for their disappearance. Twelve nuns kidnapped in December still are being held by the rebels.

USCIRF urged the U.S. government to highlight the plight of religious minorities and stress the need for protection of religious freedom for all Syrians during the recent Geneva II peace conference and include Christians and other religious minorities in these discussions in order to help ensure the survival of Christianity and Syria's religious diversity. Christian and Alawite communities, who are not aligned with either side of the conflict, are inadequately represented by the opposition coalition and the Assad regime does not represent their concerns.

Uzbekistan

Since Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, its government has systematically and egregiously violated freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. The Uzbek government harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity regardless of their religious affiliation. A restrictive religion law facilitates state control over all religious communities. The government arrests mostly Muslims, but sometimes Christians, and represses individuals and groups that do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or that it claims are associated with extremist political programs. Thousands remain imprisoned as alleged extremists, including many who reportedly are denied due process and subjected to torture. While Uzbekistan does face security threats from groups that advocate or perpetrate violence in the name of religion, vague anti-extremism laws are applied against those who pose no credible threat to security.

Uzbek police and security forces continue to raid and detain members of unregistered, and sometimes registered, religious groups, including Christians, for their peaceful religious activity. In November 2012, the Tashkent region Justice Ministry summoned leaders of some registered Protestant churches, warning them to eliminate from their statutes provisions on missionary activity and instructing them to re-register within one month. Written warnings of this nature place congregations and their leadership in a vulnerable position for future prosecution of “illegal” activity.

Uzbek police in December 2012 raided a group of about 80 Protestants on holiday in the Tashkent region; four were charged under the Administrative code for discussing their faith and singing Christian songs. Local police also confiscated three Bibles and 100 Christian songbooks, insulted the group, and took fingerprints. In June 2012, police officers with a warrant told Yelena Kim at her Baptist church in Fergana that criminal charges were lodged against her; in July 2011 she had been tried and fined for the private teaching of religion.

In some regions of Uzbekistan, almost all churches have been closed and evangelical Protestant students have been expelled from university. In other regions, no non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities are registered, making “illegal” the activity of Protestant and Jehovah’s Witnesses congregations.

The state-controlled media has encouraged intolerant views of certain minority religious groups, particularly Protestants, Baha’is, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Further, journalists have accused missionaries of posing a danger to society and equated them with religious extremists. Government officials have held meetings at universities and schools around the country warning students about the “negative consequences of missionaries and religious extremism.”

Over the past decade, the Uzbek government reportedly has sentenced or imprisoned, sometimes in psychiatric hospitals, as many as 10,000 individuals for terms of up to 20 years for their non-violent Islamic religious affiliations or beliefs in trials that fall far short of international standards. The Uzbek government frequently brands Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses “extremists” for their practice of religion outside state-sanctioned structures. These groups face ongoing harassment, detention, and arrest for “illegal religious activity,” such as holding private prayer meetings or possessing “illegal” religious literature.

Pentecostal pastor Dmitri Shestakov served a four-year term in a labor colony from 2007 to 2011 for organizing an illegal religious group, inciting religious hatred, and distributing extremist religious literature. After his release, he remained under police surveillance. In January 2013, Pastor Shestakov and his family fled to Ukraine, where they were given political asylum by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

The U.S. government has designated Uzbekistan as a CPC since 2006, but since 2009 has placed a waiver on taking any action as a consequence of this designation. USCIRF recommended CPC status for Uzbekistan in 2013 (and has done so since 2005) and that the waiver be dropped, and currently is evaluating this recommendation for 2014.

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should engage Uzbekistan in intensive negotiations about concrete progress that would address religious freedom abuses. If these talks fail after 180 days, the U.S. government should lift the waiver and impose sanctions, such as a ban on visits to the United States by high-level and mid-level Uzbek officials, including President Islam Karimov. U.S. policy toward Uzbekistan should be coordinated across agencies to ensure that human rights concerns are reflected in all dealings with the Uzbek government. U.S. security materiel and other assistance should not be given to Uzbekistan without concrete improvements in religious freedom, and if assistance is given, Uzbek agencies or units known to be responsible for severe violations should be excluded. The United States also should press the Uzbek government to revise its religion law so that it accords with international standards and establish a mechanism to review the cases of persons detained under suspicion of or charged with religion-related offenses.

Vietnam

Religious freedom conditions remain poor in Vietnam despite some positive changes in response to international attention and that nation's designation as a CPC.

The Vietnamese government continues to imprison individuals for religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. It uses a religious police force (*công an tôn giáo*) and vague national security laws to suppress independent Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai activities. The government also seeks to stop the growth of ethnic minority Protestantism and Catholicism via discrimination, violence and forced renunciations of their faith.

There are ongoing and egregious religious freedom abuses in Vietnam in the past year. Ethnic minority Protestants and Catholics in the Central Highlands have been arrested, beaten, and face forced renunciations of faith efforts for practicing outside of government approved religious organizations. Over a dozen were arrested in the past year. Hmong and Montagnard Protestants continue to experience government sanctioned efforts of forced renunciations of faith, despite a ban on this practice established in 2005. The government has sanctioned violence against Catholics, particularly those associated with the Redemptorist Orders, by "contract thugs" and arrests for peacefully advocating for religious freedom and the return of confiscated property. The government also continues to actively suppress independent religious activity among Buddhists and Protestants, and Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam leaders are detained in house arrest, their worshippers harassed, ceremonies disrupted, and youth organizations banned.

The Government's new decree on religion (Decree 92) that went into effect in January 2013 continues government oversight and control of all religious activity and demonstrates the government's continued suspicion of religious individuals and groups. This decree also does not improve the ill-defined and intrusive process of legal registration for religious entities, and may make it worse by making it unfeasible for any group not currently legally recognized from gaining that status.

The U.S. designated Vietnam as a CPC from 2004-2006. This designation spurred productive diplomatic discussions on religious freedom that brought some tangible improvements and did not disrupt progress on other issues in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. USCIRF had recommended that Vietnam be designated a CPC in 2013 because individuals are imprisoned for their religious activities and religious freedom advocacy; a religious police force represses independent religious

activity; and new ethnic minority converts to Christianity face pressure to renounce their faith through discrimination, violence, and detention. USCIRF currently is evaluating recent developments in advance of its 2014 determinations.

Given an expanding U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship, the U.S. government should: Continue to link an expanded “strategic relationship” on human rights improvements as did former Cabinet Secretaries Clinton and Panetta; initiate a “whole of government” human rights action plan that is implemented across all U.S. government agencies and entities, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists, and providing staffing and support for all U.S. delegations visiting Vietnam; make strong, consistent, and clear public statements directly to the Vietnamese people in support of religious freedom and related human rights; issue travel restrictions and/or financial penalties for Vietnamese authorities who engage in human rights abuses, officials from provinces with the worst religious freedom conditions, and those working for state agencies shown to perpetuate religious freedom and related rights abuses; and ensure that economic assistance programs reflect U.S. interest in human rights. Any increase in economic or security cooperation programs should be met by increases in human rights and religious freedom programming and non-commercial rule of law and civil society development initiatives.

USCIRF’s concerns about the state of religious freedom in Vietnam can be summed up by the life of Fr. Nguyen Van Ly, who is a Prisoner of Conscience that Representative Chris Smith has adopted as part of the Defending Freedoms Project. Father Ly has spent more than 20 years in prison for the causes of religious freedom, democracy, and human rights. He is one of the founders of Bloc 8406 and past editor of an underground publication. Initially arrested in September 1977 and sentenced to 20 years in a labor camp near Hue, he was later released but prohibited from engaging in religious activities. He was returned to jail in 2001 when he submitted testimony to the U.S. Congress and USCIRF opposing a U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Act. On March 30, 2007, in a broadcasted show trial, authorities muzzled him while he tried to defend himself.

The Vietnamese government also has detained for their Christian faith other prisoners of conscience including:

- Nguyen Trung Ton, the leader of a Pentecostal house church; and
- Duong Kim Khai Duong, a pastor of the Mennonite Church in Vietnam, a long-time democracy activist, advocate for aggrieved farmers, and member of Viet Tan, an organization advocating for democracy.

APPENDIX: Selected Christian Prisoners of Conscience by Country

CHINA



Liu Xianbin is a long-time political dissident, organizer of the China Democracy Party and member of an “illegal” Protestant house church. He is also a blogger using the pen name Wan Xianming. He is originally from Suining, in China’s southwest Sichuan province. Liu was also one of the original signers of the Charter 08 document that called for constitutional reforms, democracy and human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief. Liu was an active participant in the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement. After the protests were suppressed, Liu continued to call for democracy and was arrested by Beijing police on April 15, 1991 and held in Beijing’s infamous Qincheng prison. On December 28, 1992, he was convicted by the Beijing Intermediate People’s Court for “counter-revolutionary incitement” and sentenced to prison for two-and-a-half years with a one-year deprivation of political rights. Released in October 1993 after serving his full term, Liu was sentenced again by the Suining Intermediate People’s Court to a thirteen-year prison term for “inciting subversion of state power,” with a three-year deprivation of political rights. He was released on November 6, 2008. From April 2010 to February 2010, Liu submitted to overseas websites and magazines a number of articles critical of the Chinese Communist authorities on issues ranging from corruption, abuses of power and human rights violations. On June 28, 2010, Liu was detained and on March 15, 2011, the Suining Intermediate People’s Court convicted Liu of “inciting subversion of state power” and sentenced him to a ten-year prison term, with deprivation of political rights for two years and four months. He remains in jail.



Alimujiang Yimiti is a Uyghur Christian from Xinjiang Province now serving a fifteen-year prison term. His home is in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang and he and his wife have two young sons. While working at a British agro-food company, Alimujiang was the leader of a house church in the city of Kashgar. On September 13, 2007, the Kashgar Religious Affairs Bureau ruled that “Alimujiang Yimiti since 2002 has illegally engaged in religious infiltration under the guise of work, spreading Christianity among the Uyghur people, distributing Christian propaganda and growing [the number of] Christian believers.” On January 12, 2008, the Kashgar police criminally detained Alimujiang on “suspicion of inciting subversion of state power” and “leaking state secrets overseas.” He was formally arrested on those charges on February 28, 2008. On September 12, 2008, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled in its No. 28 document that Alimujiang’s arrest and detention had been arbitrary. In a secret trial on August 6, the Kashgar Intermediate People’s Court sentenced Alimujiang to fifteen years in prison for the crime of “leaking state secrets to foreigners.” On March 16, 2010, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Higher People’s Court, without holding a hearing and barring lawyers from court, upheld the Intermediate Court’s sentence and added a five-year sentence of deprivation of political rights.



Pastor Yang Rongli has been serving a seven-and-a-half-year prison term since 2009 for leading the 50,000-member Linfen Church in Shaanxi province. Yang is a 1982 graduate of the Linfen Normal College's Chinese department. Because of her excellent academic record, she was retained by the college to teach. She also worked as an editor and reporter. She and her husband, Wang Xiaoguang, were the leaders of the Jindengtai (Golden Lampstand) Church, a house church in Linfen, Shaanxi province. In 1998, they became the church's full-time clergy and in the following two decades, the church grew to 50,000 members. On September 13, 2009 at 3 a.m., the local Fushan county government dispatched more than 400 police officers and plainclothes police, led by government officials, to the meeting site of the Fushan Christians and the Gospel Shoe Factory, where they brutally beat Christians staying in a dormitory. More than 100 people were seriously injured. On September 23, armed police surrounded the main Jindengtai church building, and on September 25, Yang and six other church leaders were arrested while traveling to the provincial capital of Taiyuan to petition the government. On November 25, the Yaodu District Court convicted Yang and her husband of "illegal occupation of farmland" and "gathering a mob to create a traffic disturbance." Yang was sentenced to a seven-year prison term and fined 30,000 yuan (US\$4,755); her husband was sentenced to a three-year term and fined 10,000 yuan (US\$1,585).



Bishop James Su Zhimin was arrested in 1996 for unregistered religious activity. He has not been heard from since, despite repeated international inquiries, though he was believed to have been seen in 2003 in a Baoding Hospital. He served as an unregistered Bishop in the city of Baoding in the Chinese province of Hebei. Chinese religious authorities select Bishops over the authority of the Vatican, but Bishop Su recognized only the Catholic Church's authority in this matter. Chinese authorities took him during a religious procession in 1996. Attempts at identifying or memorializing him or holding public events in his honor have met with hostile police action.



Gao Zhisheng is one of the most respected human rights lawyers in China, and has been subjected to enforced disappearance, torture, illegal house arrest and detention. He currently is imprisoned in Shaya county prison in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China, after being sent to prison in December 2011 for apparently violating the conditions of his suspended three-year sentence. Prior to this, his whereabouts had been unknown for almost 20 months. He has been repeatedly tortured since 2006, and continues to be at high risk of further torture.

This award-winning human rights lawyer has handled a number of high-profile human rights cases, including a dispute over government-seized oil fields case in Shaanxi province, Christians in Kashgar in the far western region of Xinjiang, and Falun Gong practitioners. In November 2005, the Beijing Judicial Bureau ordered his Shengzhi Law Office shut down. On December 22, 2006,

Gao was convicted of “inciting subversion of state power,” sentenced to a three-year prison term, with a five-year probation and one-year deprivation of political rights, and released home.

On Sept. 21, 2007, Gao was taken into official custody again. When he was released 50 days later, he wrote “Dark Night, Dark Hood, Kidnapping by Dark Mafia,” in which he recounted how he had been tortured, including having toothpicks inserted into his penis. On Jan. 9, 2009, his wife, daughter and son left Beijing and fled to the United States. On Feb. 4, 2009, Gao was taken by Chinese authorities and disappeared into official custody. He suddenly re-appeared on March 27, 2010, under the surveillance of Domestic Security Protection Agents, then disappeared again on April 20.

On Jan. 10, 2011, Charles Hutzler of the Associated Press reported in a piece entitled “Missing Chinese lawyer told of abuse” that nearly a year earlier, on April 7, 2010, he had met Gao in a Beijing teahouse for an extended interview during which Gao revealed that during his disappearance he had been held variously in Beijing, Shaanxi province and the far western region of Xinjiang, and described in detail the brutal torture that had been inflicted on him. On December 16, 2011, the official Xinhua News Agency reported in a short English-only dispatch that because Gao had violated the terms of his parole, he was being sent back to jail to serve his three-year prison term. He is currently incarcerated in a prison in remote Shaya County in far western Xinjiang.

ERITREA



Eritrean Patriarch Abune Antonios was deposed by the government in 2006 and placed under house arrest after he protested the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs’ interference in his church’s affairs. In January 2005, the Patriarch’s annual Nativity message was not broadcast or televised and the Eritrean Holy Synod met in August 2005 with the main purpose of removing all executive authority from the Patriarch. He was allowed to officiate at church services but prohibited from having any administrative role in church affairs. Among the accusations brought against the Patriarch, were his reluctance to excommunicate 3,000 members of the Medhane Alem, an Orthodox Sunday School movement and his demands that the government release imprisoned Christians accused of treason. In January 2006, he was officially removed from his position as head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and spiritual leader of more than two million persons and placed under house arrest. On May 27, 2007, the government installed Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera as the new Patriarch. That same day, Abune Antonios was forcibly removed from his residence and transported to an undisclosed location. Since then, he has been prevented from communicating with the outside world and reportedly denied medical care.

IRAN



Saeed Abedini is a 33-year-old father and husband from Idaho who currently is incarcerated in Evin Prison. Saeed is a dual national of the United States (via naturalization) and Iran (by birth). He has broken no codified Iranian law, but has been sentenced to eight years in prison for practicing his Christian faith. In the last year, he has been arrested, given a sham trial before a notoriously biased judge, threatened with death, beaten, and denied life-saving medical treatment.



Farshid Fathi is a Christian pastor who ran a network of house churches in Tehran. Iranian officials arrested him on December 26, 2010. Pastor Fathi currently is serving a six-year sentence in Iran's notorious Evin prison. Farshid left Iran to attend seminary in Turkey and then pursued additional training in London with his wife before returning to Iran. Farshid reportedly is imprisoned alongside Saeed Abedini (see above). Though his crime is being a Christian and spreading his faith, Iranian authorities have cast his Christian activity as "political offenses," arguing that his Christian activities were equivalent to "actions against national security." He also was charged with possessing religious propaganda. At trial, the regime offered as evidence that Pastor Fathi had Bibles printed in Farsi, unlawfully distributed them, and possessed Christian literature. The regime also made it difficult for his lawyers to present a defense by denying them full access to the case until just a few days before trial.

KAZAKHSTAN



Bakhytzhon Kashkumbayev led the Presbyterian Grace Church in Astana. He has been jailed since May 2013. For a period of time he was detained in a psychiatric hospital where he was forcibly administered psychotropic drugs, a notorious Soviet form of punishment. While he was released from the psychiatric hospital, he was rearrested on charges of extremism. These serious charges carry a possible prison term of three to seven years, with obviously grave implications for both Pastor Kashkumbayev and the Grace Church. The Pastor was arrested on May 17, 2013 on charges of "intentional infliction of serious harm to health" to parishioner Lyazzat Almenova, but the complainant's mother, called for the case against the pastor to be dropped. The pastor's pre-trial detention was extended on October 7 until November 17 and he was then supposed to be transferred from prison to house arrest. Finally, after the Pastor's very brief reunion in prison with his family he was re-arrested and charged with acts of "propaganda of terrorism or extremism or public calls to commit an act of terrorism or extremism as well as the distribution of material of the content indicated." He remains detained today and is not receiving adequate care for a serious heart condition. Police in Astana also have stepped up their intimidation of members of the Grace Church.

PAKISTAN



Asia Bibi (f) is a Catholic mother of five and was a farmhand from the village of Ittan Wali in Sheikhpura District of Punjab province. In June 2009, an argument arose with her fellow laborers over whether the water she brought was “unclean” because she was Christian and they Muslim. Later coworkers complained to a cleric that Bibi made derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad. Police investigated her remarks, which resulted in her arrest and prosecution under Section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code for blasphemy. She spent more than a year in jail. On November 8, 2010, a district court in Nankana Sahib, Punjab, sentenced her to death for blasphemy, the first such sentence for blasphemy handed down against a woman. The death penalty is permissible under Pakistani law. According to the State Department, Bibi is waiting for her appeal to be heard at the Lahore High Court; she remains in custody. (USCIRF)

VIETNAM



Nguyen Trung Ton is a leader of a Pentecostal house church. Due to his evangelical work and advocacy for dispossessed farmers, Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton has often been harassed and beaten by security police. He is a signatory of the Bloc 8406 Democracy Movement manifesto. On December 29, 2011, he was sentenced to a two-year prison term to be followed by a two-year period of house arrest. The charge was “propaganda against the socialist state.”



Pastor Duong Kim Khai Duong is a pastor for the Mennonite Church in Vietnam, a long-time advocate for aggrieved farmers, a democracy activist and member of Viet Tan, an organization advocating for democracy. Since the early 1990’s, he has been detained or arrested thirteen times, often while trying to organize prayer sessions. He was jailed in 2004 for starting an “illegal” religious group. Upon his release in 2006, he founded the Mennonite Cattle Shed Congregation in order to advocate for religious freedom and social justice, particularly to provide assistance to farmers so they could petition the government for redress in land disputes or corruption cases in Ben Tre and Dong Thap provinces. He also joined Viet Tan during this period. Pastor Duong Kim Khai was arrested on August 10, 2010 on the charge of “attempting to overthrow the government.” The condition of his health and place of detention were kept from his family by authorities until October 12, 2010, when it received written confirmation of his arrest. On May 30, 2011, he was sentenced to a six-year prison term (later reduced to five years) followed by five-year term of house arrest. In 2011, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that the Hanoi government’s detention and conviction of Pastor Duong Kim Khai and six other land activists were in violation of international law.



Father Nguyen Van Ly has spent over 15 years in prison for the causes of religious freedom, democracy, and human rights. Initially arrested in September 1977 and sentenced to 20 years in a labor camp near Hue, he was later released but prohibited from engaging in religious activities. He was returned to jail in 2001 when he submitted testimony to the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom opposing a U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Act. On March 30, 2007, in a broadcasted show trial, authorities muzzled him while he tried to defend himself. He is a one of the founders of Bloc 8406 and past editor of an underground publication. (USCIRF)