

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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LEONARD A. LEO: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Leonard Leo, and I serve as chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, also known as USCIRF, has been visited electronically by foreign authorities who'd really like to know what we're saying about their governments; and they're trying awfully hard to read our private emails lately.

So let me, if I may, take a brief moment to address these esteemed authorities publicly: For your reading enjoyment, you can go to our website and see all of our reports on your government. It's www.uscifr.gov. When you get to "countries," click on "China," and I'm sure you'll find what you need. But if you want more, we can accommodate.

Today, we are releasing our 2011 annual report, which I trust you and others will find enlightening. I've had the privilege of serving as chairman of this commission for the past year, and the privilege of serving with quite a number of distinguished commissioners.

With me today are Vice Chair Elizabeth Prodromou, as well as Commissioners Imam Talal Eid, Felice Gaer, Richard Land, Reverend William Shaw, Nina Shea and Ted Van Der Meid. I want to thank all of them for their tireless efforts. I also want to thank our staff, and especially Executive Director Jackie Wolcott and Elizabeth Cassidy for their essential role in helping to prepare the annual report.

As many of you know, the commission was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, also known as IRFA. We are a bipartisan, independent U.S. government body that monitors religious freedom worldwide and makes policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state and to Congress. In accomplishing its mission, USCIRF refers to the standards found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments.

This year's annual report represent (ph) a year's work by commissioners and the staff; with the reporting period of April 2010 through March 2011, our report covers 28 countries.

Now, to carry out our charge, commissioners traveled during the past reporting period to a number of countries, including Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey and Cyprus. They also consulted at the Council of Europe, the OSCE and Berlin with the Bundestag and government there.

Staff members traveled to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan and the Philippines. USCIRF discussed with the Obama administration how the United States can promote religious freedom more effectively on issues critical to our foreign policy. We also met with members of Congress, U.S. ambassadors to key countries and high-ranking officials from the State Department and the National Security Council.

Over the past year, USCIRF has championed the rights of a wide range of religious communities: Uighur Muslims in China; Shia and Ismaili Muslims in Saudi Arabia; Christians and Ahmadis in Pakistan and Indonesia; Jews in Venezuela; Bahais, Christians and dissident Muslims in Iran; Buddhists in Vietnam and China; and a range of indigenous groups and movements in China, Egypt, Iraq, Vietnam and a number of other countries.

While it is obvious that violations of religious freedom are a fundamental human rights concern, it is also true that they have strong national security implications. For example, the recent assassinations of high-level officials in Pakistan serve to remind us how laws against blasphemy are destabilizing a critical U.S. ally, creating a climate of impunity by fueling hatred and violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims in the country.

We have actually dedicated this year's annual report to one of those brave officials, Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's minister for minority affairs who was killed on March 2nd by the Pakistani Taliban. On the cover of the annual report is the scene in his hometown where he was buried. He was a good friend of this commission.

For this year's report, USCIRF recommends that the secretary of state designate 14 nations as countries of particular concern, or CPCs, if you will, for their systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom as mandated by the International Religious Freedom Act. My colleagues and I will discuss these momentarily; there is a list of those countries over to my right.

While the Obama administration has relied on the prior administration's CPC designations, we are hopeful that the confirmation of Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook as the new ambassador-at-large for religious freedom – it will make new designations and apply meaningful actions very soon, underscoring America's resolve to bolster the freedom of religion or belief around the world.

When it comes to religious freedom, there are three main kinds of violations our commission has observed and documented in this report: First, there is state hostility toward religion, religious communities and/or religious leadership; second, there is state sponsorship of extremist ideology and education; and third, there is a state's failure to prevent and punish religious-freedom violations perpetrated by private individuals.

State hostility involves active persecution of dissenting religious believers. State sponsorship involves active promotion, including exportation, of radical ideas and propaganda against these or other believers. State failure involves neglecting to take action necessary to protect them against other citizens who threaten them because of their different beliefs.

Another word for a state's failure to protect is "impunity." It is impunity that has especially concerned the commission lately because it receives the least attention at precisely the time that it is growing tremendously.

It's partly because of our concern about impunity that today, for the first time, we are recommending that Egypt be designated as a country of particular concern. We are acutely aware that the success of Egypt's current political transition depends on its full respect for the rule of law, including respect for fundamental human rights, of which religious freedom is critical.

According to our findings, the Egyptian government engaged in and tolerated religious freedom violations both before and after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11 of this year. In his waning months, religious-freedom conditions were rapidly deteriorating. And since his departure, we've seen nothing to indicate that these conditions have improved.

This is especially true on the impunity front where attacks on religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians but also disfavored Muslims, have risen. The severe level of violence and the failure to convict those responsible, including two of the three alleged perpetrators in last year's Nag Hammadi murders, continue to foster a climate of impunity, making violence more likely.

Despite the transitional government's initial efforts to dismantle the state's repressive security apparatus, Egypt's state of emergency remains, and laws and practices that discriminate continue to hinder religious freedom. Since February 11th, military and security forces have allegedly used excessive force, including live ammunition, against Christian demonstrators and churches.

As part of our CPC designation, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. use some of the money it gives Egypt for military assistance to enhance physical protection for Coptic Christians and other religious minorities, and their places of worship. The U.S. government should also provide more aid to organizations promoting democracy and governance training, as well as for civil society groups promoting human rights and religious-freedom reforms.

Now, in our judgment, nations that we recommend for CPC status, like Egypt, are the world's worst violators of religious freedom. But there are other nations that, while being unmistakable violators, don't quite meet the CPC threshold. These are countries that comprise our watch list; and as watch-list nations, they are closely monitored. If little or nothing changes, they stay on the list. If things dramatically improve, we could move them off the list. If things dramatically worsen, we could recommend them for CPC status.

One example of a watch-list country is Turkey. We traveled there in February and met with Turkish officials including the deputy prime minister, as well as leading religious figures including the Diyanet president, the ecumenical patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, the patriarchs of the Syriac and Armenian Orthodox churches, and the chief rabbi of Turkey, as well as Turkish journalists, academics and civil society representatives.

We've decided to keep Turkey on our watch list because its government continues to stifle religious freedom by imposing suffocating regulations which threaten the vitality and survival of religious minorities in that country. State secularism in Turkey has significantly restricted religious freedom, especially for religious-minority communities, including the Greek,

Armenian and Syriac Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, and the Jewish community, but also for the majority Sunni Muslim community and the minority Allavis (ph), which some view as a unique sect of Islam.

Through these restrictions on non-Muslim communities, Turkey continues to deny them the right to train their clergy, offer religious education, and own and maintain places of worship. Moreover, through its military control over Northern Cyprus, Turkey supports a web of arbitrary restrictions imposed by Turkish Cypriot authorities resulting in serious limitations on freedom of religion.

We urge the U.S. government to press Turkey toward full legal recognition for religious communities, full permission for religious minorities to train their clergy, full re-opening of the Greek Orthodox theological seminary of Halki for that purpose, full return of the Mor Gabriel Syrian Orthodox monastery to its rightful owners, and full removal of restrictions on religious garb for both men and women.

The removal – excuse me – the U.S. government should also urge Turkey and Turkish Cypriot authorities to abandon all restrictions on Christians and Jews regarding the access, use and restoration of places of worship and cemeteries, and to cease the ongoing desecration of these sites and items.

Now, let me end on a positive note: On March 24th, the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva rejected an approach that favored a global blasphemy law. I'm referring to the so-called "defamation of religions" resolution which had been designed in recent years by certain U.N. member states to protect a specific religion, namely Islam, from criticism. In response, USCIRF worked with the State Department, Congress and human rights NGOs to highlight the dangers of this approach, and to urge its rejection by other U.N. member states.

As a result of our efforts, support for it began to erode. And last month, the council abandoned the defamation approach altogether. In its place, the council adopted a new consensus resolution protecting individuals from discrimination, rather than religions, from any criticism.

It is our hope that in the coming months and years, Pakistan and other nations will abandon their own blasphemy laws, and that the U.S. and world community will support further steps that will strengthen the right to freedom of religion for all.

And now, I'd like to turn to my colleagues for their comments and observations on various countries. And I think we're going to begin with our vice chair, Elizabeth Prodromou.

ELIZABETH H. PRODROMOU: Good morning. Earlier this year in January of 2010, I was part of our commission's delegation that visited Saudi Arabia. We had last visited Saudi Arabia in June of 2007.

On this most recent visit, our commission saw signs of – some signs of improvement in religious-freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia, but we also confirmed ongoing, systematic and

egregious violations of religious freedom which persist in the kingdom. And because of these violations, the USCIRF recommends that Saudi Arabia again be named a country of particular concern, or a CPC.

Of course, King Abdullah has actually undertaken some limited reform measures, and he promotes interreligious dialogue in international fora. Nonetheless, the Saudi government persists in banning all public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of Sunni Islam – Hanbali Islam – and likewise continues to interfere with private religious practice, including for non-Muslim expatriate workers in Saudi Arabia.

In addition, the Saudi government continues to ban churches, synagogues, temples and other non-Muslim places of worship. Ismaili Muslims suffer repression in Saudi Arabia; there have been numerous arrests and detentions as well of Shia Muslim dissidents, in part as a result of increasing regional unrest.

Members of the Saudi Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (ph), the CPVPV – also known as the mutawa – continue to commit abuses in Saudi Arabia, although we found that their public presence had diminished slightly, and the number of reported incidents of abuse had decreased in some parts of the country.

The government still uses in schools, and also posts online, state textbooks which espouse intolerance and also incite violence.

It's been almost 10 years now since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, and it's also been nearly five years since the Saudi government promised to improve religious-freedom conditions in the confirmation of policies that was announced by our State Department.

As a consequence, the USCIRF has concluded that U.S. policy in Saudi Arabia does not adequately prioritize issues of human rights and religious freedom. And as a consequence, our commission recommends that the U.S. government lift the indefinite waiver of action, or at least extend a limited, 180-day waiver during which time the Saudi government should complete reforms on textbooks and certainly rein in the CPVPV.

Now, in terms of Iraq, the USCIRF continues to recommend that that country be named a country of particular concern, or a CPC. Our recommendation is based on the severe religious-freedom violations and abuses in that country, and the inadequate Iraqi government responses and measures to protect religious communities or to hold perpetrators accountable – in other words, to correct the climate of impunity.

Iraq's religious-freedom situation remains especially grave for the country's small and most vulnerable religious minorities. These include Chaldo-Assyrians and other Christians, Sabeans, Mandaean and Yazidis. The violence, forced displacement, discrimination, marginalization and neglect that's suffered by members of these groups actually threatens their very existence, their sustainability of these ancient communities, and jeopardizes Iraq's future as a diverse, pluralistic and free society.

Although violence in Iraq has decreased overall, late 2010 actually saw a surge in attacks against Christians, and a new wave of Christian displacement. In particular, the attacks included the worst single assault on Christians since 2003; this occurred on October 31 of 2010. It was the hostage siege at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Roman Catholic church in Baghdad. The Iraqi government has publicly condemned such violence, but again continues to fall short in investigating attacks, and likewise, in bringing perpetrators of such attacks to justice.

Many of the remaining Christians and Yazidis in Iraq reside in the country's three – in the three governorates of the Kurdistan Regional Governor (ph) at the KRG, and in the highly dangerous Nineveh governorate. Now, this is – the Nineveh governorate is contested between the KRG and Baghdad.

And in these locations in particular, religious and ethnic minorities are caught in the crossfire and the struggle for control between the KRG and Baghdad. And they have been targeted for abuses and discrimination.

USCIRF therefore urges the U.S. government to designate Iraq a CPC, and especially to take concrete steps to make the prevention of abuses against religious minorities a high priority, to make certain that the KRG upholds minority rights, and finally, to ensure that the situation of internally displaced persons – IDPs – and refugees is effectively addressed. Thank you.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Shea?

NINA SHEA: Good morning. I'm Commissioner Nina Shea. I'm going to be addressing Pakistan and Iran.

In Pakistan, numerous attacks were launched against religious groups during the past year, and two high-profile members of the ruling party were assassinated for their opposition to Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws.

As Chairman Leo already mentioned, one of the assassinated individuals, federal Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, was a long-time friend of the commission and a personal friend of mine.

In light of these particularly severe violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2011 that Pakistan be designated a country of particular concern. Pakistan is arguably the most glaring omission to the State Department's CPC list, as the government is both responsible for and tolerates egregious violations of religious freedom.

While the Zardari government has taken some positive actions to promote religious tolerance and remedy abuses, mainly through the actions of the late Shahbaz Bhatti, it has failed to protect religious freedom for all Pakistanis. Blasphemy laws are deployed against members of religious minority groups and dissenters within the majority Muslim community, and frequently result in imprisonment on account of religion or belief and/or a vigilante violence.

Three individuals had death sentences imposed or upheld against them during the reporting period, including the outrageous sentence against Asia Bibi. Anti-Ahmadi laws discriminate against individual Ahmadis and effectively criminalize various practices of their faith.

These laws and other religiously discriminatory legislation have created an atmosphere of violent extremism and vigilantism. The forces that threaten Pakistani and U.S. security interests are largely motivated by a violent extremist ideology that rejects international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief.

The Pakistani government's response to this extremism remains inadequate, despite increased military operations.

Promoting respect for freedom of religion or belief must be an integral part of U.S. strategy in Pakistan, and designating Pakistan as a CPC would enable the United States to press Islamabad more effectively to undertake needed reforms.

Regarding Iran, since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran a country of particular concern. USCIRF continues to recommend that Iran remain a CPC, as the Iranian government engages in systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.

Since the disputed June 12th, 2009 elections, human rights and religious freedom conditions in Iran have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic revolution. Over the past year, religious minorities – in particular, Baha'is, Christians and Sufi Muslims – faced intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests and imprisonment. The seven Baha'i leaders continue to endure lengthy prison sentences.

During the reporting period, the number of incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, harassing and threatening church members, and arresting, convicting and imprisoning worshippers and church leaders has significantly increased. Majority Shia and minority Sunni Muslims, including dissenting clerics, were intimidated, harassed and detained.

During the past year, U.S. policy on human rights in Iran has consisted of increased public statements, heightened activity in multilateral fora, and imposing unilateral sanctions on Iranian officials for human rights violations. USCIRF urges the United States government to continue to impose sanctions on the Iranian government officials responsible for severe abuses.

To date, the U.S. government has named 10 officials, while the European Union announced earlier this month that it had sanctioned 32 individual officials for human rights abuses. USCIRF has recommended other officials this year who should be sanctioned.

And now, my fellow commissioner, Felice Gaer, welcome to the podium.

FELICE GAER: Thank you very much.

Well, for 12 years, this commission has reported on the status of freedom. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief in Russia was one of the first countries the commission addressed. Due to the increasing concerns about limitations on religious freedom across the Russian Federation, the commission has this year again placed Russia on its watch list.

Religious freedom conditions in Russia continue to deteriorate, says the commission. Over the past year, the government increased its use of anti-extremist legislation: legislation against religious groups, groups that are not known to use or advocate violence. National and local government officials also harassed Muslims and members of religious groups that they view as nontraditional through the enforcement of other laws, including laws dealing with religious organizations.

Human rights groups are concerned that the heavy-handed way in which the Russian government is addressing security threats could increase instability and radicalism among the Russian Muslim community. Muslims and several minority religious groups continued to experience denials of registration to operate and delays and refusals to permit construction of grant permits to rent places of worship. Their members are often harassed and detained.

A rise in Russian xenophobia and intolerance continues to result in numerous violent attacks and other hate crimes, including anti-Semitic hate crimes.

Despite improved prosecution rates in Moscow, the Russian government has failed to address these serious problems adequately, consistently or effectively.

As part of the so-called reset of bilateral relations, the commission's view is that the United States government should treat religion – freedom of religion and belief – as vital to the U.S.-Russian relationship, recognizing that it is both a human rights and a security concern in Russia. In addition, the U.S. commission has made recommendations on ways the United States could respond to the massive abuses allegedly attributed to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, which the European Court of Human Rights has found responsible for severe ongoing human rights abuses.

I turn now to China. Regarding China, another longtime concern of this commission, we report that there has been no improvement in the religious freedom situation, and the annual report goes so far as to indicate a marked deterioration regarding Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims in China. It calls the conditions affecting them the worst they have been in the last 10 years.

In addition, human rights defenders who protect the universal rights of every individual, including members of unfavored religious groups, have been tortured, they have been detained, they have been forcibly disappeared, and they have been stripped of their legal licenses.

Some senior-level government officials, including President Hu Jintao, have in fact acknowledged the positive role that religious communities can play. There are reports, now, that the government is considering legalizing charitable activities of recognized religious organizations.

However, in the last year, the Chinese government has issued new guidelines that emphasize guiding or forcing unregistered Protestants to worship in state-sanctioned churches and to break large churches into small groups.

They have issued guidelines that further deny Catholics the freedom to make bishop appointments with the Vatican's approval, that require Muslims to pass political tests to go on a religious pilgrimage, and to better manage Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

In addition, the Chinese government continues to restrict online access to religious information and the rights of parents to teach their own children religion.

The U.S. commission has concluded that a robust religious freedom agenda should be a critical component of the bilateral relationship and should be woven firmly into the full architecture of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship.

Why?

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

USCIRF has also recommended that the U.S. raise religious freedom concerns in multilateral fora where the United States and China are members, while also raising religious freedom and negotiating binding human rights agreements at the U.S.-China strategic and economic dialogue.

Thank you.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Eid?

IMAM TALAL Y. EID: Good morning. I am Commissioner Imam Talal Eid, and I will share two countries with you: Nigeria and Indonesia.

First, the government of Nigeria continues to tolerate systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom. The government has inadequately and ineffectively responded to acts of religiously-related violence, including reprisal attacks, and has failed to bring those responsible for such violence to justice.

As I have seen during my visit to Nigeria, years of inaction by Nigeria's federal law and the state representatives who created a climate of impunity resulting in thousands of deaths.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again recommends that Nigeria be designated a CPC country. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Nigeria since 2009.

Religion and religious identity are intertwined in ethnic, political, economic and social controversies, and can be misused by politicians, religious leaders or others to galvanize their constituencies for political gain. Combined with the Nigerian government's toleration of criminal acts, this has created an atmosphere for violence that has led to the death of 13,000 Nigerians if not more in strife between Muslims and the Christians.

In late 2010, for the first time in years, the government brought some perpetrators to justice, convicting five persons on federal terrorism charges for their role in March, 2010 violence in Jos. These convictions are an important first step to end the culture of impunity. But the government must do more to prevent incidents – prosecute perpetrators and protect all Nigerians from religiously-related violence.

Jurisdictional disputes between federal and state officials prevent prosecutions and are a factor in the culture of impunity.

Second, regarding Indonesia: A USCIRF delegation traveled there in May, 2010 and met with government officials, Indonesian parliamentarians, civil society representatives and religious – and religious leaders.

We found that despite Indonesia's tradition of religious tolerance, religious radicalism and extremism have made inroads, leading to sectarian violence, terrorism and religious freedom violations.

The majority of Indonesia's diverse religious communities operate openly and with few restrictions. The president has condemned violence against religious minorities and has urged their protection, yet religious minorities have continued to experience harassment, intimidation and violence perpetuated by groups espousing intolerance and extremism under the banner of Islamic orthodoxy. Meanwhile, law enforcement and government officials remain passive and sometimes even complicit in the face of violence against religious minorities.

These problems are a threat to Indonesia's tradition of religious tolerance and the pluralism. In the past year, three Ahmadiyya followers were killed in a mob attack, and several Ahmadiyya mosques were forcibly closed. Also, a 2008 joint ministerial decree curtailing the activities of the Ahmadiyya community remained in place and several provinces have issued bans on Ahmadiyya practice.

The Indonesian government continues to allow the enforcement of local laws restricting the rights of women, especially in Aceh. Enforcement of Sharia, particularly the law prohibiting un-Islamic dress and unchaperoned meetings between unmarried men and women, is applied selectively and abusively, and often severely violates women's rights to personal autonomy, expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.

USCIRF recommends that the Obama administration create regular human right dialogues and target economic assistance to support 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 the pressing social, political and economic concerns.

Thank you.

MR. LEO: Reverend Shaw. Commissioner Shaw.

REVEREND WILLIAM J. SHAW: Good morning. I'm William Shaw, commissioner. I will be reporting on Sudan, Northern and Southern Sudan.

Sudan was one of the first countries on which the commission focused its attention, due to the role that religion played in the north-south civil war, 1983 through 2005, which war cost 2 million lives, most of them Christians and followers of traditional African religions.

Every year since 1999, and including this year, the commission has recommended that the Sudan be designated a country of particular concern due to Khartoum's severe violations of freedom (of) religion or belief. The State Department has designated Sudan since 1999 as well.

Since the signing in 2005 of the comprehensive peace agreement, also known as the CPA, Sudan has experienced a fragile peace between north and south, and has seen a successful January, 2011 referendum on self-determination for South Sudan, in which southerners voted overwhelmingly for independence. The CPA is scheduled to end in July, with South Sudan becoming a new country. But many questions remain.

Meanwhile, in the north, religious freedom violations continue. They include: the Khartoum government's imposition of its version of Sharia law, and enforcement of religiously-based morality laws through corporal punishment; the criminalization of conversion from Islam, a crime punishable by death; the denial of the rights of non-Muslims to public religious expression and persuasion while Muslims are allowed to proselytize; and the difficulty in obtaining permission to build churches, as compared to government funding of mosque construction.

USCIRF is concerned that religious freedom conditions in the north will further deteriorate once the south becomes independent in July. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has said that once this happens, Sharia will be the basis of a new constitution and that references in the current constitution that Sudan is a multi-religious, -ethnic and -cultural state will be eliminated.

One remaining obstacle on the path to southern independence is the failure to resolve the status of the contested Abyei area, which wants to hold its own referendum for residents to decide if they wanted to remain in the north or join an independent South Sudan. The referendum is indefinitely delayed as negotiations have failed and tensions have led to violence in January and March. Additionally, the citizenship issue remains unresolved, leaving southerners in the north in danger of becoming stateless.

Regarding South Sudan, the commission traveled there a total of three times in this reporting period to investigate religious freedom conditions, monitor CPA implementations, and determine the region's development needs. Since 2005, conditions for religious freedom have improved in Southern Sudan. The interim constitution of South Sudan includes protections for freedom of religion or belief, and the government of South Sudan generally respects religious freedom.

The commission recommends that that U.S. government and international partners work closely with the parties in Sudan to resolve the citizenship issue so that vulnerable populations are not rendered stateless and overcome the Abyei impasse to prevent further violence. UCIRF recommends that the U.S. government maintain current IRFA and IEPA (ph) religious freedom sanctions on the north and leverage these sanctions, or impose new sanctions, to prevent further deterioration of freedom of religion or belief.

The commission also recommends that the U.S. government and the international partners urge the governments in the north and the south to ensure that their new constitutions reflect international obligations to religious freedom and human rights, and that the constitution drafting processes are inclusive and transparent. Thank you.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Van Der Meid.

TED VAN DER MEID: I'm Ted Van Der Meid. This is my first year on the commission and I want to say it's been an honor and a privilege to work with these distinguished colleagues and a very dedicated staff on these very important issues.

Since Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991, basic human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, have been under assault. The commission recommends that the secretary of state continue to designate Uzbekistan a CPC. While Uzbekistan has been so designated by the State Department since 2006, a de facto indefinite waiver of any punitive action has been in place since 2008.

Uzbekistan's 1998 religion law places severe limits on the activities of all religious communities. The law allows the Uzbek government to control religious communities and the approved practice of the majority Muslim faith. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses are often branded as extremists and face harassment, detention and arrest for illegal religious activity.

The Uzbek government continues to arrest Muslims and repress individuals, groups and mosques that do not conform to the government-prescribed practices, or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This policy has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons. Many reportedly are detained, denied due process, and are subjected to torture.

Granted, Uzbekistan faces security concerns as a result of serious threats from groups which advocate or engage in violence in the name of religion. Nevertheless, the Uzbek government's broad-brush approach to this situation is problematic, due to its arbitrary

application of vague anti-extremism laws against religious adherents and others who pose no credible threat to security.

Uzbekistan plays an important role in the Northern Distribution Network, NDN, that supplies U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan. There is, however, a concern that Uzbekistan's NDN role could lead the U.S. government to downplay its severe human rights and religious freedom abuses, and that those abuses could have a destabilizing effect on other countries in Central Asia.

USCIRF has concluded that the State Department should again designate Uzbekistan as a CPC. Upon redesignation no waiver should be given and sanctions should be imposed, including a ban on visits to the United States by high level Uzbek officials.

Regarding Vietnam, human rights and religious freedom conditions continue to deteriorate, despite statements by the U.S. government officials to the contrary. The commission has found there continued to be severe religious freedom abuses occurring in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government continues to detain prisoners of concern, restrict independent religious practice, repress individuals and groups viewed as a challenge to political authority, and maintain a religious security police force.

In the past year there have been new arrests and detentions, evidence of forced renunciations of faith, and government sanctioned violence targeting religious communities, including the Catholic village of Con Dau. These ongoing and serious violations, the uneven pace of religious freedom progress, the continued detention of prisoners of concern and new evidence of severe religious freedom abuses – USCIRF again recommends that Vietnam be designated as a CPC.

The CPC designation has proven to be a productive diplomatic tool in the past, spurring discussion that has led to tangible improvements on the ground without halting progress in other bilateral interests. We believe it'll do so again. Thus, USCIRF urges the Obama administration to reevaluate all available diplomatic and political resources to advance religious freedom in Vietnam.

MR. LEO: Thank you, and Commissioner Land.

RICHARD D. LAND: Thank you, Chairman Leo. I apologize for being late but I was in the airport for seven hours yesterday in Nashville trying to get here, and then they cancelled the flight. So I got up at 4:00 this morning and got the first flight here.

I've spent nine of the last 10 years on this commission and I want you to know that it's a privilege and an honor to serve on this commission. I think this is one of the most important things, and one of the altruistic things that our government does, and it is in keeping with our basic principles. The people on this commission disagree about lots of things, but we're in unanimity about the right of individuals to worship as they please without the interference of human authorities.

Since 2004, the commission has recommended the Eritrea be designated a CPC. And the country has been so named by the State Department since that year. In September of 2005, the State Department announced a sanction against Eritrea restricting arms exports, which was the first unique action to be undertaken under the International Religious Freedom Act in response to a CPC designation.

Nonregistered religious communities are severely harassed by government authorities. Members of these communities are arbitrarily arrested, detained in crowded prison cells for indefinite periods of time without charge and with no medical attention, and even tortured. Some, reportedly, have died. Human rights groups estimate that there are 2 (thousand) to 3,000 religious prisoners currently in Eritrean jails. Most of these affected are evangelical or Pentecostal Christians.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been barred from obtaining government-issued identity and travel documents, which prevents the legal recognition of marriages. Some Jehovah's Witnesses who have refused to serve in the military have been imprisoned without trial for over a decade.

In light of this, the commission recommends that in addition to keeping the existing U.S. ban on the export of defense articles covered by the Arms Control Export Act, the U.S. government employ the international emergency 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 also reiterates its recommendation that the U.S. government prohibit any foreign company from raising capital or listing its securities in the United States while engaged in developing Eritrea's mineral resources.

Regarding Afghanistan, USCIRF has determined that conditions for religious freedom remain exceedingly poor for minority religious communities and dissenting members of the majority faith, and again, we place it on our watch list. The commission has made this finding, despite the presence of U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan for almost 10 years, and the substantial investment of lives, resources and expertise by the United States and the international community.

In spite of advances in human rights since the ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001, the Afghan government remains unable to protect citizens against violence and intimidation by the Taliban and other illegal armed groups. In addition, many of the religious freedom problems emanate from the government's interpretation of the 2004 Afghan constitution, which has effectively established Islamic law as the law of the land. Afghan jurists and government officials do not view the guarantees to human rights that come late in the document as taking precedence.

As a result, small religious minorities, such as Christians, experience increased repression during the reporting period and Muslims are prevented from openly debating issues relating to religion, society and the state. Considering the emphasis placed on respect for the constitution in negotiations and reconciliation efforts with the Taliban, USCIRF is concerned that this widespread interpretation of the constitution's provisions on Islamic law would seriously undermine freedom of religion and the human rights of women in the country.

To better prioritize freedom of religion on behalf – or belief – in U.S. policy, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government use its influence to support those who advocate respect for freedom of religion or belief as well as increased efforts to ensure that the formal and informal judicial sectors uphold international standards of human rights.

MR. LEO: Thank you very much, Commissioner. We have one commissioner who is not here this morning, Commissioner Don Argue, also a vice chair of the commission, and he has been on a number of mission and delegations with us and I know wanted to be here. And we very much appreciate his service and his companionship as a fellow commissioner.

And there was one individual on the dais who has not risen to the podium but who is nevertheless a very important part of our commission's life, and that is Ambassador Jackie Wolcott, to my far left. She is our executive director and a tremendous resource, and those of you in the press and civil society world should, of course, feel free to reach out to her, as well as many of the other policy experts and other staff I'm sure you're familiar with.

This is the fun part. This is when we get to have a more interactive conversation, questions from the press and other members of the audience. And we will do our best to be responsive to your inquiries. So why don't we open up the floor.

Q: Is there a mic?

MR. LEO: Yes sir? And if you could – there is, and if you could identify yourself that would be great.

Q: Thank you very much, Vladimir Kara-Murza with RTVi television. I have a question on Russia. Could you elaborate specifically on the couple of recommendations you have, regarding the Smith amendment? And secondly, on the visa ban for Mr. Kadyrov, could you talk a little bit more in detail about those? Thank you.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Gaer, do you want to start by fielding that question? And what we'll do is, a number of commissioners have expertise in different areas so we'll give them the first crack but then other commissioners may want to chime in as well.

MS. GAER: Well, the commission has recommended that the U.S. government actually institute a visa ban and freeze the assets of Ramzan Kadyrov due to his continued gross human rights violations and to his alleged links to politically motivated killings. And we've also asked that America's European partners do the same. Now, this is an expansion of a position that we took in the past, and you might want to compare that.

Now, as far as the Smith act is concerned I can assure you there is no change in our position on that. And Commissioner Prodromou will add to that.

MS. PRODROMOU: Yeah, I think in terms of the Smith amendment, as Commissioner Gaer mentioned, there's no change in our position, which means we continue to advocate for the

implementation of the provisions of the Smith amendment. And that would actually restrict assistance to the Russian Federation government in cases where there's demonstrated violation of – and discrimination against – religious and other minority groups in the country. So the problem is that the act exists and yet its provisions have not yet been implemented. So we continue to push for their implementation.

MR. LEO: Other comments from commissioners on Russia?

MS. GAER: I just wanted to add that on the Kadyrov issue, we've specifically asked that there be consideration of recommending him for the politically exposed persons list. That's a specific item in the politically exposed persons list which includes government officials whose bank assets should be frozen.

MR. LEO: In the back.

Q: Thank you, my name is Lina Correa. I work for Voice of America. In the specific cases of countries like Cuba and Venezuela, what are the facts that make that country remain on the list as a watched country? And about the recommendations, there is one on United Nations resolution against a violation of human rights in Venezuela. I would like to hear your comments about that, please.

MR. LEO: OK, so Cuba and Venezuela.

Q: Cuba and Venezuela. Yeah, and their recommendations. Specifically United Nations. Thank you.

MR. LEO: OK. Commissioner Van Der Meid, do you want to take Cuba?

MR. VAN DER MEID: Well, in relation to Cuba, we didn't see any real change in the status of Cuba. We did note, in the report, the release of – the agreement that was negotiated with the church, for the release of political prisoners, initially 52 I think, and then they ultimately released over 100, with the condition that they have to – they went – they were deported and went to Spain.

But otherwise, church leaders were still detained, harassment continues against church leaders in Cuba. So we didn't really see any change in Cuba except for the release of the political prisoners, which I think The Washington Post editorialized may have been done for other reasons, aid and other reasons other than religious freedom. But other than that we didn't see any particular change in Cuba.

MR. LEO: Venezuela, are you – that's ok. Commissioner Shea.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, we're concerned about the government, some of the government statements in Venezuela particularly anti-Semitic statements, and the impunity, the continuing impunity in attacks against the Papal Nuncio's residences, the synagogue – there was a five-hour attack couple of years ago – still have not been adjudicated.

So the United States, we believe, should be speaking out more about this and be working in a multilateral way to put pressure on Hugo Chavez's government to make sure that there is justice served in these attacks so that they don't grow, they don't continue, and that the rhetoric stop from the government.

Because this seems to be – there's a correspondence naturally, as you'd expect, when the top leader of the country speaks in these terms to anti-Semitic graffiti and even vandalism and attacks. We want to see a resolution in the Human Rights Council. We also call for the government to work with Brazil, for example – another country that is – may have some influence where we don't.

MR. LEO: I – our – I would just add that our recommendation – our recommendations do include support for the U.N. General Assembly resolution, to which I think you're referring. I would also add that one of the key recommendations we made in connection with Venezuela was to hold accountable the perpetrators of the violence that occurred in 2009, both against one of the synagogues in Venezuela and also some violence that occurred at the Papal Nunciature. And so that was an important part of our recommendations as well.

Yes?

Q: Hi, Emily Belz with WORLD Magazine. I just wanted to ask, if Egypt made it onto the CPC list, why didn't Afghanistan make it onto the list if their constitution is actively oppressing religious minorities?

MR. LEO: Egypt made it onto the CPC list for a number of very specific reasons, but one that was of particular focus to the commission over the past couple of years and that was the issue of impunity.

We had been watching with some interest and concern the Naga Hammadi trials. And we, for quite some time, had viewed that as a very critical benchmark for how Egypt was going to be dealing with issues of impunity and bringing perpetrators of private sectarian-related violence to justice.

And when – when those acquittals in that case took place and when the – I believe it was subsequent – bombing took place in – I believe it was Alexandria, that was for us a very important signal that the impunity issue was getting worse and not better.

Now, when you combine that with other conditions that have existed, particularly various elements of state-sponsored repression, we believe that there was sufficient grounds for triggering the IRF Act standard, which, as you know, is systematic egregious violations of the freedom of religion or belief. But impunity was a very important benchmark for us.

Afghanistan – Commissioner Land, do you want to – do you want to address Afghanistan briefly and sort of how we thought through Afghanistan?

MR. LAND: Well, I think you made the essential point. I think that we see one country where impunity seems to be – attempts to deal with it by the government, and one where the government seems to be ignoring it or you have, you know, jury nullification of the government's attempt to deal with it. But neither one of them are happy cases.

You know, the watchlist is serious. And Afghanistan, we should be very concerned about. But Egypt, the growing impunity with which violence against religious minorities is treated was taken very seriously, as Chairman Leo has said.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Shea?

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I just want to add that if you look at the statement that I joined with Chairman Leo in the report on Afghanistan – it's on page 226 of this temporary report. But we note that it's really a matter of time before Afghanistan is CPC, we believe, because there's – the problem of the constitution, as you pointed out, it's framed in such a way that minorities – Christians, in this particular case – are not going to be able to get freedom of religion. So that is an unfortunate part of the reconstruction effort.

We've been writing and talking about that for – since, I think, '05, as a commission, offering our recommendations on the Afghan and Iraq constitutions as well. But it is a very – you know, President Karzai's government is grappling with some of these issues, and there've been some prison releases that were significant, of Christians on death row for converting.

So we're going to be watching it, as Dr. Land said, extremely closely in this coming year.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Prodromou?

MS. PRODROMOU: Just one last follow up on, why Egypt and not Afghanistan? I think the Egypt piece is – the change – so that needs to be addressed more specifically.

I think, to sum it up, we saw both a qualitative as well as a quantitative deterioration in the religious freedom conditions in Egypt. In particular, we saw a dramatic uptick of targeted religious violence, primarily against the Coptic Orthodox community but also against the Roman Catholic community and other Christian communities.

And in addition to that, what are so-called disfavored Muslim groups – Quranists, Ahmadis, Sufis, Shia – they continue to experience ongoing harassment and discrimination through Article 98 of the penal code in Egypt. And we saw an uptick in that as well. In other words, they are charged with blasphemy.

And then finally in terms of another community which has been subjected to violence and discrimination in Egypt, we continue to see foot-dragging as well as a worsening, in some cases, and that's the Baha'is – measures that were designed to issue identity papers to the Baha'is by the Egyptian government. Those have been lagging. So I think it's both a combination of quantitative deterioration and qualitative deterioration that really underscored and prompted us to call for a CPC status for Egypt.

MR. LEO: And, you know, on Egypt, it was very interesting – even before the final verdicts in the Naga Mahadi (sic) trials, both President Obama and Pope Benedict in December and January, respectively, cited Egypt among one or two other countries as presenting very serious problems with regard to the issue of impunity. President Obama did so, if I remember correctly, between Christmas and New Year's of last year. Pope Benedict did so in both his world peace message, which I believe was delivered on New Year's Day and then in his address to the diplomatic corps of the Holy See.

And so Egypt has been a focus and I think a number of important individuals and institutions other than this commission have been seeing a change and have been benchmarking some of the – some of the trials and other impunity-related issues in connection with that country.

Yes, in the back?

Q: (Off mic.) Mike Bowman, also with Voice of America.

I know your focus is foreign countries but do you see any areas where we as Americans should be working on? Perhaps, I don't know; the treatment of Muslims after 9/11?

MR. LEO: Our mandate is precisely as you described it. It's to address issues of international religious freedom. And so the commission doesn't express any view on U.S. – on domestic U.S. policy with respect to the freedom of religion or belief. And that's been the commission's custom, consistent with its statutory mandate. Congress was very specific in charging us with only looking at issues of international religious freedom.

And interestingly – and importantly, I think – you know, first of all, the commission is a unique body in the world. There is no other institution – government institution like it in any other country that looks only at issues of international freedom of religion or belief.

There are some other countries, like Germany and the Philippines, which have looked to the USCIRF model and are beginning to think very seriously about adopting similar bodies right now. But right now, we're a unique institution internationally.

Secondly – and this is so important – when we travel abroad and meet with other leaders, we don't use U.S.-based, U.S.-style law in ascertaining religious freedom conditions around the world. We use international human rights instruments, so, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil (and) Political Rights and other important international legal documents.

And so that's sort of our – that's our silo or focus, if you will. And so, for better or worse, we cannot address interesting domestic problems or issues.

IMAM EID: However, you know, as commissioners, we are individuals and each one of us is vibrant in engaging in many issues here in the United States.

MR. LAND: And one of the reasons that we're on this commission is because we've been active in dealing with these issues both here and overseas.

One of our requirements that we've put together internally is that we have to have six votes to make a recommendation. And given the diversity of this commission, I'm not sure we could get six votes on most domestic issues. (Laughter.)

MR. LEO: Yes, in the front row here. Yes. Ma'am?

Q: Yeah, thank you. I'm Katie (ph) Wong (sp) with NTDTV. I have two questions regarding China. I know China has been designated on your CPC list for many years and the U.S. and China have frequent human rights dialogue and – as well as strategic dialogues.

But why, for so many years, we haven't seen any improvement on the religious freedom conditions in China?

And the second question is, China has been stating that they are against the foreign countries using the pretext of human rights issue for interfering in China's internal affairs. So I'm wondering, how do you respond to this?

MR. LEO: Commissioner Gaer, would you like to open that one up?

MS. GAER: Sure.

Well, our commission has looked hard to find those improvements. (Laughter.) And if you look at the reports year after year, what you'll find is we mention such things that – as are considered to be better in one area or another.

In my own remarks this morning, you heard me refer to the fact that the president said that he saw some value – the president of China – saw some value in the religious communities. And, I mean, to an American audience it would be bizarre to consider a mere statement that there's value in religious communities as a sign of improvement. (Laughter.)

But in the context of China, where there's not just ambivalence but a negativity towards such communities and organizations, this is a helpful kind of comment.

It was matched by, however – as I said in my other comments – by actions which further restricted the guidelines for control – “guidance” – this is what they call it – for the control of three or four major matters: Where you can worship, who can worship, the treatment of so-called “management” in Buddhist monasteries – the management committees.

Those are the org committees; those are the party committee. They are the ones who control what's taught. They control political education. They control who is the – who are the monks, what they can do. And we know it's happened in these areas in recent years. So we take

the positive when we can find it and we look at the – we look at other measures when we see them and we reach a judgment. Our judgment was, de facto, no improvements.

If you followed our press releases, you'll see there were a series of arrests – house arrests and other detentions, for example, of Protestants trying to worship on Easter or on the – on Palm Sunday, and weeks before that. We have an array of situations affecting Buddhists and Uighurs that led us to say it's the worst it's been in 10 years

So that's how we reached that judgment.

On the question of China warning foreign countries against using human rights as a pretext: Now, this morning's New York Times refers to this kind of activity and the U.S. dialogue that's going on right now as diplomatic theater. Well, part of the diplomatic theater are issuing these warnings beforehand, saying, you can't address this.

Now, sometimes, sometimes, individuals or representatives of governments are intimidated by this kind of talk and they say, we'd better not raise these issues at all.

But historically what we've seen is many others aren't at all. Human rights is a universal right. The capacity to examine how a country treats its own citizens is widely recognized as not being an internal affairs of countries in any way. And China – China is a member of the United Nations. It's signed several human rights treaties. It's run for and fought to be elected to the Human Rights Council. It appears before various human rights bodies to tell its own story of its own compliance. It's not exempt from scrutiny. It's not exempt from discussion. And the attempt to silence that discussion is really very, very worrisome. Very worrisome bit of "theater."

MR. LEO: Any other commissioner comments on China? (Pause.)

OK, I'll go back to the other side of the room. Questions? OK. Yes, sir, in the second row.

Q: Yes, Voice of America, Urdu service.

My question is regarding Pakistan. There've been two high-profile murders recently. In the wake of these incidents, when you look at the response of the international community, do you think there's been enough pressure on Pakistan from the international community to improve things, or has it been muted?

What do you think? What's your understanding of that?

MR. LEO: Commissioner Shea, do you want to tackle that?

MS. SHEA: You're right that there was some pressure after those murders and I think that one of the reasons – my own analysis is that one of the reasons that the defamation of religions resolution at the Human Rights Council this year was not introduced was because

Pakistan was the sponsor of that resolution each year in the council and was under such pressure and disgrace, basically, because of those high-level murders coming that month, the same month that the resolution was to be introduced, that they just didn't do it. They abstained – they held back from introducing that resolution this year and it did not pass for the first time in 12 years.

So there is some – there has been some pressure, and in the wake of that, there has been a death sentence handed out on April 18th by a Pakistani antiterrorism court for the murder of two Christians who were gunned down outside the court when they were on trial for blasphemy.

So there is some movement, some response, but our whole – the whole thrust of our chapter in the report, and our findings, is that there is not nearly enough and that the United States needs to integrate more thoroughly concern for religious freedom and human rights particularly around this blasphemy wall in its diplomacy, in its engagement with Pakistan on counterterrorism and security issues and working on the Afghan situation.

So this is a very important point that we make, is that there is not enough sustained and consistent pressure regarding the blasphemy law, regarding toleration for other religions taught in the textbooks and in the madrasas of the country, and in continuing the important work of Minister Shahbaz Bhatti of the interfaith network that he established. We feel very strongly that this can only help and that this – the United States should be supporting that effort – the continuation of that effort because that was – it may be one way to – one avenue for having peaceful coexistence and religious freedom for minorities as well as majority in Pakistan.

MR. LEO: We've been recommending that Pakistan be named a country of particular concern since 2002, and without avail. Of course, we're recommending again this year, that it be named a country of particular concern. Conditions have continued to deteriorate, year after year, in that country.

This is one of those countries on our CPC list where you see all three problems in one place:

You see state-sponsored repression through the laws that they pass – various forms of official discrimination.

You see exportation of extremist ideology when we have had delegations to various parts of North and Sub-Saharan Africa. We have been told about instances where hateful and incendiary educational materials have been disseminated from Pakistan to those countries in places like northern Nigeria. And so there is an exportation of extremist ideology; Commissioner Shea referred to the madrassas in Pakistan, which are the source of many of those materials.

And we have seen impunity through vaguely drafted blasphemy laws that, when vigilantes believe those laws are not being sufficiently applied, those individuals take matters into their own hands and go out and kill or injure people or destroy their property.

This is one country where all three thematic line up, and yet, since 2002, our first recommendation for CPC status, there has not been any such action taken. Hopefully, it will be.

Yes?

Q: Hi, my name is Andrea Hayley from the Epoch Times.

Language in the report in the China section states: Chinese officials are increasingly adept at employing the language of human rights and the rule of law to defend repression of religious communities.

I'm concerned about the blinding effect of this kind of doublespeak. Acknowledging the concerted efforts of the Chinese government behind the scenes politically with their consistent messaging – China regularly states they support religious freedom, for example – China's strict control over the media, self-censorship in Western media, economic threats used against anyone who dares to question the human rights record publicly: Based on these, do you think there's enough awareness among Americans and the U.S. government about the reality of religious repression in China? What can and should be done to improve real awareness of the realities of religious repression in China?

MS. GAER: Well, we wouldn't be having this press conference today if we thought that there was enough awareness of these issues. We're definitely concerned about increasing awareness about all human rights abuses, including religious freedom abuses, in the countries of particular concern, the watch list, and elsewhere.

Now, China, because it has this aggressive policy that you describe of talking the talk, but not walking the walk, and not even talking the talk when they issue the kind of warnings we were talking about before, it is a country – and because it's such a huge country, it's very important that there be greater awareness of the diversity of China, the diversity of religions, the diversity and the similarity in the techniques that are used to repress, limit, harass, and control religious belief and practice inside the country.

So, the answer is: No, there isn't enough awareness, and I hope that with this annual report, and ongoing work by you and everyone else who is here, there'll be more.

MR. LEO: Vice Chair Prodromou?

MS. PRODRAMOU: Just by way – just by way of a brief follow up, I think the question that you raise is a very important one, and it's relevant not only for China, but for several of the other countries that you find in our report. And that is this, you know, gap between discourse and rhetoric on the one hand and substance on the other. Or, you know, the politics of symbolic and gesture changes and improvements in human rights and the lack of follow-through and substantive institutional changes. Usually we see those in places like the judiciary, the education, and police and security, and therefore broader social transformation that would support the kind of tolerance for freedom of conscience and belief.

And China is certainly, I think, a paradigmatic case, but if you look at other chapters as well, you'll see that we cite this similar phenomenon in places like Saudi Arabia and Turkey,

where, again, the language, the gap between discourse and rhetoric on the hand one and institutional change on the other is quite acute.

And that's something that the commission is, in terms of raising awareness, that we're trying to do. We're trying to point out these kinds of inconsistencies, where it may appear that things are improving marginally, but indeed, in terms of substantive changes, there's miles to go before we all sleep.

MR. LEO: That, in part, is what I think drove a statement that Commissioner Shea and I appended to the report that tries to focus some attention specifically on the plight of the Catholic Church in China, because there have been people who have suggested, oh, you know, conditions are improving there. But when you really sort of pull the curtain back, and you start looking at what's happening, that's perception, not necessarily reality. And I think that is sort of one illustration among many others, and there are others listed in the main report, that sort of divergence between what's really happening and what the Chinese government would like you to think is happening.

Any other comments on China?

In the back there.

Q: My name is Emmanuel Ogebe, and I'm with the Justice for Jos Project.

I look at page 100 of your report with regard to Nigeria, and I notice that the worst attack is reportedly the one where approximately 28 people were killed. I mean, we're concerned, because further down, in that same paragraph, you do mention that in March, about 500 people were killed. I don't know if this is an editorial mix-up, maybe I'm talking "tomatoes/tomahto (ph)" here, but 500, I think, would be worse than 28 people.

Now, I think that it's a major omission to de-emphasize that massacre where 500 people were killed. The Dogo Nahawa massacre of March 2010 was really above the pale – I think it was the single most horrendous incident of all of 2010 anywhere in the world where you had huge numbers of women and children killed. I know that the New York Times and many other papers actually went down there and saw, you know, the kids with half their skulls lopped off. So that might be something you may want to edit.

My second question is: In the last couple of weeks, we've had, you know, churches burnt and hundreds of people killed in the post-election violence in Nigeria. So I'm taking a wild guess here that Nigeria is going to be back on the CPC list – (laughs) – in your next report. But if there were a two-point recommendation you would make for the government of Nigeria right now, to head off getting back on the CPC list based on the events of the last couple of weeks, what would those two points be that they would need to do?

Thank you.

MR. LEO: Do you want to take that question for starters? OK.

IMAM EID: Well, regarding your first point, it's well taken. And I think it is included in our report.

As far as the second one, I'd like to assure you that we are paying close attention to the issue of Nigeria. And we take every opportunity, when we travel, to meet with security officials and emphasize the importance of – the importance of paying attention to the issue of prosecution of those who violate the law.

As far as the two points: The two points I can suggest here, and this is what we work on – the first one is the issue of prosecution. We emphasize that the government is not paying well attention to that, and therefore creating increase of violence between Christian sects and Muslim sects. This is number one.

Number two we emphasize is the issue of dialogue. It is important that dialogue continue between the different groups, and there is the national dialogue that's established by the government, and we try to encourage them, and if they need our help and assistance, we will greatly respond to that. So these are the two areas that the commission believe that we need to pay attention.

MR. LEO: If I can make just a couple of comments as well, having been to Nigeria now on several occasions on commission delegations.

First of all, your comment about the numbers of deaths is very well taken. I must confess, it is extremely difficult in the case of Nigeria to know how many people are dying or how many people have been injured or what kinds of vandalism has taken place in connection with a riot. Reporting swings wildly, and so, you know, when we get a comment such as the one you offered, we go back and we take a look, because a lot of times, you know, reports are scant or conflicting.

And this is a plea to all of the NGOs who follow issues of impunity in Nigeria and elsewhere: When you know of incidents that have occurred, I hope that you will reach out to the commission and tell us about them, and give us as much information as you can about the extent of the damage or harm to individuals so that we can properly investigate and make appropriate findings.

The post-election election violence last week, which I think you referenced, was really most unfortunate. I remember, just after the election, there was sort of a calm or a quiet, and I remember saying to someone: Wow, maybe there won't be any – maybe there won't be any violence this time. And then, of course, we saw the outbreaks of violence in both Kaduna and Kano, I believe.

Again, the numbers swing wildly here. You know, the conservative estimates are that there are between 43 and 121 dead, but there are a number of NGOs reporting that more than 500 were killed in Kaduna.

And, you know, this is a real – this is a real problem: over 13,000 dead over the past decade or so, and only five prosecutions that we know of, only five, which, of course, reinforces what Commissioner Eid just said, which is that one of the key recommendations is that people finally be brought to justice. There needs to be investigations, prosecutions, and convictions.

That's not happening for a lot of reasons, but one of them is that there is finger-pointing going in both directions. The federal government and the state governments just don't work together. And there is no understanding of their respective jurisdictional authorities. They have to work through that.

And we as the United States can be helpful there, right, because we're a federal system. We have a national government, we have state governments, just like Nigeria does. We should use our experience and expertise and our government should sit down with the Nigerians and try to work through those jurisdictional issues so that they can have a better sort of prosecutorial framework for bringing people to justice.

I would say one other thing here. And we detected this on our last visit to Nigeria, which was, I think, earlier this year, just several months ago. Politicians in Nigeria have to stop using religion as a way of stirring up their base. They have to stop doing that. In connection with last week, there is some evidence that Buhari, who is a Muslim from the north, who ran, didn't adequately rein in his supporters, and that that may be part of the reason why there was violence there.

Politicians need to stop using religion as a ploy to stir up their base and to create the kind of tension or conflict or division which they think inures to their own political benefit. Until that happens, we're going to have serious – continue to have serious problems in Nigeria.

So that needs to be done, and then the issues that Commissioner Eid mentioned, I think, are very valuable as well.

Yes, Sir?

Q: Yeah. My name is Karma Dorjee. I'm from Radio Free Asia.

I'm sorry I missed the earlier opening remark, if there was anything on the religious – the condition or the freedom in Tibet. I'm particularly referring to one incident which is still going on in the Tibetan area in Sichuan. And there's one monastery, the Kirti monastery, which has about 2,500 monks, and so this – the monastery is still under a Chinese siege, and they have arrested over 400 monks, and they were taken away to some detention centers, in local centers. So I don't know whether the commission is aware of this. If you are aware, is there any way you can make any attempts or any recommendations so that this siege could be relaxed?

MR. LEO: As Commissioner Gaer noted earlier in her initial presentation, our report notes that the conditions for Tibetans have worsened in particular, and so our report does note that specific item. There is, as you'll see in our report, an entire section on the plight of the Tibetan community. I do not believe it references the monastery that you mentioned, and so I

hope that – I'm sure that our staff will look into the matter promptly and see what we can find out.

And things that are not mentioned in our reports, because we only issue a report every year, we often do through other statements: press releases, letters to our government urging them to investigate a particular situation. So we will definitely look into that particular monastery.

Yes, there was a question in the back.

Q: Thank you. My name is Umir Bobehanov (ph). I represent Asia Plus news agency from Tajikistan, Central Asia. I have two questions.

First, regarding – I would like to know your assessment of situation – religion situation in Central Asia in progress. Is it getting better, or it's getting worse? Because now we see, during – somewhat – few last years that, for one side, we see that Islamic radicalization is growing; on the other hand, we see that government tries to keep these trends under control and violate the human rights and religious rights of community there. So what's your opinion about that, and how it could be improved?

And second – and my second question is: How would you assess the reflection of administration to your recommendation? During – every year, you make a recommendation to U.S. administration concerning religious rights in Central Asia region. But this region and these countries suddenly became the strategic partners in the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan. So administration has to have good relations with that government, for one side, and, on the other hand, it should follow your recommendation. So what's your opinion about that? Do they follow your recommendation, or not? Thank you.

MR. LEO: OK. Vice Chair Prodromou, I think you were going to take on Tajikistan. So you want to start it off?

MS. PRODROMOU: Sure. From the general to the specific, you asked about the commission's, I think, opinion on religious freedom in Central Asia as a whole. And I think if you look at our annual report, you'll see that there are three Central Asian countries that are designated as either CPC or watch list – no, one CPC, one watch, and one monitoring. So Uzbekistan is a CPC, Tajikistan is a watch list, and Kazakhstan is a country that we continue to monitor. Oh, and Turkmenistan, as well, is CPC. So four Central Asian countries are on – are being followed at some level and with some degree of designation by the commission.

So I think that in and of itself speaks to the fact that we are very concerned about the negative religious-freedom conditions in Central Asia.

Now, with regard to Tajikistan in particular, Tajikistan was placed on our watch list two years ago. And it remains; we remain – it remains on our watch list. And the primary reason for that was the 2009 law on religions that was passed in Tajikistan, which is, you probably know better than many of us, is an extremely oppressive and repressive law. It's been utilized by the

government of Tajikistan effectively to try to control all aspects of religious activity in the country and to punish all non-state-sanctioned forms of religious activity, and that means for Muslims, for non-Muslims, for what are considered, you know, unregulated religious groups both Muslim and non-Muslim alike, so that the overall religious-freedom situation in the country is extremely concerning.

The other factor here of concern for the commission, and we've noted this in terms of our recommendations – and this gets to your question about the responsiveness of the government, the U.S. government, to our recommendations – Tajikistan, as you know, is a country that is of great strategic importance for overall regional stability in Central Asia, and for the U.S. foreign policy, given its long and very porous border with Afghanistan.

So if you go to the last two pages of our recommendations in the Tajikistan section, you'll see that we have been very specific in our recommendations to the government regarding U.S. foreign-security assistance to Tajikistan, so that that assistance does not go to government agencies – in particular, parts of the interior and the justice ministry – that have been responsible for violations of religious freedom, and also that we have – we're recommending to the U.S. government that it work with Tajikistan to develop a specific timetable by which it would be possible to measure concrete improvements in religious freedom.

So we are very aware of the situation there, and we have been very thorough in trying to develop recommendations that are very nuanced, and therefore also very feasible in terms of their implementation, at least, from our perspective.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Van Der Meid, do you want to chime in? I know you –

MR. VAN DER MEID: Let me just add one point, and that is, as you've said, that's a very difficult area; there are legitimate security concerns both internally and externally. But as, I think, I said in my remarks, that the governments of these countries often times hide behind or use the anti-extremism laws to persecute churches or put people in prison, and they don't make a distinction between religious groups that are not extremists and religious groups that are extremists. And that's what they, in my opinion, need to focus much more on.

MR. LEO: You know, I'm glad you brought up Central Asia because I think this is one part of the world where we could have, I think, an important window into the interplay between national security and religious freedom.

A lot of the Central Asian countries you referenced will often say, well, we are regulating these religious communities because of national security concerns or public-order concerns. Now, to be sure, there are national security issues in Central Asia that need addressing. But when a government becomes too heavy-handed against peaceable, nonviolent forms of religious expression, worship, practice, what those governments are perhaps causing in the long run is a greater degree of instability and insecurity because coming down too hard on religious minorities for protected, peaceable religious worship and other activity just fosters a tremendous climate of hostility, animosity.

You can see the emergence of separatist movements; young men enter into lives of more violent and terroristic-related activity when communities like that are repressed wrongly. So there are certainly legitimate national security concerns, and the U.S. government recognizes those. But it's very, very important that governments in Central Asia calibrate those in ways that don't have blowback effects. And that's something that our report on a number of these countries points out.

And yes, we have important strategic interests in a number of these countries – I think you mentioned Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, for example. But we have important strategic interests all over the world, not just in Central Asia. And this commission's view has been that promotion and protection and the bolstering of freedom of religion or belief actually, in the long run, enhances security and stability. And so it should be a part of our national security strategy to take into account religious-freedom conditions in countries in Central Asia and elsewhere, and integrate the promotion of international religious freedom into our efforts to improve security and stability worldwide.

Other questions? Yes, sir.

Q: Lambert (sp) with the Cybercast News Service. I'm just wondering why a country like Ethiopia has not come up on your list, given that within the last three months there was some violence in Ethiopia, and that is – it seems to be recurring. Because I think two years ago, the same area was attacked, and we had 69 churches burned down and almost 5,000 persons displaced.

My second question is in relation to Iraq: It seems as if the Christian population in Iraq is going to disappear within a few years. Are we concerned about that? And what moves are we taking? Thanks.

MR. LEO: I'll take the question on Ethiopia, and then, maybe, Vice Chair Prodromou, if you could kick off on Iraq. And then, other commissioners may have comments as well.

We actually were in Africa very recently, and stopped in Ethiopia en route back to the United States to visit with our embassy officials there to gather some information on the most recent torching of what appeared to be Protestant house churches. I think – this is off the cuff here, but I think the comment from the embassy was that there were somewhere around 37 or more homes that were torched, burnt.

And that this is, you know, not an insignificant incident in Ethiopia, although not a common incident, either; it doesn't happen with the same frequency that it happens elsewhere in Africa. But because of that incident and because of the other incident that you referred to – which I guess was a year-and-a-half or two years ago, right – we are looking more carefully at what's going on there.

And we have – and that's consistent with what this commission's approach has been over the past year. We are placing a greater degree of attention on sub-Saharan and North Africa precisely because we have seen an uptick in this kind of impunity.

And so I can assure you that it's a matter we're looking at. We've begun to collect information, and, you know, we will be having, I'm sure, a full-throated discussion about Ethiopia as we move into our next annual report phase. But I can't tell you what determination we'll make, but it's certainly an area that the staff and commissioners have been looking at.

Now, Vice Chair, do you want to address Iraq? And then we'll open it up for other commissioners to comment on Iraq or on Ethiopia.

MS. PRODRIMOU: Sure. Just a brief comment on Iraq: You pointed out, I think, something that deserves underscoring, and that is the concern about the declining number of Christians and other minorities, but certainly the Christian community in Iraq since 2003, and the potential for the disappearance of that community from Iraq from its historic place of origin.

Depending on the numbers, in 2003, there were approximately 1.4 million Christians in Iraq. And depending on what numbers you see now, the estimates are anywhere between 400,000 to 500,000 Christians left in Iraq. And the numbers that – the gross decline in numbers for other minority communities is equally concerning.

I think that what this points to, however – the Iraqi case – is a broader phenomenon. And that is the possibility for the disappearance of Christians from that region. And there was a statement which Commissioner – Chair Leo and I have both joined with Commissioner Shea – it's appended to the Egypt chapter – which speaks about this phenomenon of the potential erasure of Christianity from its historic place of origin.

And so if you look at countries in the report like Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, you see this very generalized phenomenon. And unfortunately, the Christian community is emblematic of a broader condition whereby minorities in general find themselves under various forms of assault and siege. So this is something certainly that the commission is quite aware of as more of a general problem.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Shea, since you were – your statement was referenced, do you want to reply?

MS. SHEA: Yes, you're absolutely right. There is the concern that Christianity's – the Christian presence may disappear entirely from Iraq, or virtually entirely. This is brought about by both terrorist attacks targeting them, not just being caught in the crossfire, and also by government indifference in Iraq with a government that has been slow to protect them and has made life very difficult, particularly in Christian villages in the north where they do not get essential services that are given to other surrounding villages, and being squeezed out from the legislature, and so forth. So there is this perception that they are not wanted and not protected.

And I'd like to add that we have found for several years now under both administrations here – Republican and Democrat – that U.S. government policies regarding this beleaguered minority have fallen short. And we make recommendations in our report to try to come up with ways to protect them, to encourage them to stay, to make it even viable for them to stay.

But it is extremely disconcerting to see this unfold in our generation, this ancient presence there – 2,000 years in Iraq. It's really what I call an ongoing religious cleansing.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Land?

MR. LAND: Yes, and we're also very concerned about the recent events in Syria. While the unrest in Syria is not primarily religiously motivated, Syria has been a place of refuge for many of these people. And if that unrest continues, we're very concerned about the situation for them there.

MR. LEO: We have time for maybe one more question, if anyone has one. OK – last question.

Q: I've read your fact sheet here about "who we are" and "what we do." I'm wondering how much influence you have with the U.S. government to have them take actions to help stop some of these religious abuses, and if you can point to any specific successes or a track record – just trying to understand – you know, you're working with international treaties like the U.N., and I understand you're advising the government – but yeah, what –

MR. LEO: Sure – what's our value-added, right?

Q: Yeah.

MR. LEO: OK. Yeah, let me give you a couple of – look, I mean, obviously, it's a patchwork. Right? With some countries and issues, we have been very successful at helping to shape U.S. government policy; in other instances, it is an ongoing work-in-progress.

Take a couple of countries as examples: You will see, I think, USCIRF policy recommendations scattered throughout the Iran sanctions act. I think this commission is, in good part, responsible for the U.S. government's enormous time and attention on Sudan over the years, where this commission has made Sudan an important priority.

We've, I think, been responsible for helping to move the U.S. government further in the direction of understanding some of the problems that are occurring in Nigeria right now with regards to impunity and the nature of sectarian-related violence. And for a while, the U.S. government, I think, was in a bit of denial about what was happening there. And I think there is a greater recognition of the problem now than there used to be.

Obviously, the defamation-of-religions issue was a partnership with Congress and the State Department and lots of actors within the U.S. government. But this commission kept that drumbeat going for many years, and, I think, played an important role in moving a number of countries over from the category of supporting that pernicious resolution to abstaining, and then, some even voting against it to the point where now it no longer exists.

And so I think those are some areas where the – you know, the U.S. government has listened to what the commission has to say. As I've said, however, there are other areas where the U.S. government doesn't always listen to the commission. We are an advisory body; the best we can do is to tell them what we think should be done.

Only eight of our 14 countries have been designated as CPCs; we don't designate countries as CPCs for sport. And so we would want the other six to be designated.

And it's important to note that actions taken against countries under the International Religious Freedom Act has been rather anemic since the very institution of the commission and since the very creation of the International Religious Freedom Act. There is only one country of the eight that has specific IRF sanctions leveled against it.

So if this regime is to have teeth, ultimately in this commission's view, there needs to be more of these countries designated as CPCs, and actions need to be taken against these countries: for example, the lifting of the waiver for Saudi Arabia. And there are lots of other examples.

And as you tick through our report, thumb through our report, you'll see, I think, lots of instances where U.S. government policy reflects a number of our recommendations. Another example that just came to mind: Vietnam; the designation of Vietnam as a CPC was something that the commission pressed for mightily. We also happen to think that they were prematurely de-designated, but there are a lot of instances where the commission has had some – has had some influence.

So I would encourage you to look at the report. And I would agree, with an eye toward where we've managed to move some policy but also where our recommendations have not yet been fully adopted. And in the case of those that haven't been, we have to rely on the echo chamber of the media and of Congress and of the NGO community to help us get those recommendations and issues in front of the public, as well as the executive branch.

MR. LAND: A couple of others – I think, one – several years ago, we played a significant role in getting France to reverse a policy where they were exporting anti-cult laws and going around giving advice on how to deal with so-called cults, and having their security police monitoring cults, et cetera. And basically, the French – as a result, the French government was embarrassed. And Monsieur Vivien is doing something else now. And that was us, and we are very happy about that.

The other thing that I think IRFA itself has done that I don't think anybody was smart enough to have thought about, but it's just one of those unforeseen consequences that's a good one: The IRFA report requires the State Department to do a report on every country. My suspicion is, the low person on the totem pole got that assignment in every embassy. (Laughter.) But having done the report, they were sensitized in a way they had not been sensitized before to religious issue – religious-freedom issues as a real important issue, and a significant one.

Now, that's been 12 years. What's happened – and those of us who have been dealing with the State Department have seen this – there has been a change in the State Department's

culture. As these people have rotated back and have begun to rise in the career foreign service, there is an increasing sensitivity to this as an issue, as opposed to when, you know, Madeleine Albright says in “The Mighty and the Almighty” that we just totally were blind to this. That’s how we missed the Ayatollah; we just were blind to it.

They’re not blind to it anymore, and one of the reasons is the IRFA act, which created this commission.

MR. LEO: Nina, a quick, 30-second close.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I just want to just drill down briefly a bit on that question because it is an important one. And I’d just like to take a look at Saudi Arabia, for example: It seems like year after year, we’re saying the same things about Saudi Arabia. But I think that’s our strength, that we have perseverance; we have tenacity.

In ’05, the State Department was reporting something that the Saudis told them, completely unexamined, which was that there had been a complete overhaul of their textbooks to remove every disparaging comment about other religions. Well, we knew that that wasn’t true. We brought out examples of that. In ’06, the State Department then came up with a memorandum of a policy confirmation between the United States and the Saudis that they would start, then, to restart – seriously revising their textbooks.

This has gone on and on; five years has now passed. They still have not completed this revision. But this – we’re in this dialogue with State Department; they arranged that we were able to go to Saudi Arabia this year. We went to Riyadh; we had the highest-level meetings with the minister of education, the minister of justice and the minister of Islamic affairs, and directly brought up our concerns, showed them their problems. So we’re in this struggle. And we’re – have lots of perseverance. (Chuckles.)

MR. LEO: And with your attention in the press and the help of civil society, hopefully we can have more of that perseverance bear some fruit.

Thank you very much for your time this morning. I know that Press Club wants us out of the room as quickly as possible, but the commissioners will stand outside in the lobby area if anyone wants to ask us other questions you may have on the way out. Thank you.

(END)