

**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (USCIRF)**

2010 ANNUAL REPORT

**WELCOME AND MODERATOR:
LEONARDO LEO,
CHAIRMAN,
USCIRF**

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LEONARDO LEO: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. If you could all take your seats. Good morning. Over the past few months, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has visited a number of human-rights hotspots around the world where freedom of religion is obstructed and related human rights are trampled.

Our 2010 annual report that we released today offers new and important policy solutions to improve conditions, foreign policy, national security and international standards for the protection of freedom of religion can and should interact. The report's conclusion is clear: The U.S. government must do more.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Leonard Leo. I serve as the chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. With me this morning are our two vice-chairs, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou and Mr. Michael Cromartie, along with our commissioners, Richard Land, Donald Argue, Talal Eid, Nina Shea, our executive director to the far left, Ambassador Jackie Wolcott. Commissioner Felice Gaer is not with us this morning. She is in Geneva, actually, helping to defend freedom of religion there at U.N. meetings.

I want to thank all of my fellow commissioners for the incredible amount of hard work that went into the preparation of this annual report and for being here today. And I would like to especially thank the staff of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, particularly Elizabeth Cassidy, for their essential role in helping to prepare this report.

As many of you know, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by Congress in 1998. It's an independent, bipartisan federal agency and its role is to make recommendations to the president, the secretary of state and Congress regarding how best to bolster the international protection of freedom of religion for our foreign policy, national security and economic development agendas.

We are separate from the State Department and it's worth noting that USCIRF is the only independent government body in the world tasked with focusing solely on religious freedom. The annual report that you have before you today, with a formal published version coming out shortly, replete with photos and other items, is in many ways the centerpiece of our work and contains many of the important policy recommendations that we make.

The annual report, importantly, includes our recommendations for which countries the secretary of state should designate as countries of particular concern for their systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom as mandated by the International Religious Freedom Act.

This year, USCIRF recommends that the secretary of state designate as CPCs 13 countries, and you can find the list of those countries at page six of our report and there are charts elsewhere in the room that list those countries. USCIRF also maintains what we call a

watchlist of countries that do not meet the CPC threshold, but in which serious violations of religious freedom take place or tolerated by the government. And I would call your attention, again, to the chart on page six where you can see the full list of those countries. And of course, we'll be talking about a number of those countries this morning.

In addition to these designations – I'd like to underscore this – each country chapter in the annual report contains detailed recommendations on how U.S. foreign policy can more effectively promote religious freedom. And this is a very important part of what the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom does.

We are not simply in the business of finding facts. We are in the business of making very serious and important policy recommendations in order to push the United States' agenda forward in protecting freedom of religion abroad. While it's been a busy year for our commission, we've placed particular emphasis on eight priority countries. They are China, Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Vietnam.

Of course, we continue to monitor religious freedom violations in other countries and all over the world. But we selected these eight countries, seven of which are recommended for CPC status and one of which is on our watchlist based on three analytics frameworks that the commissioners developed after extensive discussions at our meetings last year.

And those three frameworks are state hostility toward religion, religious communities and/or religious leadership; secondly, state-sponsored extremist ideology and education; and thirdly, what we call impunity – state failure to prevent and punish religious freedom violations. And these frameworks, we think, encapsulate the problematic countries and my colleagues will speak to them momentarily.

Now, there's a fourth theme that the commission has focused on and that has been ways to combat the problematic defamation of religions resolutions at the United Nations. Those resolutions seek to limit the freedoms of religion and expression. We have made some progress in reducing the support for these initiatives, but it has been trench warfare and we must remain vigilant in opposing the defamation of religions concept.

Now, before I turn the podium over to my colleagues, I want to mention a few key trends that have informed our deliberations and that have focused our use of resources over the past year. The annual report documents how, in many countries, religious communities continue to experience severe persecution.

Notably, we have found that in majority-Muslim countries, it is oftentimes those governments that repress the free practice of Islam the most. Also, for the first time, the annual report highlights an informal list of prisoners detained, jailed or disappeared on account of their religious beliefs or religious freedom advocacy. While reflecting only a fraction of those believed to be held captive, it does bring into focus the human element of our discussions today about religious freedom.

We've observed a second, equally egregious threat to religious freedom that receives far too little attention. And that is the issue of impunity. During our missions this year to places like Nigeria and Egypt, we've witnessed how the absence of accountability breeds lawlessness and the breakdown of justice.

This is impunity and it encourages individuals to attack and even kill those who dissent from or fail to embrace others' religious views. The commission has concluded that countering this impunity is among the greatest challenges that the United States faces as it develops policies to effectively promote and protect freedom of religion or belief around the world.

Considering this and many of the other challenges religious freedom faces together and with due respect in regard for the hard work of the State Department, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is concerned that U.S. foreign policy on religious freedom is missing the mark.

Certainly symbolic of this is the fact that the ambassador at large on international religious freedom has yet to be named well over a year into the administration. Many, as you know, have criticized this gap and a person of distinction who is familiar with international human rights standards and religious freedom conditions around the world should be appointed as quickly as possible.

But in the world of foreign policy and diplomacy, where every word is carefully chosen to convey meaning and interest, there is an even more important situation that could be taken by some in the world community as a signal that freedom of religion or belief is not a priority for the administration.

USCIRF notes that since the initially strong language on religious freedom used in President Obama's Cairo speech, presidential references to religious freedom have become rare, often replaced, at most, with references to freedom of worship. The same holds true for many of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speeches.

This change in phraseology could well be viewed by human rights defenders and by officials in other countries as having concrete policy implications. Freedom of worship is only one aspect of religious freedom and a purposeful change in language could mean a much narrower view of the right, ignoring such components as religiously motivated expression and religious education as well as ignoring incursions such as discrimination in government benefits and privileges or the creation of climates of impunity, where private religiously-motivated violence isn't prevented and punished.

Our foreign policy must be better at exposing and castigating the Potemkin villages of religious worship created by some countries where churches might well be propped up for services, but where the faithful can't get basic services because of their views are gunned down with impunity while in their churches, they are viciously caricatured and attacked by state-run media and are otherwise relegated to second-class citizenship.

The oppressed of this world look to the administration, indeed all of us, with hope and forbearance to do more. Now, this, of course, isn't the first time an administration has, intentionally or not, threaded the needle on freedom of religion. I remember President Bush's trip to China with Secretary of State Rice.

He, too, referenced religious worship and not freedom of religion broadly and beyond that, often did not prioritize freedom of religion the way it should have been in our foreign policy and national security agendas. And so today, our point is less to assess blame or intention and more to encourage the administration to underscore the importance of freedom of religion or belief so as to eliminate confusion as well as to eliminate openings for duplicitousness by the world's worst human rights abusers.

If the United States cares about human rights, if we value international stability, if we are concerned about countering extremism, freedom of religion or belief must be a critical component of our nation's diplomacy, national security and economic development objectives. The current administration has been insufficiently engaged in promoting the freedom of religion or belief abroad.

And as I have said, this isn't a new problem. This commission was equally vocal in its criticism of the Bush administration and the Clinton administration before that. The photo on the cover of our report this year, which you can see up here on the poster boards, I think, captures the urgency of the problem that we have quite well.

In it, there is a lone, Uighur Muslim woman facing down a column of armed Chinese security forces during the Chinese government's violent response to the Uighur protest in the Urumqi in the Xinjiang province of China in July of 2009. The unrest left hundreds dead and thousands injured. Defiant, with her fist raised, her actions display a hope that peaceful protest will prevail over repressive state policies that seek to crush peaceful Uighur religious freedoms such as the right to religious education and to appoint their own religious leaders.

With these and other brave souls standing up for what is right, who would deny – who would deny that freedom of religion must be a fundamental principle of our nation's foreign policy, national security and economic development agendas? The U.S. can and must do more and we respectfully lay out our concrete proposals for doing so in this 2010 annual report. And now, without further delay, I would like to introduce one of our vice-chairs, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, who will explain our first theme and some of the countries that fall within its parameters. Thank you. Dr. Prodromou.

ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: Thank you, commissioner, Chair Leo. Good morning to everyone, thank you for being here. Now, as Commissioner Leo – Chair Leo noted, our commission actually conducted extensive deliberations about how to develop three themes or what we call categories of violators of religious freedom.

And we actually noticed that in terms of our three categories that he mentioned, that several of the world's worst violators could fall into any of those three categories. But I'm

actually going to cover one specific theme or category at the moment. And that is state hostility toward religion, religious communities and/or religious leadership.

This category certainly covers some of the worst violators of religious freedom in the world, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, China, Vietnam to name but a few. Now, what is it that a state violator – or state hostility, actually, means? This is a category that describes countries that exhibit very strong opposition to freedom of religion or belief, either toward individual members, toward religious leaders or towards entire religious communities.

And these are also countries that take – states that take steps to forcefully curtail and penalize religious freedoms such as the sharing of religious beliefs or the undertakings of basic religious practices. Now, some of the mechanisms – there's a whole panoply of mechanisms that are utilized in this category to express state hostility.

Some of them that we may want to think about include legal mechanisms, extrajudicial mechanisms, the use of security forces, whether police or military, intelligence gathering, economic mechanisms – for example, property rights regimes and arbitrary expropriations and all forms of discrimination, whether in jobs, education and in other institutional environments – religious registration laws, for example.

Now, allow me to say a little bit about three countries that fall into this category of state hostility. The first is Iran. As most of you will probably know, Iran is one of the most hostile regime in the world toward religious freedom. USCIRF has continued to recommend that Iran remain a CPC, as it's been designated since 1999.

Since last year's disputed elections in June – June 12th, in fact, the one year anniversary's upon us. Since those elections last year, human rights and religious freedom conditions in Iran have regressed, in fact, to a point that we haven't seen since the early days of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The state's hostility towards many religious minorities, in particular, Baha'is, but also including Christians and Sufi Muslims has intensified. All of these groups have faced, during our reporting period, intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrest and imprisonment. Now, even the country's recognized nonreligious – non-Muslim religious minorities, Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians and Zoroastrians have also faced increasing discrimination and repression during our reporting period.

The Iranian regime's hostility, the state's hostility has also extended to the majority Muslim community. And indeed, dissident Muslims in Iran over the past year of reporting period were increasingly subjected to abuse. And the government has manipulated the reach of its religion laws in order to silence and in some cases, to put to death Shia Muslims who have simply tried to exercise their freedoms of religion and expression.

Now, in response to these conditions, the commission – our commission urges the United States government to fulfill the International Religious Freedom Act statutory requirements by identifying those Iranian officials and those Iranian entities that are responsible for severe

religious freedom violations and to subsequently impose travel bans, to impose asset freezes on these individuals and others. The U.S. government, we hope and we urge them to do so, should work actively with its European allies to do the same.

In addition, the commission also has recommended that the Iranian government should immediately release the seven Baha'i leaders who have been, now, held for two years on unsubstantiated and baseless charges and also, that the Iranian government should release Shia dissident cleric, Ayatollah Mohammed Boroujerdi, who has been in prison for the last four years, who is in very poor health and indeed, whose supporters have been in contact with our commission. And finally, the commission urges that those Christians, Sufi Muslims and others in Iran who have been imprisoned unjustly for their religion or belief should be released.

Now, another regime that falls under this category of state hostility – and that is, indeed, extraordinarily hostile to religious communities – is that found in Sudan. Sudan was one of the first countries on which our commission focused its attention and that was due to the role that religion played in the north-south civil war from 1983 to 2005.

And every year since 1999, the commission has recommended that Sudan be listed as a country of particular concern. And the State Department indeed has designated it every year since 1999 as a CPC as well. Now, since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the CPA, in 2005, Sudan has enjoyed a somewhat fragile peace between the north and the south.

But the CPA is actually scheduled to end in January of next year. And the commission believes that the greatest danger to religious freedom and overall human rights in Sudan would be the collapse of the fragile peace that's been brought about by the CPA. And indeed, the most likely danger – the greatest danger would be a failure to hold the referendum that's scheduled for January 9th of 2011.

This referendum, as you know, is mandated by the CPA. So much remains to be done in the upcoming year in preparation for the implementation of that referendum. And the commission recommends that the United States government and its international parties – partners – work closely with all parties in Sudan to ensure that fair, free and credible referenda are held in Southern Sudan and Abyei as scheduled, as well as to begin working immediately to address post-2011 – in other words, post-referenda issues.

Now, the third country that I would like to address in terms of state hostility is North Korea. North Korea is another country that exhibits profound state hostility towards religion. The government controls almost all aspects of religious freedom and religious life. The government in the past reporting period has actively repressed any new growth when it comes to religious organizations and it indeed has clamped down on approved religious organizations during the past reporting year.

Severe abuses have occurred regularly and systematically and comprehensively. And some of these abuses, just to give you a sense of the comprehensiveness of state hostility, have included the detention, torture and possible execution of those that conduct clandestine religious activity or those that distribute religious information.

The state has mistreated and imprisoned asylum-seekers who have been repatriated from China, particularly those suspected of engaging in religious activities or having any kind of religious affiliation. And finally, the state has particularly maltreated and been hostile towards those who have approved religious organizations who have tried to gain foreign assistance.

So the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended in this case, in the case of North Korea, that U.S. assistance programs should work to counter the government's stranglehold on information, that the U.S. should seek to – our assistance programs should seek to aid refugees, and in particular, that we should seek to support North Koreans working for overall democratization.

In addition, the commission believes that the six-party talks offer an excellent opportunity to build a broader regional security framework that includes and emphasizes humanitarian and human rights concerns.

So in that vein, the commission urges the administration to work with its regional allies at the six-party talks to raise human rights concerns, to raise the profile of human rights concerns, including religious freedom, and especially to link future economic, political and diplomatic assistance to progress in the areas of human rights and religious freedom. Now, I'd like to turn over the podium to my two fellow commissioners, Dr. Land and then vice chair Michael Cromartie.

RICHARD LAND: The Chinese government's hostility towards religion and religious communities is manifested in a variety of ways. USCIRF has observed no improvement in the religious freedom situation in China and the government strictly controls all religious practice and represses religious activity outside state-approved organizations. Unregistered religious groups or those deemed by the government to threaten national security or social harmony face severe violations including fines, imprisonment, torture, detention and the destruction of their religious sites.

During this reporting period, USCIRF has observed a marked deterioration in Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur Muslim areas. The Chinese government severely and illegitimately repressed peaceful religious activity among Muslims and Buddhists, invoking security-related campaigns that exaggerate the threat of separatism and domestic terrorism. In addition, human rights defenders who protect vulnerable religious groups have been tortured, detained, disappeared and stripped of their legal licenses.

To better protect vulnerable communities and advance religious freedom, USCIRF urges the secretary of state to impose a new sanction targeting officials who perpetuate religious freedom abuses, entities that control access to religious information via the Internet or provinces where religious freedom conditions are the most egregious.

The International Religious Freedom Act can be a flexible diplomatic tool. We urge the State Department to use the act's provision to better advance religious freedom and the rule of law in China.

Also over the past year, USCIRF consulted with experts on human rights in China and sent a letter to Assistant Secretary Posner with ideas for improving U.S.-China human rights diplomacy and religious freedom advocacy. We hope that our recommendations will be raised in the upcoming U.S.-China human rights dialogue and the strategic and economic dialogue.

USCIRF has long maintained that U.S. human rights policy must not be pursued only through private diplomacy. Beijing must be sent the message that religious freedom is linked to other U.S. interests and pursue binding agreements as we do on trade, security and the environment. Only when human rights are clearly integrated within the full range of U.S. interests under Secretary Clinton's leadership will Beijing make commitments consistent with China's international commitments and its own domestic laws.

Conditions for religious freedom also remain problematic in Afghanistan, a watch-list country despite gains in human rights since the ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001. The security situation continues to be serious. Resurgent Taliban and other anti-government elements making the situation for – (audio break) – religious freedom precarious in many parts of the country. The U.S. government should therefore state clearly its concern for religious freedom as an essential element in U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

USCIRF has long raised concerns about the failures of Afghanistan's constitution to protect the right of individuals to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy on Islamic beliefs and practices. This has resulted at times in serious abuses including criminal court cases for blasphemy that violate the rights of the accused.

For instance, this March, President Karzai pardoned three individuals who had been imprisoned for lengthy jail terms for blasphemy after publishing an independent translation of the Quran. The situation of the Shia Muslim minority has improved significantly since the fall of the Taliban regime although during the past year, a controversial, new personal-status law for the Shia Muslim minority reinforced the perception that women are in a subordinate position in the family.

Members of Afghanistan's small, non-Muslim minorities – Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is and Christians are effectively barred from government jobs and face societal hostility and harassment. Baha'is and Christians cannot practice their faith openly. Although conditions have improved for women significantly since the fall of the Taliban regime, pervasive discrimination still limits women's access to education, employment and even medical care. Chairman?

MR. LEO: Thank you very much, Dr. Land. Next, I'd like to introduce Commissioner Nina Shea, our longest-serving commissioner, to discuss countries falling under the rubric of state-sponsored extremist ideology and education. Thank you, Commissioner Shea.

NINA SHEA: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. During the commission's discussions at the beginning of this reporting period, we identified two key countries that fall into the paradigm of state-sponsored extremist ideology and education. They are Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This category highlights countries that sponsor education systems and materials that teach hatred and

intolerance towards other religious groups. Considering how this ideology can motivate individuals to undertake acts of violence, this issue has national security implications for the United States.

USCIRF has since its inception recommended that Saudi Arabia be designated a country of particular concern and recommends that the State Department continue to designate it as a CPC, as State has done since 2004. Despite King Abdullah undertaking some limited reform measures and promoting interreligious dialogue in international fora in recent years, the Saudi government continues to be involved in supporting activities globally that promote an extremist ideology, and in some cases, violence towards non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims.

And by the way, some of these textbooks can be found on the ministry of education's website that contains the full curriculum of what we're talking about. It's available today at the Saudi government's education ministry website. In addition, the Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and continues to interfere with private religious practices.

Ismaili Muslims continue to suffer severe discrimination and abuse. And there is an ongoing crackdown on Shia Muslim dissidents which has resulted in numerous arrests and detentions during the past year. Of course, one of the – the longest political prisoner – religious prisoner – in Saudi Arabia is an Ismaili Muslim, Hadi Al-Mutif, who's been there for 17 years for a wisecrack he made as a teenager under the blasphemy laws.

Members of the commission to promote virtue and prevent vice where the religious police continue to commit abuses, overstep their authority with impunity and are not subject to judicial oversight. One of the many examples of the people they have arrested include Ali Sabat from Lebanon, who was arrested on the hajj and given the death penalty – he's now in prison – because he had a satellite program doing fortune telling back in Lebanon. A Saudi blogger who tried to document the abuses of the religious police himself was arrested in '08 and had to flee the country for his life.

Therefore, USCIRF urges the U.S. government to lift the indefinite waiver of education, or at a minimum, extend a limited 180-day waiver during which time the Saudi government should complete reforms from government schoolbooks, textbooks, as well as rein in the religious police by ensuring that members are held accountable and prosecuted for abuses. Finally, the Saudi government should immediately release Hadi Al-Mutif, one of the longest-serving prisoners, as I mentioned above; Shia activist Munir Jassas, held since November, and Ali Sabat from Lebanon.

Regarding Pakistan, since 2002, the commission has recommended that Pakistan be named a CPC in light of a number of serious religious freedom concerns. Today, we renew that recommendation and urge the U.S. government to make promoting respect for religious freedom an integral part of our engagement with Pakistan.

While the current government of Pakistan has taken some positive actions to promote religious intolerance, such as through the efforts of minister of minorities affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, it has failed to reverse the continuing erosion of religious freedom for religious minority communities or the majority-Muslim community.

A significant minority of Pakistan's thousands of religious schools reportedly continue to provide ideological training and motivation to those who take part in violence, targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and abroad. The government's registration process reportedly has had little if any effect on the curricula which in many of these schools remains intolerant and include exhortations to violence.

Religious freedom concerns are also evident in Pakistan's public schools. Pakistani primary and secondary schools continue to use textbooks that foster prejudice and intolerance of religious minorities; social studies and Pakistani studies textbooks frequently recount historically inaccurate events that paint Hindus and Christians in a negative light.

A number of Pakistan's laws restrict religious freedom. Ahmadis are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith and face criminal penalties for a wide range of practices common to Muslims in Pakistan. Laws against blasphemy, which include criminal punishment, frequently result in gross religious freedom violations and the mere allegation has been used to incite communal violence.

And I'd just like to also point out that in the Ahmadis' case, for a Pakistani citizen to apply for a passport, they have to sign a form denouncing the founder of the Ahmadi faith before they can acquire one, thus preventing Ahmadis from even going on the hajj because they cannot get their passports. Thank you.

MR. LEO: Thank you very much, Commissioner Shea. The last framework to be discussed is the concept of impunity, which is the state's failure to prevent and punish religious freedom violations. And with us this morning all the way from the West Coast is Commissioner Don Argue, who will address that framework with reference to a couple of countries.

DON ARGUE: Thank you, Chairman Leo, and good morning. The "State Failure to Prevent and Punish Religious Freedom Violations" rubric focuses on the concept of impunity. As our chairman mentioned in his introductory remarks, climates of impunity develop when governments fail to punish religious freedom abuses. And as the absence of accountability breeds lawlessness, the commission has seen and I have seen how this in turn often leads to endless cycles of sectarian violence.

During the past year, I have traveled to Nigeria twice, along with Chairman Leo and Commissioner Talal Eid. During our missions, we saw how years of inaction by Nigeria's federal, state and local governments have created a climate of impunity resulting in thousands of deaths. Because the Nigerian government continues to respond inadequately and ineffectively to recurrent communal and sectarian violence, USCIRF recommends again for the second year that Nigeria be designated a country of particular concern.

Since 1999, a disturbingly large number of Nigerians – 12,000, if not more – have been killed in attacks and reprisals between Muslims and Christians. This trend continued as two major outbreaks of sectarian violence in and around the city of Jos, Plateau state, resulted in as many as 1,000 people being killed since January of this year. Tensions in Plateau remain high and it appears smaller-scale reprisal killings have occurred in recent weeks.

The government of Nigeria has done little if anything to address sectarian and communal violence, making no serious effort to investigate or prosecute the perpetrators of the numerous killings and other crimes. To break the culture of impunity, the United States should urge the top levels of Nigerian government, including the highest-ranking state and federal officials, to prevent and contain recurring sectarian violence by bringing perpetrators to justice. The U.S. should also ensure that these issues are an important part of discussions in the context of the newly-established U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission.

Regarding Egypt, USCIRF has placed the country on its watch list every year since the creation of list in 2002 because of ongoing problems of discrimination, intolerance and other human rights violations against members of dissident Muslims and religious minorities. This year was no exception.

We have traveled to Egypt – some in January – to independently address religious freedom conditions in the country just weeks after six Coptic Christians and one Muslim were killed outside a church of the Coptic on the Coptic Christmas Eve in Upper Egypt. This past year has seen significant upsurge in violence targeting Christians with little effective government response. This increase in violence and the failure to prosecute those responsible has fostered a growing climate of impunity in the country.

Other religious freedom restrictions persist. Disfavored Muslims like the Quranists or the Shia Muslims and other dissidents, such as bloggers, continue to face discrimination or repression, including through application of the penal code which prohibits blasphemy. Implementation of previous court rulings related to official identity documents for Baha'i and Christian converts has limited and subject to onerous delays. The government has not responded adequately to widespread anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media.

The U.S. government should aggressively press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators responsible for the sectarian violence and also recommends that the U.S. government should establish a timetable with Cairo for the implementation of human rights and religious freedom reforms.

If the deadlines are not met, the U.S. government should reconsider its allocation of assistance to the Egyptian government. Finally, the Egyptian government should immediately release blogger Abdul Kareem Suleiman, in prison for more than three years for blasphemy; and Coptic Christian blogger, Hani Nazeer, held for more than 18 months allegedly for insulting Islam. Mr. Chairman?

MR. LEO: Thank you very much, Commissioner Argue. Next up will be Commissioner Talal Eid, who will talk a little bit about the “defamation of religions” concept and what the commission has been doing in that regard. Commissioner?

TALAL EID: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning. In recent years, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has been very concerned about the efforts by some United Nations member-states to create an international legal norm or redefine existing norms to ban the so-called defamation of religions.

Essentially, what these states are seeking is a global blasphemy law to protect Islam. Its proponents argue that such a ban on defamation of religions would help address the very real problem of religious persecution and discrimination. It would not. Instead, it would exacerbate these problems. It also would undermine fundamental individual rights. In countries that have blasphemy laws, like Egypt and Pakistan, which are leading countries in this effort, they are used to intimidate and arrest members of religious minority communities and dissenting members of the majority community.

International human rights law protects individuals, not beliefs or belief systems. Every individual has the right to freedom of religion or belief but that right does not include a right to have one’s religion or belief be free from comment or criticism. To the contrary, religious freedom and pluralism necessarily involve discussing, questioning and even criticizing each other’s religions or beliefs.

Rather than banning speech that defames religions, governments should address the very real problem of religious intolerance through positive measures such as education and public diplomacy. In addition, laws against bias-motivated violence and discrimination should be fully enforced. The United States government should continue its vigorous efforts to oppose and encourage others to oppose all efforts to seek a global ban on defamation of religions.

However, there is some good news, as support for these resolutions declined at the United Nations Human Rights Council and General Assembly. In March of this year, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom welcomed the reduced support in the U.N. Human Rights Council for these Resolutions.

Though we remain disappointed that the council once again passed this ill-conceived resolution, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom applauded the fact that support for this concept has hit a new low level. The resolution garnered the fewest “yes” votes and most “no” votes overcast on this issue in the council, coming within four votes of defeat.

It is heartening that more countries are recognizing the dangerous nature of these initiatives. However, the chair was right to say in his opening remarks that this is trench warfare. With some progress being made, the United States and its allies must now redouble their efforts to see the defeat of these resolutions. Mr. Chairman?

MR. LEO: Thank you very much, Commissioner Eid. As I mentioned at the outset, in addition to our CPC list, we also have a list of watchlist countries that engage in various forms of conduct that repress or oppress religion in some very serious ways and we monitor very carefully those countries as well. You can find a list of them at page six of our report.

Our vice chairman, Michael Cromartie, is going to talk about one watchlist country in particular, Indonesia. But I think before doing that, Commissioner Cromartie wanted to talk a little bit about one of our other CPC countries that hasn't been mentioned yet, Vietnam, having traveled to the country on behalf of the commission on various delegations. So Vice Chair Cromartie?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you, Chairman Leo. Yes, having traveled to Vietnam two times, I and my colleagues have observed a deterioration of human rights and religious freedom conditions in the country since it joined the World Trade Organization in 2007. The government of Vietnam continues to control government-approved religious communities, to severely restrict independent religious practice and to repress individuals and groups viewed as a challenge to their political authority.

The CPC designation produced tangible results in the past when Vietnam was designated a CPC in 2004 and 2005. The government released prisoners, it issued a new legal framework for religion, it prohibited the policy of forced renunciations of faith through violence and it allowed large-scale religious ceremonies and celebrations.

However, despite being removed from the CPC list, serious abuses continue. Individuals are imprisoned or detained for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. Independent religious activity remains illegal. Legal protections for government-approved religious organizations are subject to arbitrary and discriminatory interpretations. And new converts to some Protestant and Buddhist communities face discrimination and they face pressure to renounce their faith.

Given these ongoing, serious violations, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom again recommends that Vietnam be placed and be designated as a CPC in 2010. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom continues to urge the Obama administration to reevaluate diplomatic and political resources necessary to advance religious freedom and related human rights in its relations with Vietnam. The CPC designation has proven in the past to spur productive diplomatic discussion on religious freedom. It has led to tangible improvements without hindering progress on other bilateral interests.

Now, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom delegation will travel to Indonesia in two weeks. We are going a month before President Obama travels to Indonesia. And we hope to continue to advise the administration on how to pursue U.S.-Indonesian partnership. Indonesia has a tradition of religious tolerance and of pluralism, it has a tradition of legal protection for religious freedom and Indonesians have rejected extremism at the polls. Nevertheless, religious radicalism and extremism have found converts in Indonesia, leading to sectarian violence, terrorism and religious freedom violations.

National decrees and provincial laws have been used to restrict rather than advance the freedom of religion and belief. The constitutional court's recent decision to uphold – to uphold – the blasphemy decree of 1965 was, we believe, a missed opportunity to fully protect the freedoms found in Indonesia's constitution and its international commitments. Therefore, we look forward to learning more about how the Indonesian government protects and promotes religious freedom during our visit there in two weeks. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. LEO: Thank you very much, Vice Chair Cromartie. Well, and now comes the fun part, I guess, when you get to test us on our knowledge of all these different countries and when you can offer your questions, comments, observations, and we will do our best to provide you as much information as possible. And so why don't we open up the floor for questions?

Q: Yes, Steve Pulman (ph) with Associated Press. Dr. Leo, what is the commission's position on missionary proselytizing, the right to convert or seek converts?

MR. LEO: Any commissioners like to begin on that one?

MR. LAND: We believe that the right to practice one's faith, the right to change one's faith is part of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We believe it's a basic international human freedom and should be recognized by governments around the world, especially the vast majority of those governments that are signatories to the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

MR. LEO: As you can –

MR. LAND: Don wanted to also –

MR. LEO: Oh, Commissioner Argue? Sorry about that.

MR. ARGUE: I think you would be well-served to review Article XVIII of the U.N. Charter on Human Rights, where it is very clear that a person has the right to observe a religious practice, to change that religious practice, to worship in public or in private.

We often say that the practice of religion is the canary in the mine. It's an indicator of broad human rights violations. But the basic right of religious freedom is assured and guaranteed in Article XVIII. So when we talk about proselytizing, we need to go back to that document which these countries have signed on to affirm.

MR. LEO: I think Commissioner Shea, you had a comment, and then Commissioner Eid.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I'd just like to say that of course we're against coercive conversion so that we believe in religious freedom, people can choose to change their faith, leave their faith but they should not be coerced in any way to do so.

MR. LEO: And Commissioner Eid? Okay? Okay. You'll see throughout our report and the various country reports that we do make references from time to time to various efforts to

control, limit or restrict proselytism in various countries, and so you'll be able to see various instances where we comment on that.

And also, the commission has been looking into the issue of proselytism in Morocco. We're in the process of collecting information; we've been in communication with the U.S. ambassador to Morocco to obtain information about what really has happened there and we hope to have more data in the very near future.

MR. LEO: Yes, ma'am, please.

Q: Thank you. Hebal Kotsi (ph) from Al-Masryoon Egyptian newspaper. I just have a couple of questions.

MR. LEO: Could you identify yourself and speak a little bit more loudly? We're having a hard time hearing.

Q: Yeah, my name is Hebal Kotsi. I'm from Al-Masryoon Egyptian newspaper. Okay, I have – can you give some ranking of the most countries that you fear they are having problems concerning freedom of religion – religious freedom? And second, what about asylum? Can you elaborate a little bit about rules and laws of asylum in the U.S.? And that's it. Thank you.

MR. LEO: Well, first, with regard to the issue of ranking countries: Of course there are other institutions and civil society groups in particular that do rankings in various kinds of indices but that's not really what the U.S. commission is in the business of doing. As you can see from our report, we have 13 countries that we've singled out as countries of particular concern because they meet the statutory definition of what would constitute a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

We don't rank the countries within that list of 13. Our hope is that the secretary of state would designate those countries as countries of particular concern and that they would receive serious attention by the government in an effort to try to move those countries' policies in a more positive direction. But we don't rank the countries, per se. So that's just something we don't do. Now, your second question was asylum. Okay, would any of the commissioners like to talk to the issue of asylum? Vice Chair Prodromou?

MS. PRODROMO: Just a brief comment on asylum. The commission actually conducted a study called "The Expedited Removal Study" in 2003, 2004. We were commissioned where – Congress made a request that we undertake this study. You can find on our website.

But in terms of asylum – and I've looked at the conditions of asylum-seekers in the United States amongst other things and made a series of recommendations – I know that asylum-seeking is a particular issue with the Coptic community in Egypt so I would direct you to take a look at the study. Of course, you can also look at some of our recommendations in various chapters because we do make specific recommendations on more expeditious – by that, more

timely and procedurally streamlined – processes for our religious asylum-seekers in some countries.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Shea?

MS. SHEA: Yeah, just getting back to your first question, I just want to clarify – there was an incorrect report in the Egyptian press saying that Egypt was ranked such and such; that it's not true. We do not rank countries, as the chairman explained.

MR. LEO: Also on the asylum issue, you might want to take a look at some of the op-eds that various commissioners have written. I know there was an op-ed placed in either The Atlanta Journal-Constitution or The Miami Herald – I can't remember which one – late last year that deals with the asylum issue – The Miami Herald. And the commission has a long history of making recommendations in this area. I believe the gentleman over here had his hand up.

Q: Dennis Sadowski with Catholic News Service. Wondering about the conditions in Nigeria in particular and also, by extension, in India, where the violence seems to be portrayed on religious grounds. In talking with some Nigerians in particular in this country and in Nigeria, they seem to say that the violence there is more tribal or land-based and by extension also in Orissa province of India, rather than so much religion. It happens to be religious players but that the issue there more is political. So I'd like to hear what your views are on that.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Argue?

MR. ARGUE: Visiting Nigeria twice in the last year has provided insights. Yes, there are issues. There are economic issues: unemployment, ethic, land ownership – all of these things come into play. But the question is why has the frustration been vented in religious persecution? The reports that we received while we were there, the reports since we have been there are astonishing. The government has basically been ineffective. As a result, religious minorities and even large religious groups have been persecuted tragically.

I think I can sum it up with our first visit. We were with two senators – federal senators from the Plateau state – and we happened to be in a reception and they were there. So I questioned them and both of them kind of lifted their heads and said, If it's not religious violence, why did they burn 24 Christian churches? Or why did they kill the bishop of one particular group?

He just went out in front of his home to defend his wife and 10 children; they found out he was a leader, a bishop; they horribly treated him. They gouged out his eyes; they cut his arms off at the elbows, his legs at the knees and then beheaded him. And I had a meeting with the pastor that went to the mortuary to identify his remains. So sure, there are other issues. But if it's not a religious issue, why do they carry out the violence as they do?

Now, most recently we were there just a few weeks ago and the horrible, horrible persecution took place in the Jos area again, where people came in and took women and children,

murdered them in their beds, beheaded them. And we have a series of photos on the remains that is just tragic. But they were targeted because of their religious belief.

Q: Can I follow up on that?

MR. LEO: Well, sure, go ahead. Yeah.

Q: I'm just wondering if perhaps the problem is that the federal government or the regional governments has been able to – to be effective in those areas.

MR. ARGUE: Well, I'd turn to one of my other commissioners who were there but I don't feel they've been effective.

MR. LEO: There have been at least 13,000 deaths from sectarian-related conflicts going all the way back to 1999 – probably about a dozen various conflicts. Until the Nigerian government recognizes that there is a sectarian aspect to this conflict and violence, it will not be solved. It will not be solved.

We were there. It is true that there are economic – various socioeconomic and land-related issues tied up in all of this violence. But some of that is a consequence of Nigerian law. For, as some of you are aware, there are various forms of indigenous status in Nigeria and that indigenous status, which provides certain special privileges and benefits, often runs hand in hand with one's religious affiliation. And so that creates enormous difficulties in country. And so until the Nigerian government recognizes that those religious tensions are inextricably intertwined with everything else that is going on, they will not solve this problem and they will not solve it at their peril.

Because as we have seen, since the commission named Nigeria a CPC in May of last year, we have seen an increase in violence; we have seen an increase of extremism with the radical group Boko Haram wreaking havoc in the country last year; we have seen the Christmas Day bomber and his relationship to Nigeria and the designation of Nigeria as a “country of interest” by the United States. This is a serious problem.

Fortunately, fortunately there is a bilateral national exchange taking place between the United States and Nigerian governments and it provides a wonderful opportunity for our country and the Nigerian government to come together and to try to solve this problem. There are lots of things that the United States can do proactively to provide assistance here. We can provide technical assistance for police and other security forces in the country who are often too young and too ill-trained to really figure out how to prevent and ultimately deal with sectarian violence.

We can begin to help the Nigerian government get a handle on the often-times conflicting jurisdictions between the federal government and the states and help them work through how to figure out who needs to do investigations and prosecutions. There is finger-pointing that has gone on with regard to many of these sectarian conflicts. And part of the problem is that nobody knows who is supposed to investigate, who is supposed to prosecute. Those problems have to be worked out.

Now, for a – (audio break) – of hope: When we were there, as Commissioner Argue and Commissioner Eid may remember, the morning we were there, the justice ministry filed 41 prosecutions in Plateau state because of the Jos violence. It was the first time ever that there were actual prosecutions pending in a state judicial system.

Now, what will happen? That's anybody's guess. We've seen arrests take place before and people are just released. Will these prosecutions lead to convictions and serious punishment? We don't know. A But what the United States needs to do is use its best efforts to make sure that those prosecutions see their way to a positive end, of course with all due process safeguards ensured, and that other investigations and prosecutions take place in the event that there is other violence in the future. Yes, Commissioner Eid?

MR. EID: I visited Nigeria three times. It is true that religion is not a real factor in the problem. But I did notice a great tension between Muslims and the Christians over issues of the past but in particular over the issue of applying the Shariah law and establishing the religious police in certain states in Nigeria. I did not notice among Muslims who would stand up and speak in support of Christians. So there is a tension but there are also other factors for sectarian violence in Nigeria.

MR. LEO: Vice Chair Prodromou?

MS. PRODRMOU: I think your question is very well-considered. It speaks to the difficulties of unpacking conflicts over material questions with conflicts over identity. But I think what our commission has found indisputably, by virtue of the work on the ground that we've done, is that those are inextricably connected.

And I think one point that also deserves mentioning as a kind of footnote is the fact that the expansion of Shariah law into 13 states in Nigeria has had negative effects on Muslims and Christians alike. And what is very disturbing is that Muslim communities themselves, Muslims who don't wish to be subjected to Shariah law, are encountering the same sorts of discrimination as Christians do. That's the first point that I wanted to mention.

The second point is that we're also very concerned about something that we see in Nigeria that's reflective of a broader pattern of concern. And that's namely the way that external actors seek to instrumentalize and to mobilize religion as a factor for conflict. In particular, we have concerns that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have begun to provide funding – Libya as well – for the construction of mosques and schools and also for the training of clerics.

So there are these pressure points that make for the connections between identity interest and material interest and the way these are being mobilized and instrumentalized are things that our recommendations seek to address and seek to resolve.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Shea, do you want to speak to India because there was a second part to that question? Then we'll take the next question.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, just briefly I want to say that also it's a situation of – other factors are integrated into this problem but the minorities are scapegoated in certain areas of India. So we had the Orissa violence in '08 with about 40, all Christians, dead, and then tens of thousands forced out, fleeing for their lives into the jungle area.

And before that, in Gujarat in '02, with Hindu-Muslim riots, there were over a thousand killed – mostly Muslims, along with some Christians. In these situations, you see the police failing to quell the violence and the justice system slow and ineffective. And that creates further tensions and it's a snowballing effect and it's also sort of a green light for these violent groups to continue what they're doing.

In the weeks preceding this event today, there has been some movement, as reported in The New York Times, about India, at least an interrogation of the person in charge of the state of Gujarat. Of course, it's eight years later; he's finally being interrogated. But that's why we recommend that the United States in its policy, one, raise these issues in its bilateral meetings with India and also to assist in making their justice system more effective in these religious cases.

MR. LEO: Yes, sir.

Q: Do I need the mike?

MR. LEO: Yes, if you would.

Q: I'll stand here so I don't block the cameras. My name is Ihab Aziz. I'm the executive director of Coptic American Friendship Association, a Washington, D.C.-based association. I think you probably have had, as far as Egypt, over 90 percent of the recommendations that we've been really asking for, for the past decade or so. So I think awesome job done here. Thank you for that.

I would like to comment on and ask you regarding the timetable that you are recommending. You have recommended to Congress, to the White House and said possibly that they would enforce a timetable or put a timetable for the Egyptian administration to apply some of the recommendations or all the recommendations hopefully, which they have done nothing such as this in the past. What kind of timetable do you have in mind? Is it a year, two, five? Is it six months? Is it for the whole list of recommendations or just a few? What kind of timetable do you have in mind? That's one.

Two, is Egypt is the second-largest recipient of U.S. money after Israel since 1977. They get about \$2 billion a year of U.S. taxpayers' money. That's close to \$70 billion to date. While we're not recommending that you would cut this assistance rate to Egypt because we need it and we acknowledge that, but what is the government in Egypt doing to show full implementation of relationship between the U.S. and Egypt?

Eighteen members of Congress, a month-and-a-half ago, two months ago, expressed in a letter, a serious letter, to the Egyptian administration, to the Secretary Clinton that they are

considering the protection of the Copts as a serious concern and also a mutual, I guess, goal that both countries should seek to achieve. So what is happening here?

And also you visited in January, so I'm wondering given the relationship – and Egypt is one of the, you know, closest allies to the U.S. Most of the government officials, as stated in the report, refuse to meet with the commission. I mean, what's your comment on that? I think they should get a clear message that they should be able to meet with the commission and they should not ban or refuse to give visas to some of the commissioners going to Egypt. And so these are some of the issues that we have.

And finally – I apologize for the long question – your comment on the second article on the constitution, the Shariah, which states, I believe that the Islamic Shariah principles should be the main source of legislation for the constitution. So that's really impacting all the other non-Sunni Egyptians in Egypt, including the disfavored Muslims, the Christians, the Copts – about 15 million Christians, what have you. So would you recommend that the Egyptians were to remove that second article? Would you want to keep it? Does it really matter? What's your comment on that? Thank you.

MR. LEO: All right, well a lot of ground to cover, but I think we can get through a bunch of it. First of all, as to timetables, unfortunately as with many of the recommendations the commission makes, these sorts of policies and procedures that we ask countries to undertake ought to have been undertaken yesterday or months ago or years ago. So the Egyptian government, like many of these governments that oppress religious groups, are a little bit behind schedule.

There are ongoing problems. So for example in the context of impunity which we've discussed, there are trials that are underway now. There are trials that have taken place over the past couple of years. In some of those instances, unfortunately, the reconciliation process – the so-called reconciliation process – has become a substitute for trial, conviction and punishment. The commission has no objection to reconciliation and to peace-building, but that is not a substitute to bringing people to justice. And that is a problem which has to be solved immediately because there are cases percolating through the system as we speak.

There have been other ongoing problems. The Egyptian government continues to support the defamation of religions concept, which is a global blasphemy standard. We think that for a progressive country with such close relationships to the United States that is an unacceptable position for the country to be taking.

There are many other problems. There are the problems of identity cards and the inability of various converts, particularly converts from Islam or re-converts, to obtain identity cards, which in Egypt is a very, very important card because it guarantees you all kinds of different services and benefits and the ability to travel. Unfortunately, the Egyptian government has been very slow and nonresponsive, quite frankly, in trying to resolve the identity card issue in how various religious minorities are to be identified.

The situation in Egypt is very unfortunate. And I have to say that it is befuddling to try to figure out how a country that receives so much aid and assistance from the United States can be so far behind in ensuring religious freedom for quite a number of different groups, minority groups and so forth around the country.

I was quite struck when we were there. One particular meeting we had with a group of Quranists and there were 12 of them – men and women. And I asked them, apart from what they do to advance their Quranic faith, what do they do for a living, where do they live? None of them had jobs. None of them had valid identity cards. They can't survive in their society as Quranists. That's a form of discrimination that has to be remedied and quickly. Now, you talked about many other issues and I'll sort of turn to commissioners now to see if they'd like to take on any of those subjects.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I just want to clarify that we have called for the U.S. government to establish a timetable, you know, hopefully as the chair said, it would be yesterday – (chuckles) – but soon. And a realistic timetable that would – and if the deadlines are not met, that the U.S. government should reconsider its aid to Egypt. That is one of our recommendations.

We've prioritized two of these items that should be given early deadlines and that is the reconstruction of places of worship for the Copts; to make a uniform code of construction so that there's no discrimination or really suppression of Coptic Christianity in Egypt. After all, the Copts were an ancient people there. And also, the identity card issue – to resolve that is – because it affects Baha'is, it affects the converts, it affects Quranists, Sunnis and so forth.

MR. LEO: Other comments on Egypt? Vice Chair Prodromou?

MS. PRODRMOU: Regarding the timetable, one of the things that we have asked with more specificity is the following: that the State Department be required to report every six months on progress being made on our recommendations, particularly those that are directed to U.S. foreign assistance that's meant to go to NGOs in Egypt.

We've asked in our recommendations that that kind of funding go directly to NGOs rather than the Egyptian government vetting the NGOs and then deciding to direct to whom it goes. And also we have allowed that U.S. foreign assistance meant for NGOs – that those NGOs are allowed to operate more freely and without any kind of hindrance on their activities. So the most specific timetable that we've established, it is a piece of it, and that's the six months reporting period. And we link that very much to overall U.S. foreign assistance to Egypt.

MR. LEO: Oh, I'm sorry – over here? Okay. We'll switch back and forth. Yes.

Q: I'm Katie Wong (sp) with New Tang Dynasty TV. Since the U.S.-China human rights dialogue will be coming within two weeks, so this year, there will continue to be the closed-door dialogue. So how do you think about the format of – whether such format is effective to improve the situation there? And could you talk more about your recommendation to the U.S. government on improving the religious freedom there?

MR. LEO: Any of the commissioners like to speak to the dialogue? Commissioner Argue?

MR. ARGUE: Well, we're encouraged with the announcement of the dialogue and we have our hopes. I've been involved in China for about 15 years and I'm heartened with some progress and I'm very disappointed with others. This is a very dramatic photo. If you get close enough to it, you'll see this lady is on a crutch.

It reminds one of the young man standing before the tanks in Tiananmen Square. She was standing there for the Uighur Muslims, as you've already heard who were so persecuted. Now, there have been some advances, but they're inconsistent – and then you see this slaughter. We hope to be able to address some of those issues during the dialogue.

MR. LEO: I was actually on the phone yesterday with Assistant Secretary Posner talking about the dialogue and he was assuring me on the phone yesterday that freedom of religion is going to be a very important part of the human rights dialogue.

Now, of course we'll have to see what transpires during the course of it but I am hopeful that the fact that they are focusing on freedom of religion and are hoping to have people in the dialogue who are real experts in the area will help to advance some of the issues and discussions here. As Commissioner Argue points out, we spent a lot of time on China and the condition of the Uighur Muslims in China. Commissioner Land?

MR. LAND: I think if you look at our report, we talk about this as a priority recommendation. Religious freedom is a bellwether issue in U.S.-China relations because it encompasses issues including the rule of law, freedom of expression and the well-being of ethnic minorities. Promoting religious freedom in China is a vital U.S. interest that can positively affect the United States' future security, economic and political relations with China.

I know of very few places in the world where the canary in the coal mine is more apt than it is in this situation. The state of religious minorities and those who are not part of officially sanctioned religions is the canary. If the canary is chirping and the canary is healthy, then that's a positive indicator for all the other rights that we are concerned about in China for individual Chinese citizens. If the canary is choking or the canary is laying over unconscious in the cage, that's a big problem.

MR. LEO: China is a great example, by the way, of this sort of freedom of worship and freedom of religion distinction that I was discussing earlier, right? Going back to President Bush's trip to China and the more recent trips of this administration, there's been a tendency for every administration that goes to China to talk about freedom of worship, not freedom of religion. There's a big difference and that picture encapsulates it.

For the Uighur Muslims, it's just not about their ability to worship. It's about tremendous oppression. It's about torture. It's about extrajudicial killing. It's about taking Uighur women and shipping them halfway across the country to work in other factories so that

the Uighur Muslim community can't procreate. That's what is at stake – a broader issue of freedom of religion.

It's our hope – our hope – and to some extent our expectation based on what we heard yesterday from Assistant Secretary Posner, that that broader set of issues would be addressed not only for Uighur Muslims in China but for Protestants and Catholics and Buddhists and the other religious minorities in the country. I think you were next and then we'll switch over to the other side and come back and forth. Yes, sir.

Q: Andy Manatos with the Order of St. Andrew. My question involves Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, whom I noticed you mentioned in your report. It concerns particularly your comments about the reopening of the theological school of Halki and the following through of the decision by the European Court of Human Rights as to the return of the orphanage.

As you know, 95 percent of the patriarch's properties have been confiscated and with respect to the timing of these things happening, President Clinton, back in the '90s, was quite certain that the Halki seminary was about to be opened. My question involves what have you found out with respect to movements on either of those issues – the seminary or the orphanage?

And if I might just ask one more generic question which I noticed – I believe it was in your report; it said that the report of the commission has not been officially accepted by the White House since 2006, I thought I read. If that's true, what is that referring to?

MR. LEO: Not sure about that last point but I will say this with regard to the Halki seminary and other commitments made by the Turkish government to the Christian Orthodox community: It is a history of broken promises.

This commission is on record as having called for the turnover of that seminary. We urged, I believe, late last year when the Turkish government came here to Washington, D.C., for President Obama to urge the government to respect the promise that it has made over and over again but has not followed through on. So that is a very, very serious – very serious problem and in certain respects, a breach of trust. Other commissioners? Yes, Vice Chair Prodromou.

MS. PRODROMOU: Sure. The commission visited Turkey and in our meetings with Turkish state officials there, we raised repeatedly, amongst other things, the property rights regime that has resulted in arbitrary seizure of properties for the Orthodox Christian community there as well as for Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Jewish community and including other Christian minority communities, Roman Catholic and Protestant.

So we raised this issue as well as for restrictions on the property rights of Alawis, another minority community in Turkey. So we raised this issue across the board when we were in Turkey. When we raised the issue of Halki in particular, we were told repeatedly that this was a decision that rested under the purview of the president – the president's educational council or commission, Yohk (ph).

So you can see in our recommendations that we have urged that Prime Minister Erdogan and then the president – but Prime Minister Erdogan make good on his general public statements regarding the possibility for reopening Halki. And we also sent a letter – the commission sent a letter to President Obama on the eve of Prime Minister Erdogan’s visit here and we referenced specifically the reopening of the theological school of Halki as an independent religious seminary, as called for by international treaties including this one.

MR. LEO: Gentleman over here, on the right.

Q: Hi, I’m Elliott Daniels with Christian Solidarity International. Ms. Shea, you mentioned earlier that the commission is explicitly opposed to forced conversions and in November of 2009, the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights and Christian Solidarity International published a report where several dozen women and girls in Egypt, Coptic Christian women and girls, claimed to be victims of forced conversion and forced marriages, many of them under violence and many of them were drugged; some of them were minors.

This struck a very sensitive chord, understandably, because a forced conversion of any kind, anywhere is an egregious violation. Now, you all were in Egypt in January. Did you find this to be an issue? Did you report on it in the new report? More broadly also I’d be curious to hear: Have you found other countries – what other countries have you found forced conversion to be an issue and what is the nature of this crime. Thank you.

MS. SHEA: Yes, it’s a very important issue and it goes to the issue, again, of impunity of reports, allegations – serious allegations of crimes being committed where there is no follow-up – there’s no satisfactory follow-up; there’s no justice; there’s no real independent investigation, even, in Egypt. It’s something that we do hear about and it’s been persistent over the years; it’s not even just new. The report reflects that.

The other places we have heard of that in – there were situations of Hindu and Christian girls, I believe in – I hesitate to say where but I think it’s Pakistan – where that has been a – yeah, Pakistan was – Steve Snow, our staff researcher, is nodding his head – where that has also been reported as a very big concern because apart from the tragedy of that person and her family, that is also a real trigger point for increased, intensified sectarian violence. It really does strike a nerve and I have also heard reports of that in northern Sudan as well, southern Sudan as well. So it is a problem – very serious problem.

MR. LEO: Find a place with blasphemy laws and you’ll probably find a few forced conversions. They often run hand in hand, not surprisingly, because of the climate that blasphemy laws create in terms of intolerance and extremism, which is why we’re against the “defamation of religions” concept, which is just code for a global blasphemy law. Yes, sir.

Q: Mac Skelton from Buxton Initiative. It’s a very impressive and substantive report but obviously, the Obama administration won’t be able to implement all of its policy recommendations. Does the commission have one or two or maybe three priorities that you’re really hoping to emphasize for this next year?

MR. LEO: Well, I'll let each of the commissioners state their own view of the matter. For my own part, I think the first step is to – is for the administration to do what it's required to do by statute which is designate countries of particular concern, which has not happened in a while.

So number one, we need to have some designations and our preference, I think, would be that instead of the usual eight countries that are designated, all 13 get designated. So I think that's important. For my own part, I think another priority is for these designations to actually mean something, you know? Of the eight countries that are designated CPCs, only one – only one – has sanctions specifically for the CPC designation and that's Eritrea.

All of the other CPC countries, they do what we call double-hatting. They take sanctions that are already imposed on a country and they use them for purposes of religious freedom violations as well as other human rights abuses or other problems that may exist in the country. That provides tremendous disincentives for a country to take religious freedom seriously and to view it as a priority for the United States government.

Then of course there's Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia which has a presidential waiver. Despite the fact that many of the policies that the Saudis themselves identified as priorities for themselves in its 2006 confirmation of policies have not been completely fulfilled and so from my own standpoint, I think it's a priority to name these countries and then to do something proactive once they're named: sanctions, bilateral negotiations, whatever it takes. Vice Chair Cromartie?

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, I would just add to that that it would really be important that this administration name an ambassador to run the office, to implement some of the things that Commissioner Leo just mentioned. We haven't had an ambassador for over a year and we need a qualified, experienced ambassador in that office and sooner rather than later.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Land?

MR. LAND: I would second what both Chairman Leo and Vice Chairman Cromartie said but I would also say that it would appear to me to be obvious that in terms of the sheer number of human beings impacted, China has to be a priority just because of the numbers of people that are involved.

Probably North Korea is still the worst place in the world to wake up in the morning, if you don't happen to be part of the thug-ocracy that runs the country, so we certainly would want to keep the focus of public opinion on North Korea and anything that the world community can do and our government can do to help even marginally improve the terrible situation of the citizens of that country.

MR. LEO: Vice Chair Prodromou?

MS. PRODROMOU: Just for a final note on that, my fellow commissioners have identified particular countries. I do want to go back to this point about the actual mechanisms

that are utilized once a country has been designated. The issue of double-hatting is something that we're particularly concerned about.

In order to really give it – the legislation – some traction, the double-hatting needs to stop. You'll notice in this year's annual report that we've actually made a recommendation with specificity on Iran and we've asked, in the case of Iran, for example, that the time has come to end the double-hatting on Iran. It's just one case in point.

The other thing is, with regard to a semantic issue of great importance and I think priority for the commission, that's the one that Imam Talal Eid presented to you and that's the defamation of religions. The defamation of religions, as Chair Leo mentioned, is the equivalent of a global blasphemy law and the potential consequences of the defamation of religions effort are – they're catastrophic for religious freedom and they would adversely affect all believers, regardless of persuasion.

What's most pernicious about blasphemy laws and therefore the defamation of religions is the fact that it's used in order to target not only believers from other traditions but also believers who would internally criticize, debate and explore their own religious tradition from within. So the defamation of religions issue or theme is also going to be – we see it as especially important for us.

MR. LAND: Also, let's remember too that the defamation of religion laws would also violate the basic rights of nonbelievers, whoever they may be. Atheists and agnostics would be included because any criticism of religion, it's a violation of freedom of thought, it's a violation of freedom of speech. It is about as bad an idea as has surfaced in the world in the recent past.

MR. CROMARTIE: Those are one or two recommendations for the Obama administration.

MR. LEO: I would say in conclusion on this question also just that there really needs to be a cultural shift here within government. The problems that we're talking about are not new. You can go all the way back to the very beginning of this commission and right after the enactment of IRFA administration after administration has not made freedom of religion a priority in its foreign policy, national security and economic development agendas.

So there needs to be some kind of a serious intellectual or cultural shift. Freedom of religion has to be viewed as inextricably intertwined with the business of foreign policy and national security and that hasn't happened in over 10 years of IRFA being in existence.

Perhaps some of the solution is for Congress to become even more engaged than it is in putting pressure on administrations to make freedom of religion a priority. Perhaps there's a need for religious leaders in the civil society community to step up even more, to redouble their efforts to make this a priority issue. Yes, there and then in the back. Oh, I'm sorry, do we have one other? Okay.

Q: Emily Belz from WORLD Magazine. I just wanted to – you mentioned meeting with Secretary Posner. I just wondered if you'd had any responsiveness from the administration to some of the concerns you've raised.

MR. LEO: First, on the issue of the dialogue regarding these issues, the administration has been very open to engaging in serious discussions with this commission about these issues. We have met with Assistant Secretary Posner on a couple of occasions; we recently met with Assistant Secretary Johnnie Carson on some of the Africa issues; we've been received both by Secretary Clinton and by Deputy Secretary Steinberg.

In a way, I think there has been an open door for hearing about the commission's views and perspectives. I think that's very, very important and despite the fact that an IRFA ambassador has not been appointed, which is a real problem, they have received us and have listened to what we have to say.

We've met with top-level officials within the White House, at the National Security Council on the issue with respect to the Sudan. Whenever we've done our trips around the globe, we've been very well received by the U.S. ambassadors in those countries – we've had lengthy and sometimes productive meetings with our ambassadors in countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example.

So there is an open door. There's a lot of dialogue taking place. But, as with previous administrations, foreign policy and national security are a mix of a lot of different competing interests and objectives and the trick is for all of those conversations, discussions, notes that are taken during those meetings to then rise to the surface and become a priority in the days and weeks after you've met and that's a constant struggle.

It's a constant struggle and again, that's why I think, to some extent, there needs to be a bit of a cultural and intellectual shift. The State Department and the National Security Council as institutions need to recognize freedom of religion or belief as a part of its set of priorities and work those into the problems that they're dealing with in hotspots around the world and that does not happen with the kind of time and attention that it needs to. Other commissioners? Commissioner Shea?

MS. SHEA: Yeah, you know, a perfect example of a situation where we really do need more cooperation is Saudi Arabia. As the chair mentioned, Saudi Arabia is the only country on our CPC list that gets a pass. It got a pass under the Bush administration; it's getting a pass now under the Obama administration and we have raised this issue with Secretary Clinton, Deputy Secretary Steinberg, Assistant Secretary Mike Posner.

But we've had no real satisfaction here. One of our chief recommendations in '08 was that the Saudi Academy run in Virginia, run by the embassy and using the Ministry of Education textbooks, turn over its textbooks for our examination, for our review because we were very concerned about what the content is in Saudi textbooks in general – that is, killing; a directive to kill or sanctioning killing the polytheist – meaning Shiite and others – killing apostates. This is directly stated in these textbooks.

Within a short time after our recommendation that the school either be closed if they don't turn over the textbooks, they did turn over the textbooks to the State Department. That was two years ago. The State Department held onto them, has kept them under close guard about what these textbooks say. There have been very cursory references in the annual report saying that there hasn't been enough, sufficient improvement or it's still intolerant. But there's no real analysis, detailed analysis, and they have not shared it with us.

This educational issue is a very important issue. Commissioner Land talked about China which I agree is extremely important because of the numbers but numbers are also involved here because there have been in recent years reports that continue to surface. We've seen anecdotal examples of this on our trips and otherwise about Saudi funding and providing of these extremely intolerant educational materials around the world: in the Middle East, parts of Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, parts of the Western world and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans. So this is a very big problem.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Land?

MR. LAND: Yes. This is the reason that the International Religious Freedom Act was passed: because there was a widespread perception that religious freedom was the orphan, it was the redheaded stepchild that nobody paid any attention to. Madeleine Albright acknowledged in her book, "The Mighty and the Almighty," that this was the blind spot of American foreign policy professionals for a generation.

It's why they missed the ayatollah: They couldn't believe that religion could be that important and they were stunned by the Islamic revolution in Iran. The recent Pew study shows that there's still an appalling lack of appreciation of and ignorance of religion as a huge issue in the foreign policy of the United States and the need to know more about religion and the role that religion plays.

This is why this commission was brought into being. We wouldn't be having this press conference today if we didn't have the commission which came about as a result of the International Religious Freedom Act and it's our job to trumpet the importance of this until our government gets it.

And I think it would be fair to say that under the Clinton administration, under the Bush administration and under the Obama administration, the State Department has not gotten it in any sense that we would believe would be adequate, much less acceptable. And so we're going to continue to make that case and to make it – that's our job – to the Congress and to the executive branch.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Argue?

MR. ARGUE: Dr. Land has referred to former Secretary Madeleine Albright. I don't know, Richard, if you were in the session I was in, in the Clinton Global Initiative in New York where she gave a stunning speech. She said her experience as secretary of state has changed her

view and as a result, she did produce her I think great work on “The Mighty and the Almighty.” I had the privilege of vetting that book for her. Her view, if you want to get a good perspective on it, refer to that book and her view on where it goes.

Now, at the risk of being redundant regarding the obvious, I would remind the press that the commission is constituted as nonpolitical, nonpartisan. We represent, as you’ve heard this morning, all religions, whether it be the Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Baha’is, Christians, Jews, whatever. That is our role; and then to report to the president, the secretary of state and to the Congress. Leonard Leo, Elizabeth Prodromou, Michael Cromartie, Don Argue, Talal Eid, Richard Land, Nina Shea.

MR. LEO: If you care about religious freedom the way we do, you look for benchmarks and those change every month, sometimes every week. But there are two that we talked about during the course of this press conference that I think people should watch and think about in assessing the current state of our government’s foreign policy and its intersection with freedom of religion.

They are the China human rights dialogue, which was discussed, and the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission. Will freedom of religion, broadly speaking, be addressed comprehensively in a meaningful way in those two forums? If they aren’t, that’s a serious problem, because those are two countries where there are serious problems and where the United States could help to do something about them. Okay, there’s a question here and then I’ll take the question in that back over there. Yes, sir?

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. : Can’t hear him.

Q: Can you hear? Okay. My name is Hermund Berjeto (ph), I work for the – (inaudible) – alliance. My question is about a country that seems not to be on the spotlight, although it’s been in your CPC list since 2006 – that’s Uzbekistan. I would like to hear more about how effectively the U.S. government has followed your recommendations and how many of them have been implemented by now, and what expectations can you have that the situation can improve in that country?

MR. LAND: I don’t think I could hear most of that. You were asking about Uzbekistan?

Q: Yeah.

MR. LAND: Yeah, we have – Uzbekistan is one of our countries of particular concern, and we have, under Uzbekistan, recommendations that we believe should be addressed by our State Department. The State Department should again designate Uzbekistan as a CPC.

Upon redesignation, no waivers should be given and sanctions should be imposed, including a ban on business to the United States by high-level Uzbek officials. The commission recommends that the U.S. coordinate its public and private actions and statements across

agencies to ensure that U.S. concerns about human rights conditions in Uzbekistan are reflected in all of its dealings with the U.S. government.

MR. LEO: Uzbekistan is – if I might also just comment briefly – Uzbekistan is a country where we have seen very serious incursions on freedom of religion or belief. The Muslim community in Uzbekistan faces severe restrictions, limitations and oppression under, I believe, the 1998 religion law. There are very oppressive registration regulations. And the Uzbek government is one of those governments that likes to use security and public order as an excuse for repressing religious communities.

We see that quite often in Central Asia with other countries, but Uzbekistan is one that uses very shoddy national security arguments for repressing peaceful religious expression and activity on the part of the Muslim community there. So those are some of the reasons why Uzbekistan is on the CPC list, and I see that Vice Chair Prodromou has a comment, too.

MS. PRODRMOU: Right. I think the Uzbek case really illustrates a point that several commissioners made previously regarding all administrations in the United States, and that's our message that security and human rights go hand-in-hand. There can't be security without respect for human rights, and there can't be respect for human rights and religious freedom without security. So Uzbekistan, in many ways, is a perfect illustration of that.

One of the things you'll find in our annual report chapter is mention of the fact that the United States has entered into transit cooperation agreements with Uzbekistan and Russia, and we're very concerned that the importance of those transit agreements for transiting materiel and soldiers through the region to Afghanistan might temper the criticism of human rights and religious freedom abuses in Uzbekistan.

We have, you know, really tried to make the point that those two things go hand-in-hand, both within Uzbekistan and certainly in terms of the United States. Human rights and respect for religious freedom is intrinsic to any kind of sustainable security, and meaningful security in turn means that there is absolute respect for religious freedom. So you'll see a set of policy recommendations associated with that sort of core principle in the Uzbek chapter.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Argue.

MR. ARGUE: I would like to emphasize what Dr. Prodromou and Dr. Land have mentioned, but may have been passed over, and that is, for every country, if you read the report, there are specific recommendations that, as a commission, we have worked through. So if you want to know what we're thinking about a particular country, that is very clearly stated. And I would encourage you to take a look at that in the report.

Q: (Inaudible, off mike) – how effectively the U.S. government has followed your recommendations.

MR. LEO: It hasn't. That's the problem. (Laughter.) I mean, you know, it needs to be designated as a CPC and it needs to be sanctioned, you know.

MR. : It is a CPC.

MR. LEO: I'm sorry, it needs to have – it needs to be sanctioned, it needs to be sanctioned.

MS. PRODROMOU: One of the other issues that we raise in the chapter – and we've raised this repeatedly – is the fact that religious minority groups, including followers of the "Nur" movement, have been exposed to and subjected to systematic repression.

And one of the things we're especially concerned about in Uzbekistan – but again, it's a more general point – is the fact that repression of these kinds of movements – repression of any kind of internal diversity within religious traditions ultimately leads to – and there's so much empirical evidence to support the point – it leads to radicalization. So we have many recommendations that deal with the maltreatment of the followers of the "Nur" movement.

MR. CROMARTIE: This is a perfect example of what happens when you don't put teeth into the IRFA process, right? You know, what good is a CPC designation if there isn't going to be any cost – if no price is going to be exacted for a certain kind of behavior? And this is a classic example – again, only one country on the CPC list of eight that the State Department has gets specifically targeted sanctions, and that's Eritrea. And so it shouldn't be any surprise that conditions haven't improved particularly well in Uzbekistan.

MR. LEO: Okay, I think we have one more question and then we'll go through rounds of concluding remarks. Yes, sir?

Q: (Inaudible) – Yong Kim (sp), Voice of America. I have a question about the North Korea. According to your report –

MR. LEO: About – say that again.

Q: North Korea.

MR. LEO: North Korea, okay.

Q: Yeah, according to your report, a North Korean Christian woman was publicly executed last year, in charge of distributing Bibles. And her husband and her three children were sent to a political prison camp. This is very cruel. That's why I think, you know, I believe you designate the North Koreans as CPC.

And also, the human rights – the U.N. General Assembly adopted the North Korea human right resolution every year since 2005 and the U.N. Human Rights Council also adopted a resolution last March. Unfortunately, we cannot see any improvement or change in North Korea, and I found five recommendations in your report, but you know, it's very similar to last year, and some critics say too broad, too general and nothing specific.

And that's why, you know, recently some of the experts recommended, you know, it's time to bring this issue to International Criminal Court or commission of inquiry in the U.N. Security Council or more sanctions on North Korea. So what do you think about this suggestion, or do you have any thought about this?

MR. LEO: Does anyone want to respond on North Korea?

MR. PRODROMOU: We take your observations about the fact that our recommendations have not been implemented. I think one of the things you'll see that's different in terms of this year's annual report in the chapter on North Korea is the emphasis on the fact that the human rights agenda needs to be more aggressively pushed, and pushed certainly related to, but not contingent upon the denuclearization talks.

So we've asked, in the annual report recommendations, that the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2008 be fully implemented and that this not be, in many ways, contingent upon the nuclear talks, or the denuclearization talks.

That's the most noticeable difference, in terms of our recommendation – ratcheting up and decoupling and not maintaining a kind of sequencing whereby the security talks come before or are prioritized, vis-à-vis the human rights talks. That arrangement provides a whole array of diplomatic tools that can deal with human rights and religious freedom. And we've asked for them to be immediately and fully implemented.

MR. LAND: We also have specifically asked for the U.N. commissioner for refugees and the U.N. commissioner on human rights to be actively involved in the process of addressing the issues with North Korea.

So we're including the U.N. and asking, for instance, that the U.N. commissioner on human rights open an office in Seoul for the purpose of initiating technical assistance in addressing regional and transitional issues, including abductions, human trafficking, police and border guard training, legal reform, political prisoners and abuse of freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.

And the U.N. high commissioner for refugees to establish a mechanism to confer temporary asylum on those seeking protection and permit safe transport to countries for final asylum, which includes a lot of those who have escaped into China. And we're very concerned about the treatment they're receiving in China.

MR. LEO: One more comment?

MS. PRODROMOU: Yeah, again, a footnote to that: We actually traveled to South Korea – to Seoul – and we met with several refugees who had escaped from North Korea – several of them not once, but twice. They had been sent back. They had been forcibly repatriated and had escaped again.

So in terms of, I think, the real question – what can actually be done, whether within existing frameworks or, you said, some argue for a resort to the International Criminal Court. These are things on the ground that actually are happening. People are getting out, and the question is, once they get out, how are they treated? And one of the things we recommend is that within the region, there are agreements not to forcibly repatriate and to ensure that those individuals receive appropriate treatment on the ground.

MR. LEO: I would just say also that our recommendations recognize that we have a long road ahead with North Korea. It involves, for example, fully implementing the North Korea Human Rights Act and helping to stand up various NGOs and other groups that are trying to do human rights and democracy building in the area.

It involves creating a security cooperation of some kind that sort of mimics what we have in Europe with the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe. These are infrastructure-building efforts that require time, but they're things that have to be implemented now in order to have real impact and effect, you know, in the not-too-distant future. One last question and then we'll just do a quick wrap-up. Yes, ma'am?

Q: Oh, Lauren Bonson (ph) with – (inaudible) – news service. I was just wondering if you could speak to, specifically, the role or lack thereof, of religious freedom in our national security engagements with Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan?

MR. LEO: For those of you who didn't hear the question, basically role of religious freedom in our national security space, with particular referencing of Iraq, Afghanistan and –

Q: Pakistan.

MR. LEO: Pakistan. Okay, commissioners?

MS. PRODROMOU: Why don't you go ahead?

MR. LEO: Okay. Well, we have believed for some time that, until the United States acknowledges that there is a sectarian component to the war in Iraq, there will be serious problems that remain unsolved. You have Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and other religious minorities in the North who are facing extinction because of insufficient attention to their problems. You've got serious issues with minority Muslims in Iraq, as well. And until those problems are addressed meaningfully, there will be instability in that country.

And I think the same can be said, to some degree, with regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where, essentially, if you do not get to the root causes of some of the problems – the madrassas in Pakistan, which promulgate extremist ideology and education, the implementation of Shariah law in the Swat region, which the United States was dead silent on; in Afghanistan, a constitutional framework that's seriously flawed and the repression of many Muslim minorities in that country. Until you get to those problems, you're going to be creating petri dishes for extremism, which create instability. Other comments?

MS. PRODROMOU: Yeah, if your question is in terms of U.S. national security priorities and engagement with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, if religion factors into it, it certainly does. I mean, Pakistan in particular, I think, is a great case in point. The commission itself has made numerous recommendations with regard to things like blasphemy laws, or the Hudood Ordinances in Pakistan and the need to repeal those.

There's certainly recognition at the level of – in the national security architectures in this country – that those kinds of ordinances have proven absolutely detrimental to religious freedom and human rights, but also to public security and public order on the ground. And more specifically, and indeed, perhaps more recently, the very active role of paramilitaries and radical groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, on the ground in Pakistan, is well-understood in terms of our national security discussions, to be a problem. And again, that's a religious – you can't understand them apart from the religious freedom frameworks, as well.

MR. LEO: We started a few minutes late, and so we're ending a few minutes late. If commissioners have any very brief concluding remarks, we would certainly welcome that.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I just wanted to make the point that not all is bleak. There are points of hope in our work, and you'll see that and read about those in each of the country chapters, or many of them. And if you look on the back cover of our book, it's one example of our report. And this is an April 10th candlelight prayer vigil in Juba, South Sudan – children praying on the eve of the national election there.

And this is an issue of the comprehensive peace agreement, of which the election was a stop along the way to its final culmination, next year, of the referendum. The CPA – this agreement – was something that the commission helped bring about. We took on Sudan as our very first country 10 years ago, and at that time, South Sudan was caught up in a horrendous, horrendous civil war.

Millions died, millions more were driven out of their homes. There were slave raids; there was bombing of agricultural areas and hospitals. And that has calmed down. There is a relative – or actually, for the most part, peace there, although there's constant problems, of course. And there is religious freedom in South Sudan now,. Whether this will hold really depends on this fulfillment of the CPA next year. But in any event, we see that as a ray of hope. And that's it.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Eid?

MR. EID: Yes, I have an issue in reference to the subject I spoke about – that's defamation of religions. And this reminds me of a young man – his name is Hadi (sp). This young man happened to say some words to criticize Islam, which we may agree or disagree, but as a result, the Saudi government did not – as I read, he was not provided a fair trial and he was thrown indefinitely in jail, or a long sentence. And I just – I need to have – issue a plea to King Abdullah to release this man, and not to keep him in prison.

MR. LEO: Vice Chair Prodrumou (sic), any comments?

MR. LAND: I just want to underscore what Commissioner Shea said. I'm hopeful, as a result of serving on this commission, now, for nearly a decade – I think the commission's work is terribly important. Religion is playing a larger role in the world, not a lesser role. And if our government is going to have the kind of impact for human rights that it wants to have, this has got to be part of the mix.

And I do believe that, although we have been critical of all three administrations that have served during the time that the commission's been in existence, one of the unintended consequences – I don't think anybody was smart enough to have actually figured this out – but one of the unintended consequences of the enactment of IRFA was that the state – every American embassy in the world has to fill out a report about the state of religion in their country and the state of religious freedom in their country, where they're serving.

And usually, that was the junior person – the low man on the totem pole or the low woman on the totem pole. But those people are now rising through the ranks, and have risen through the ranks for over a decade in the Foreign Service. And they have been sensitized to this issue in a way that they were not sensitized before, and it is changing the culture of the State department, which, emphatically, needed to be changed. Having dealt with the State Department for nearly 20 years now on this issue, I can tell you that it is changing the whole culture of the State Department in terms of understanding of the importance of this issue.

And as it continues to filter up to the top, it's going to make a difference.

MR. LEO: Commissioner Argue and then Commissioner Prodromou.

MR. ARGUE: My two colleagues, or three, are more optimistic than I am. I do highlight Vietnam, where we have seen some changes. We've seen the right of assembly, with gatherings of 25,000 in soccer stadiums. But until religious freedom and religious practice becomes a central part of our foreign policy, I'm very concerned.

I referred to Secretary Albright, but I refer also to a book that certainly impacted me, and I would encourage you to review it. And it impacted Secretary Albright. It's titled, "Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft," by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Samson. And the point is, you just can't do statecraft without understanding the religions. And those of us who heard Madeleine Albright speak when she said, I grew to the position of telling the ambassadors who worked for me as secretary of State, go home and read the Quran.

Go home and read the sacred writings of Hinduism and Buddhism and Christianity and the Torah, or you really can't understand the culture. And that's my hope, that it will become – and I appreciate Dr. Land's comments about the rising tide in the State Department. I'm waiting to see it really become prominent in our foreign policy.

MR. LEO: Vice Chair Prodromou?

MS. PRODROMOU: Just a very brief concluding observation. We started out with a very kind of sobering, and in many ways, some would argue, perhaps, depressing presentation of the state of religious freedom in many countries around the world, and we're ending on a, perhaps, slightly more positive note.

One of the things that I think is very important to recognize is that the commission, although our mandate is to look at religious freedom conditions around the world, I think it's – and it has been recognized and becomes a touch point for those whose rights of religious freedom are being oppressed and repressed – I think that, in and of itself, is value added, in terms of the possibility to improve those conditions.

The other point is, I think it's very important for American citizens as well to recognize the work that the commission is doing and recognize the absolute relevance of religious freedom to all human rights. So there's a domestic audience that, also, we need to make sure that understands the importance of religious freedom, which the founders of this country referred to as the first freedom. Thank you.

MR. LEO: To conclude, the government must do more to protect freedom of religion abroad, and this commission looks forward to working with secretary of state, Congress, the White House and a new IRFA ambassador, when one is named, to pursue that objective and goal. And we thank you for coming. We thank you for helping us stand up for freedom of religion around the world.

(END)