

Opening Remarks
2011 USCIRF Annual Report Rollout
Chairman Leonard Leo

Introduction

I'd like to acknowledge that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom -- also known as USCIRF -- has been visited electronically by foreign authorities who'd really like to know what we're saying about their government. They're trying awfully hard to read our private e-mails.

So let me, if I may, take a brief moment to address these esteemed authorities publicly:

For your reading enjoyment, you can go to our Web site and see all of our reports on your government. It's www.uscirf.gov. When you get to "countries," click on "China" and I'm sure you'll find what you need....

But if you want more, we can accommodate. Today we are releasing our 2011 Annual Report, which I trust you'll find enlightening....

Well, good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Leonard Leo and I've had the privilege of serving as chair of the Commission this past year. With me today are Vice Chair Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, as well as Commissioners Imam Talal Eid, Felice Gaer, Dr. Richard Land, Rev. William Shaw, Nina Shea, and Ted Van Der Meid. I want to thank

all of them for their tireless efforts. I also want to thank our staff, and especially Executive Director Jackie Wolcott and Elizabeth Cassidy, for their essential role in helping to prepare the Annual Report.

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

This year’s Annual Report represents a year’s work by Commissioners and staff. With a reporting period of April 2010 through March 2011, our Report covers 28 countries.

To carry out our charge, Commissioners traveled during the past reporting period to Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, and Cyprus. They also consulted at the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and in Berlin. Staff members traveled to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

USCIRF discussed with the Obama administration how the U.S. can promote religious freedom more effectively on issues critical to our foreign policy. We also met with Members of Congress, U.S.

Ambassadors to key countries, and high-ranking officials from the State Department and National Security Council.

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

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

We have dedicated this year's Annual Report to one of those brave officials – Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Minister for Minority Affairs, who was killed on March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban. On the cover of the report is the scene in his home town where he was buried.

CPCs

For this year's report, USCIRF recommends that the Secretary of State designate 14 nations as "countries of particular concern" or CPCs for their systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as mandated by IRFA. My colleagues and I will discuss these momentarily. [**Instead of reading the countries, reference the chart that lists them.**]

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

Themes

When it comes to religious freedom, there are three main kinds of violations our Commission has observed and documented in this Report.

First, there is state *hostility* toward religion, religious communities and/or religious leadership.

Second, there is state *sponsorship* of extremist ideology and education.

And third, there is state *failure* to prevent and punish religious freedom violations.

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

Another word for a state's failure to protect is impunity. It is impunity that especially concerns this Commission, because it receives the least attention at precisely the time that it is growing tremendously.

Egypt

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

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

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

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

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

Turkey

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

One example of a Watch List country is Turkey. We traveled there in February and met with Turkish officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister, as well as leading religious figures, including the Diyanet President, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Patriarchs of the Syriac and Armenian Orthodox Churches, and the Chief Rabbi of Turkey, as well as Turkish journalists, academics, and civil society representatives.

We've decided to keep Turkey on our Watch List, because its government continues to stifle religious freedom by imposing suffocating regulations which threaten the vitality and survival of religious minorities in that country. State secularism in Turkey has significantly restricted religious freedom, especially for religious minority communities, including the Greek, Armenian, and Syriac Orthodox Churches; Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches; and the

Jewish community, but also for the majority Sunni Muslim community and the minority Alevis, which some view as a unique sect of Islam. Through these restrictions on non-Muslim communities, Turkey continues to deny them the right to train their clergy, offer religious education, and own and maintain places of worship.

Moreover, through its military control over northern Cyprus, Turkey supports a web of arbitrary restrictions imposed by Turkish Cypriot authorities, resulting in serious limitations on freedom of religion.

We urge the U.S. government to press Turkey toward full legal recognition for religious communities; full permission for religious minorities to train their clergy; full reopening of the Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary of Halki for that purpose; full return of the Mor Gabriel Syrian Orthodox monastery to its rightful owners; and full removal of restrictions on religious garb for both men and women. The U.S. government should also urge Turkey and Turkish Cypriot authorities to abandon all restrictions on Christians and Jews regarding the access, use, and restoration of places of worship and cemeteries, and to cease the ongoing desecration of these sites and items.

Positive Note: Defamation

Let me end on a positive note. On March 24, the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva rejected an approach that favored a global blasphemy

law. I'm referring to the so-called defamation of religions resolution, which had been designed in recent years by certain UN member states to protect a specific religion, namely Islam, from criticism.

In response, USCIRF worked with the State Department, Congress, and human rights NGOs to highlight the dangers of this approach and to urge its rejection by other UN member states. As a result of our efforts, support for it began to erode, and last month, the Council abandoned the "defamation" approach altogether. In its place, the Council adopted a new consensus resolution protecting individuals from discrimination rather than religions from any criticism.

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

And now I'd like to turn to my colleagues for their comments and observations.