

Opening remarks: 2010 Annual Report Rollout
Leonard Leo, Chair

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Over the past few months the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has visited a number of human rights “hot spots” where freedom of religion is obstructed and related human rights are trampled. The 2010 Annual Report that we release today offers new and important policy solutions to improve conditions where foreign policy, national security, and international standards for the protection of freedom of religion can and should intersect. The report’s conclusion is clear – our government must do more.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Leonard Leo and I have had the privilege of serving as chair of the Commission this past year. With me today are Vice Chairs Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou and Michael Cromartie, as well as Commissioners Dr. Don Argue, Imam Talal Eid, Dr. Richard Land, and Nina Shea. I want to thank them, as well as Commissioner Felice Gaer who could not be here today, for their tireless efforts. I also want to thank the staff, and especially Elizabeth Cassidy, for their essential role in helping to prepare the Annual Report.

As many of you know, Congress created USCIRF in 1998 as an independent and bipartisan government commission to monitor religious freedom worldwide through the lens of international standards and make recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress through the release of this report. Separate from the State Department, USCIRF is the only independent government body in the world tasked with focusing solely on religious freedom.

The Annual Report 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 in the International Religious Freedom Act. This year, USCIRF recommends that the Secretary designate as CPCs the following 13 countries: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. USCIRF also maintains a Watch List of countries that do not meet the CPC threshold but in which serious violations of religious freedom take place or are tolerated by the government. Countries on USCIRF’s Watch List for the current reporting period are: Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Venezuela.

In addition to these designations, each country chapter in the Annual Report contains detailed recommendations on how U.S. foreign policy can more effectively promote religious freedom.

It has been a busy year for the Commission, as we have placed particular emphasis on eight priority countries – China, Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Vietnam – while continuing to monitor violations of religious freedom elsewhere. We selected these eight countries (seven CPC recommended countries and one Watch List country) based on three analytical frameworks developed after extensive discussions. They are: State Hostility toward Religion, Religious Communities, and/or Religious Leadership; State-Sponsored Extremist Ideology and Education; and State Failure to Prevent and Punish Religious Freedom Violations.

These frameworks encapsulate the most problematic countries and my colleagues will speak to them momentarily. A fourth theme the Commission focused on has been ways to counter the problematic “defamation of religions” resolutions at the United Nations, which 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.

Before I turn the podium over to my colleagues, I want to mention key trends that informed our deliberations and focused our resources this past year:

1.) The Annual Report documents how, in many countries, religious communities continue to experience serious 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 brings into focus the human element of our discussions today about religious freedom.

We have observed a second, equally egregious threat to religious freedom that receives far too little attention – the issue of impunity. During our fact finding missions this year to places like Nigeria and Egypt, we have witnessed how the absence of accountability breeds lawlessness, and this breakdown in justice – this impunity – encourages individuals to attack, and even kill, those who dissent from or fail to embrace their own religious views. The Commission has concluded that countering impunity is among the greatest challenges the United States government faces as it develops policies to effectively promote and protect freedom of religion or belief around the world.

2.) Considering this and the many other challenges religious freedom faces today, and with due respect to the hard work of our State Department personnel, USCIRF 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 this administration. Many 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.

3.) But, in a 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 to 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 Clinton’s speeches. This change in phraseology could well be viewed by human rights defenders and officials in other countries as having concrete policy implications.

Freedom of worship is only one aspect of religious freedom. A purposeful change in language could mean a much narrower view of the right that ignores 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 is not 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 are denied basic rights because of their views, are gunned down with impunity leaving places of worship, are viciously caricatured and attacked by state-run press, 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.

Of course, this is not 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 Rice. He, too, referenced religious worship and, beyond that, often did not prioritize freedom of religion the way it should have been. And so our point today is less to assess intentions, and more to encourage the Administration to underscore the importance of freedom of religion or belief so as to eliminate confusion as well as opportunities for duplicitousness by the world's worst human rights abusers.

4.) Religious freedom is a unique human right, one that serves as the "canary in the coal mine" for other rights. Often, religious freedom restrictions are followed by the elimination of the freedom of assembly, association, and press, as well as restrictions placed on minorities, women, or dissenters from the majority faith.

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 is not 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 this report captures the urgency of this problem well. In it, a lone Uighur Muslim woman faces down a column of armed Chinese security forces during the Chinese government's violent response to the Uighur protest in Urumqi in the Xinjiang autonomous region in July 2009. The unrest left hundreds dead and thousands injured. Defiant, with her fist raised, her actions display a hope that peaceful protests will prevail over repressive state policies that seek to crush peaceable Uighur religious freedoms, such as the rights 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 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 concrete proposals for doing so in this 2010 Annual Report.