

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2021 ANNUAL REPORT ROLLOUT:  
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS  
[NGO Public Event]

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Zoom Webinar

P A R T I C I P A N T S

## COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Gayle Manchin, Chair  
Tony Perkins, Vice Chair  
Anurima Bhargava, Vice Chair  
Gary L. Bauer  
James W. Carr  
Frederick A. Davie  
Nadine Maenza  
Johnnie Moore  
Nury Turkel

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MANCHIN: Good day, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Gayle Manchin, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

We at USCIRF are committed advocates for international religious freedom, which is a foundational and a fundamental human right.

Today, we are releasing our 22nd Annual Report, which we will offer you a snapshot of where religious freedom is improving or in peril and what the U.S. government can do to encourage positive change.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. advisory body dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad. We monitor religious freedom conditions in foreign countries throughout the year, including through travel--although, like many, COVID-19 conditions severely restricted our travel overseas during the past year.

Under our mandate in the International

Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, we issue a report by May 1 each year with recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

All chapters in the report are approved by a majority vote and reflect the views of a bipartisan group of commissioners from different religious, political and professional backgrounds. In the limited cases where commissioners have differing views, in accordance with the IRFA legislation, each commissioner has the right to include his or her individual reviews in the report. Different commissioners have done so many times over the years, and so this year some have done so as well.

Key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter represent insights and information gained through USCIRF hearings, fact-finding trips, research, and meetings with government officials, human rights advocates, and religious leaders.

We invite all those with questions to use the Q&A feature on the bottom of your screen to

submit a question in writing.

You may post these questions at any time, and we will respond to as many questions as possible following our overview of the highlights from this year's report.

I want to thank our professional staff for their outstanding work preparing the annual report and for organizing this event. Every year, this report represents a team effort that involves everyone on USCIRF's staff, as well as our outside copy editor, report designers and translators. The entire team's focus, coordination and dedication made today possible. Thank you all so very much.

I'd like to also extend the Commission's appreciation to Senator Chris Coons and Senator Tom Tillis, co-chairs of the Senate Human Rights Caucus, for sending videos for today's event, which we will now share with you.

SENATOR COONS: [Video presentation as follows:]

Hi. I'm U.S. Senator Chris Coons from Delaware. I'm a member of the Foreign Relations

Committee and co-chair of the Senate Human Rights Caucus, something I lead with Senator Tillis.

I want to thank the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and, in particular, thank the chair, Gayle Manchin, for your leadership including in the face of recent baseless sanctions imposed by the Chinese government.

The Senate Human Rights Caucus regularly draws on the USCIRF for research and reporting to inform our advocacy. Human rights is not a Democratic or a Republican issue. It's a bipartisan American issue, as we advocate for fundamental freedoms and rights.

I'm proud to have bipartisan support for our efforts to establish the Human Rights Commission in the Senate, and I want to thank you to the USCIRF for including the establishment of the commission among your recommendations to Congress.

The past year has been difficult for all those suffering under repressive regimes and for

human rights advocates, and I want to thank you again for your tireless work to defend religious freedom and for your advocacy.

Thank you. [End of video presentation.]

SENATOR TILLIS: [Video presentation as follows:]

Hi. I'm Thom Tillis, senator from the great State of North Carolina.

Thank you to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for asking me to speak and also thank you for your role in keeping policymakers informed of the latest threats to religious liberty.

You all rightly describe religious freedom as America's first freedom, and we are fortunate to live in a country that recognizes every human being's fundamental right to worship.

Freedom of religion has always been important to me, and that's why I was proud to join my good friend, Senator Chris Coons, as the co-chair of the bipartisan Human Rights Caucus.

It has been an honor to advocate on behalf



of individuals around the world who often can't advocate for themselves due to authoritarianism, discrimination, and the threat of violence.

My personal experience with advocating for North Carolinian Pastor Andrew Brunson, as he was arbitrarily imprisoned in Turkey, affirmed to me just how priceless our religious freedoms are. Unfortunately, millions of people around the world continue to face similar injustices without the same support system.

Right now, China has over one million Uyghurs incarcerated in concentration camps simply because of their Muslim faith. The plight of the Uyghurs, as well as the Rohingya Muslims of Burma, and the Yazidi Christians in northern Iraq, are part of a disturbing trend of religious discrimination and ethnic cleansing.

These disturbing human rights trends call for the establishment of a formal Senate counterpart to the influential Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. That's why I joined Senator Coons in introducing a resolution which will

officially create a Senate Human Rights Commission to consistently highlight international human rights abuses and keep senators informed on developments.

I'm extremely thankful for your support of our efforts, and I'm hopeful that through strong bipartisan effort, we will soon make this commission a reality.

Thank you again for your work and thank you for asking me to speak with you. I hope to see you all soon. [End of video presentation.]

CHAIR MANCHIN: We so appreciate Senator Coons and Senator Tillis for their dedication to advancing international religious freedom as an essential and bipartisan cause. Their support and that of all members of Congress who have made international religious freedom a legislative priority are essential and integral to all that we do.

The Annual Report's main focus is on two groups of countries: those that USCIRF recommends the State Department designate as Countries of

Particular Concern, or CPCs, and those that USCIRF recommends the State Department place on its Special Watch List, or SWL.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations of religious freedom.

The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not all three, of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" test for CPC status.

This year, our report covers 26 countries. Based on 2020 conditions, we recommend 14 of these countries for CPC status. This includes the ten countries the State Department has designated as CPCs, most recently in December 2020, and they are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. And, then, in addition, USCIRF believes that the State Department should designate four other countries as CPCs: India, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

We recommend that the State Department maintain on the Special Watch List two countries--Cuba and Nicaragua--and add ten countries to that list: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

My fellow commissioners and I will discuss a few of USCIRF's key findings and recommendations on some of these countries in more detail.

Though the Annual Report focuses on the worst countries in the world for religious freedom, we also highlight improvements, where appropriate, and we certainly saw some positive movements in some countries in 2020.

This year, in fact, we determined that three countries--Bahrain, the Central African Republic, and Sudan--did not meet the high threshold for inclusion on the SWL for 2020. As previously discussed, a SWL recommendation is based on USCIRF finding that the government perpetrated or tolerated severe religious freedom violations. However, religious freedom concerns remain in all

three countries, and USCIRF will continue to closely monitor them on an ongoing basis.

The cover of our report this year depicts the global reach of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not only impacted the global economy, travel and other sectors, but also international religious freedom.

Across the world, public health measures to control the virus' spread restricted in-person gatherings, including religious gatherings. In many cases, but certainly not all, these measures complied with international human rights standards protecting freedom of religion or belief.

Such measures must be necessary to protect the legitimate state interests of preventing disease and, proportionate to meeting that aim, must not be discriminatory and must be lifted once the crisis has passed.

Vice Chair Bhargava will discuss further implications of the pandemic for international religious freedom shortly.

Finally, this year's report also includes

two new sections, one highlighting key USCIRF recommendations that the U.S. government has implemented since USCIRF's previous Annual Report, and the other addressing human rights violations perpetrated based on coercive enforcement of interpretations of religion by governments.

I'd now like to turn to Vice Chair Tony Perkins, who will discuss additional positive developments, the prioritization of religious freedom by the previous administration during 2020, and perhaps the most negative development in 2020, China's egregious abuses targeting its own people and its influence abroad.

Tony.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Chair Manchin, and I would like to echo your comments in commending our tremendous staff that has been working under not the best circumstances over the last year because of the restrictions by the COVID-19 virus, but I also want to thank you for your leadership on the Commission, and also I again want to commend all of the commissioners.

As was stated earlier by Senator Coons, you know, this is a bipartisan effort and initiative when we look at religious freedom, and I think there is fewer bright spots in Washington, D.C., in this age of political paralysis, this partisan paralysis that we see, that this Commission works together with a singular focus on religious freedom. So it's a true honor to be a part of this Commission and work with such outstanding commissioners.

And I want to highlight some of the positive developments that we've seen in the last year, as chair mentioned, Chair Manchin mentioned.

In 2020, we were very encouraged to see improvements in religious freedom conditions in a handful of countries. In fact, this year, as Chair Manchin noted, we removed three countries from our list of recommendations for the Special Watch List: Bahrain, the Central African Republic, or CAR, and Sudan.

The change in status for Bahrain reflects ongoing improvements in the government's approach

toward the country's marginalized Shi'a Muslim majority. In 2020, for example, Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain were able to observe the Ashura holiday with mostly reasonable COVID-19 social distancing precautions in effect.

Additionally, Bahrain provides wide latitude for freedom of religion for the Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, and Christian communities. Bahrainian officials have taken very serious their pursuit of respecting this fundamental human right, and we have appreciated the opportunity to work closely with them.

CAR also continued to make progress in 2020. The government worked with international partners to implement key aspects of the 2019 peace agreement, and hold violators accountable. At the same time, local organizations implemented successful programs to strengthen interfaith tolerance. As a result, there was a reduction in violence against individuals based on their religious identity.

In Sudan, the transitional government that



took power in 2019 took substantial steps toward ending "systematic, ongoing and egregious" religious freedom violations. It also continued to closely engage with USCIRF and other international stakeholders in doing so.

In fact, in February of 2020, just prior to the global outbreak of COVID-19, Vice Chair Bhargava and I were able to lead a USCIRF delegation to Khartoum to assess religious freedom conditions and to engage again with the transitional leadership, including Prime Minister Hamdok and his cabinet.

We were encouraged by the evident progress as well as by further improvements as the year progressed. Most notably, in July, the transitional government adopted the Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Act, which repealed the apostasy law, ended flogging for blasphemy, banned female genital mutilation, permitted non-Muslims to drink alcohol, and abolished the guardianship law that required women to get a permit from a male guardian when traveling abroad with their children.

In addition to improvements in these three countries, we were encouraged to see the continued prioritization of religious freedom in U.S. policy in the year 2020.

In June, then President Donald Trump signed an executive order on "Advancing International Religious Freedom," which more explicitly integrated the issue of religious freedom into U.S. diplomacy and development efforts. February 2020 marked the official launch of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a network of like-minded countries committed to opposing religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion for all.

Now following two U.S.-hosted Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom in 2018 and 2019, Poland, which was a founding member of the Alliance, hosted the third ministerial this past November.

Unfortunately, religious freedom violations in China, and the extension of their influence far beyond their borders, represents the

most troubling developments in the year 2020.

The Chinese Communist Party or CCP's increasing hostility toward Islam has resulted in campaigns to "sinicize" Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid religions of alleged "foreign" influences.

In Xinjiang region, the CCP's campaign has translated into mass atrocities against Turkic Muslim minorities and, in particular, the Uyghur people.

We were therefore in full support of the State Department's decision in January of this year to designate China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity.

However, our report also found that China's growing overseas influence and activities also negatively affected religious freedom and other human rights far beyond its borders. The CCP government exercises its broad economic and geopolitical influence to pressure foreign countries, near and far, to accept its demands

without concern for human rights.

Now tactics include harassment, intimidation, and detention of human rights activists, ethnic and religious minorities and other critics, and dissidents.

The Chinese government also exerted pressure on international companies, including American businesses, to disregard human rights abuses in, and international scrutiny over, their operations in China. It also expanded efforts to weaken and subvert the international human rights system and norms within the United Nations. Now such efforts could have far-reaching implications around the world, particularly in countries and regions where authoritarian regimes suppress human rights and religious freedom.

In fact, last month, after the United States sanctioned Chinese officials for egregious religious freedom abuses, China imposed retaliatory sanctions against Chair Manchin and me, as well as other foreign government officials, as they had previously done against members of Congress.

I'll now turn the floor over to our other vice chair, Anurima Bhargava, to speak about several of the broader trends we identified as key threats to religious freedom globally in the year 2020, our recommendations related to non-state actors, USCIRF's Victims Database and Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, and some key recommendations that we have made to the Biden Administration.

Vice Chair Bhargava, the floor is yours.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you very much, Vice Chair Perkins, and I want to join in and echo your gratitude to USCIRF's professional staff, who has been the engine and lifeblood of our work and service this year, to you and to Chair Manchin for your leadership, and certainly to our fellow commissioners for the honor and pleasure of being able to serve on the Commission this year in a very difficult and challenging time.

As you both just mentioned and shared, the Annual Report focuses primarily on the countries that have been the worst violators of religious

freedom.

I want to speak briefly about three other important areas of the Commission's work in this year's Annual Report:

First, non-state actors who have engaged in severe, egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom; second, religious prisoners of conscience; and, third, key religious freedom trends around the world, which often take root or are borne out in countries that do not meet the statutory criteria for designation as a Country of Particular Concern or to be placed on the Special Watch List but certainly are of import and of concern to us.

First, religious persecution and violence is being perpetrated by more than just state actors. The Annual Report also covers Entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs. To qualify for designation as an EPC, a non-state group must commit "systematic, ongoing and egregious" violations and must also exercise significant political power and territorial control; be outside

the control of a sovereign government; and employ violence in pursuit of its objectives.

This year, USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate as EPCs the following seven non-state actors: al-Shabaab; Boko Haram; the Houthis; Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS; the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, or ISGS; Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, or JNIM; and the Taliban.

Although we remain concerned by particularly severe religious freedom violations by other groups, we concluded that they did not meet the statutory requirement of significant political power and territorial control in 2020.

In 2020, USCIRF continued to prioritize our Religious Prisoner of Conscience Project, which highlights individuals imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion, or belief, and the advocacy of USCIRF commissioners working for their release.

Religious prisoners of conscience were directly and deeply impacted by the crosswinds of COVID, which both exacerbated and highlighted the

deplorable conditions of the prisons where far too many RPOCs are being held.

We remain deeply concerned about the health and safety of RPOCs as COVID continues to ravage countries and prisons globally. At the same time, we were heartened by efforts in several countries to reduce prison populations for health and other reasons, leading to religious prisoners of conscience being released or placed under house arrest.

I am also pleased to report that during the year three individuals adopted through our RPOC Project were released: Pastor A Dao from Vietnam, Hamid bin Haydara from Yemen, and Mohammad Ali Taheri from Iran.

USCIRF has been steadily building and expanding our Freedom of Religion or Belief, or FoRB Victims List. The Victims List now contains more than a thousand profiles of victims of religious persecution to help ensure that they receive the public attention and focus their cases deserve.



Chair Manchin and Vice Chair Perkins spoke to a few of the key trends around religious freedom globally--from the long arm of China to blasphemy to proliferation of hate through technology and social media.

Of course, the most prominent global story of 2020 was the COVID pandemic. Governments took sweeping action to protect individuals and communities, including imposing restrictions that impacted the practice of one's religion and faith. Many of those restrictions fall under, and are justified as, public health exceptions defined in international law.

Other restrictions, such as cutting off the Internet or cell service, had a draconian and dire impact on already vulnerable religious communities, including the millions internally displaced or in refugee camps, who faced even greater isolation and depravation and had little, if no, safety net or protection.

We also fielded reports of disinformation blaming and targeting religious communities for

COVID and its spread.

Despite the limitations on travel and on gathering information, our 2021 Annual Report documented the deepening of religious divides and intensified religious persecution and violence experienced during COVID.

Lastly, the Biden Administration is committed to championing human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief, and centering the safety and dignity of religious communities as foreign policy priorities.

We have made specific recommendations in every chapter of the Annual Report to the Biden Administration and to Congress to effectuate that commitment.

These recommendations include, for example, urging the Biden Administration to definitively and publicly conclude that the atrocities committed, and that are ongoing, against the Rohingya people by the Burmese military constitute genocide and to act accordingly.

That genocide determination would be

following the State Department's recent determination that China's genocide against Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims was something to be designated this past December.

In February, USCIRF held a hearing on "Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution" and examined the ways in which the U.S. government could better support refugees and asylum seekers.

Consistent with USCIRF recommendations, the Biden Administration announced in February its intent to increase the annual ceiling for refugees resettled to the United States, which had been at an all time low, and to increase that for the current and upcoming fiscal years.

The Biden Administration also indicated that it was considering creating several new priority categories for access to the resettlement program, including for certain severely persecuted religious groups.

President Biden signed an emergency declaration last week, yet did not raise the ceiling for this fiscal year as of yet. The

administration indicated that it would do so by May 15th. USCIRF urges the President and the administration to raise the refugee ceiling as soon as possible and to prioritize survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution.

We also welcome President Biden's executive order, also signed in February, initiating a review of the Expedited Removal process, the implementation of which USCIRF has monitored under IRFA for many years and has long found to inadequately protect asylum seekers.

It has become abundantly clear in recent years how vital leadership and leadership positions on international religious freedom are to the advancement of international religious freedom as an essential human right and a vital part of our national security and foreign policy.

We urge the Biden Administration to move promptly by nominating and appointing well-qualified individuals to key IRF vacancies and that the Senate quickly confirm those requiring confirmation.

Those vacancies include the positions of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Special Adviser for International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council staff, Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, and Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism.

It is also important that the administration provide the financial resources and staff needed to fulfil the mandates of these roles.

Thank you, and we look forward to answering your questions.

I'll now turn the floor back over to Vice Chair Perkins to moderate the question and answer session.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Bhargava.

We will now turn to our Q&A portion of our event today. Let me just kind of state at the outset that the way I will handle these questions as they come in, as you submit them, I will turn those over to the commissioners who have the expertise of the respective country.

We have kind of divided our workload so that commissioners can go deeper in two or three different countries instead of having a superficial knowledge of all of the countries. So I will hand that question off to the primary or secondary commissioner handling that particular country.

We'll start with a question regarding the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, that it has proven that true religious freedom is possible in the Middle East. What can the U.S. do right now to protect religious minorities in northeast Syria, under constant threat by Turkey and the rebel forces it funds and supports?

I will turn to Commissioner Nadine Maenza for that question.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Perkins.

Yes, we've seen, you know--in fact, I first learned about the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria from the Commission who had been following it for several years. Really I think, as we say, it's a uniquely promising area in

terms of religious freedom conditions. You know, it remains a refuge for religious freedom, allowing Christians, Yazidis, Muslims, and others to practice their faith and even change their religion, which is practically unheard of in the region.

So, in terms of the threats, certainly, you know, Turkey, the areas that Turkey and its Islamist allies have invaded, they've really instituted harsh conditions that we talk about in our report, you know. These are, you know, really shocking conditions that we wouldn't expect from an ally like Turkey, you know, with reports of death, rape, murder, disappearances, destruction of Yazidi sites. I know we documented nine sites destroyed in those areas alone this year.

So our recommendations is that the U.S. government to pressure Turkey to present a timeline to withdraw from Syria. We also made some recommendations for the U.S. government to strengthen the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, expanding their engagement with the

Autonomous Administration, lifting sanctions on just the area that they govern.

And, as you know, USCIRF often recommends putting sanctions on those who violate religious freedom, and so this would be just a chance to reward them and also give them the opportunity to take care of their own people. Give political recognition to them as a legitimate, legitimate local government, and also demand that they're included in all activities per U.N. Resolution 2254, which is--basically that talks to find resolutions to the Syrian conflict.

So, you know, we hope that our recommendations will be taken seriously by the government because we really do believe it's a way forward for religious freedom in Syria.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Maenza.

Our next question actually touches on two of our more egregious abusers of religious freedom, both China and Iran. It says with two of the worst violators of human rights and religious freedom--



the Communist Party of China and the regime in Iran--entering into a strategic 25-year agreement, what measures should the U.S. and the international community take to confront this threat?

I will turn to Commissioner Gary Bauer who follows both of those countries. Commissioner Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you, Vice Chairman Perkins.

My goodness. Communist China and the mullahs of Iran, talk about a marriage made in Hades. The Iranians, of course, are an Islamic Republic, and they've just made an alliance with Communist China that the previous president and the current administration have both said are engaged in a genocide against the mostly Muslim Uyghur population. It's an extraordinary thing to see.

I think there's a lesson here for free nations in the world that at USCIRF we try to hold up as examples of countries built on human dignity and human freedom, that we need to stick together, and that's one of the things that we would

recommend--that the nations of the world that have values based on the idea that all people should have the right to seek God and worship God as their heart and soul leads them, that those nations should stand together and use our diplomatic tools to counter an alliance like this one with Communist China and the mullahs of Iran.

Both countries are depriving their people of this fundamental liberty. Both countries have very aggressive foreign policies interfering and threatening other nations that do allow religious liberty. So there's a lot here for the world to consider and to use our moral weight, and that's what USCIRF would recommend, that in all diplomatic and negotiations with Iran, and with Communist China, whatever the issue is that are the subject of the negotiations, that human rights and religious liberty be on the table in those bilateral negotiations.

We would also recommend, and we have recommended, economic sanctions on both countries for their violations of basic human and religious

rights, and we would continue to recommend that aggressively being done.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you,  
Commissioner Bauer.

I'm going to several questions coming in on China.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Can I make an additional comment on that?

I agree with everything Commissioner Bauer has said, but we also need to focus on something else that China is doing. About a year or so ago, during, at the human rights release event at the State Department, former Secretary of State Pompeo said that China has its own league when it comes to human rights violations. So Iran is just one of them.

And this particular agreement being included in the question happened right after Alaska. So China is not only building up alliance with dystopian regimes around the world, but they're also countering U.S. national security interests or American values. So we need to focus

on the multiple aspects of what China is doing around the world.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Well, Commissioner Turkel, I'm going to stick with you because my next question was going to come to you, and it pertains to China, and several questions have come in. In fact, one from the previous chair of USCIRF, Tenzin Dorjee, and we're glad to have him on as a part of this today.

But several others have come in about the Dali Lama and the succession of the Dali Lama, and the issues surrounding the survival of the Tibetan civilization. What international diplomatic efforts can be employed here and what should the United States be doing, as it pertains to the Tibetan community?

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: A couple of things that the United States government should do. One, learn the lesson from the past practices. United States government should not waste time engaging with China on important issues such as this. It's simply buying up--a waste of time with respect to

how China sees this.

And, two, we have to implement existing law that is specifically designed to protect the Tibetan people, Tibetan culture. In the previous administration, the Special Coordinator's position remained unoccupied, vacant for a very long time. Towards the end of the administration, we had Bob Destro being appointed. I urge the Biden Administration to fill that position immediately.

And also the Biden Administration also look into China's forced labor practices in the Tibetan region and also indoctrination of Tibetan monks.

Those are the key things that the Biden Administration should include in the formulated or interim foreign policy agenda with respect to Communist China.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Turkel.

Next question pertains to Pakistan. Have religious freedom conditions in Pakistan worsened or remained the same? What can the U.S. government

do to encourage Pakistan to take steps toward repealing controversial laws regarding blasphemy and other, targeting other religious minorities?

I will go to Commissioner Johnnie Moore for that question.

COMMISSIONER MOORE: Thank you, Vice Chair Perkins.

Before I answer that, just to add a simple point to what Commissioner Turkel was saying. It's very, very important to realize that the Chinese Communist Party did to the Tibetans what they're doing to the Uyghurs and doing to the Christians.

This is, this is not new, and 25 years ago, when the first USCIRF report was released, we raised a concern for the Uyghurs in China. Already then it was evident, and unfortunately our political leaders, both in the United States and around the world, have for too long diminished the significance of this issue, and no one should be surprised that the Communist Party of China is having a relapse of the Cultural Revolution and employing every tool that they have, and now is the

time to act, as is the case with all of these countries around the world that we interact with, and Pakistan is one of them.

You know, Pakistan has been the recipient of countless, billions of dollars of aid from the United States over many, many years. Pakistan is increasingly aligning its own interests with the Communist Party in China. And yet the United States still has significant leverage on Pakistan.

And to answer the question, things have gotten worse, and what can be done to get better, and we have many, many recommendations in the report. Everyone should read those recommendations. I'll run through a few quickly.

We need to make sure the Pakistanis are holding people accountable for extremist speech. We need to make sure the Pakistanis are reviewing their textbooks which are inciting further extremism. We need to embrace targeted sanctions against those who are engaged in the worst violations of human rights and religious freedom. Those violations tend to target communities like

the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan.

And, finally, Pakistan would be the perfect country to deploy a little-used tool in the original IRFA legislation where we could create a binding agreement with the country in order to improve the religious freedom conditions. So if a country wants to be in a better place, easy to do. The United States and Pakistan could negotiate an agreement, and we list. Even in our report, we have five or six things that can be part of that agreement.

I won't say it all, but you should definitely--everyone watching this should go to review the report. As is the case with most of these countries, you raise your voice now, you take action now or, otherwise, most of the time, it only gets worse.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Moore.

Next question. I'll take this question because it's an easy one. Do you have jurisdiction within the United States?



No. Our mission is focused only on international religious freedom, and we are restricted from looking at anything domestically, and so all of our focus is international, and so you will not see any references or recommendations made domestically here in the United States.

Now, on to some other questions. This one regarding USAID. Given the role that USAID played in advancing international religious freedom through programs and partnering with local faith leaders in communities during the previous administration, would the Commission recommend to the Biden Administration and incoming USAID Administrator Samantha Powers to appoint a chief advisor to the USAID Administrator on international religious freedom in addition to all those listed by Commissioner Bhargava?

And I will actually go to Vice Chair Bhargava for that question.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Vice Chair Perkins, and thank you for the question.

There is absolutely no question that

having USAID and the role of USAID in promoting and supporting religious communities abroad has been an incredibly important part of the work of the U.S. government.

And what I would say is that as we talked about, there are a number of positions that are related to international religious freedom that are, that need to be filled, and I would, I would certainly want those positions to be filled, and if there are ways in which we can make sure that religious persecution and violence and support to communities continues to be centered at USAID, we should do that and do that in conjunction with the many other positions that we do think are really important to have filled within the government to make sure that this is a priority.

So thank you very much for the question, and I want to again underscore how important USAID's role has been in our work and the work of religious freedom around the world.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Vice Chair Perkins, if I might add to what my colleague has said?

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Yes, please.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: I want to echo what Vice Chair Bhargava has said and just to say that at USAID, it was one of the first agencies to appoint a director of its faith programs, the Reverend Adam Phillips, and Reverend Phillips now is leading USAID's efforts as it relates to international religious freedom. It's clearly early in that work. He has reached out to USCIRF staff and begun--he has begun a set of conversations with them.

I think whether or not he continues in that role will be determined by the Administrator once she is officially in place. But I can report that the administration is taking the work of USCIRF very seriously from the perspective of USAID, and they realized it was important to have someone who was in place to engage around international religious freedom issues right away, and they have done that.

So I just appreciate an opportunity to add that bit of information to this conversation.

Thank you, Vice Chair Perkins.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you,  
Commissioner Davie.

Next question pertains to Nigeria, and for the second year in a row, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is recommending that Nigeria be identified as a Country of Particular Concern. What are the major factors pertaining to this?

I will go to Commissioner Jim Carr for that question.

COMMISSIONER CARR: Thank you, Vice Chairman.

Appreciate that question. Let me first of all say I was a new, very new member of the Commission last year when this event took place, and everybody has been very complimentary of our staff, and those are well-deserved compliments. They do a terrific job.

But I want to commend this board. These folks are volunteers, and they spend corporately together probably thousands of hours in their work,

and I just think they're an incredible group of people. You would never know who the Republicans are, the Democrats. They do, we--it's a wonderful group, and so thank you to each of them.

Now to Nigeria. I have many friends from Nigeria. Nigeria, if Uganda is the pearl of Africa, Nigeria is the diamond in the rough, and I believe they can do a lot better than what they're doing.

Nigeria is a country of 200 million citizens. It has a military made up of 300,000 active officers and soldiers, and 100,000 volunteers--300--total of 400,000. And I told the group this morning that if they can't stop the kidnappings, and primarily of Christian people in the south, the rapes, the murders, if this group can't stop it--of school children and adults--I want to quote our current president, President Biden, "Give me a break, man."

Nigeria is competing very quickly to be the worst of the worst. They're in competition with China and Iran and North Korea, and they can

do so much better, and so I want to challenge Nigeria to step up their game and be a better world citizen.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you,  
Commissioner Carr.

And we have made some very specific recommendations for Nigeria, and it is one that has reached the top of the list of concerns as we see what is unfolding there and the repercussions that could have for the entire African continent.

Several questions coming in regarding India and various aspects. So we have really two commissioners here that I'm going to turn to for these questions--Vice Chair Bhargava and Commissioner Nadine Maenza.

But, first, what immediate steps could the United States take to call into account the current Indian government that continues to allow harassment of religious minorities?

And so I will let either of those two commissioners take that, but there's also several other questions regarding whether or not some of

these individual groups in India should be recognized as Entities of Particular Concern?

So I throw that out there for you two commissioners to arm-wrestle over.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: I'll go ahead and jump in. I want to say that in India, religious freedom conditions have continued a negative trajectory. You know the government led by the BJP has promoted Hindu nationalist policies that have resulted in "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom.

We're seeing mob violence, you know, and national government and state governments have both instituted laws, which is showing that systemic approach to religious freedom violations. And also they've been cracking down on dissent, you know, so we have some really strong recommendations, including to impose targeted sanctions on those who are government officials as well as others who are responsible for these violations.

And also for the U.S. government to develop a bilateral agreement with the Indian

government that includes religious freedom and has some benchmarks so that, you know, we can work together on moving forward in this, you know, ally of ours, that we want conditions to improve, and we want to come alongside them and move toward positive conditions, and currently they're moving the wrong way.

But I'll hand this off to Vice Chair Bhargava.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Commissioner Maenza.

I wanted to actually speak to the question about why groups, and there's a number of questions that we've gotten actually, not only about India but also about Pakistan and Burma and Bangladesh, which are that why are there certain groups that we did not list as Entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs?

And I just want to go back for a moment to what I shared about a designation of groups being EPCs, which is that there are a couple of different factors that we take into account, which is, you



know, whether or not a non-state group is committing "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations of religious freedom, but those groups must also exercise significant political power and territorial control, and so they have to actually have control over a certain part of a country or an area, and we certainly have not seen that for a number of the groups that are being raised. Then to be outside the control of a sovereign government and employ violence in pursuit of their objectives.

And so for that reason, there are groups that certainly are a concern, as we mentioned, that are advocating and acting in a number of these countries, but for one of those reasons of not meeting those factors, they have not been designated as an EPC this year for us.

But we are certainly watching the ways in which those groups, including, for example, the Burmese military after the coup that started this year, are continuing to engage in violence and persecution.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you for that

clarification, Vice Chair Bhargava.

Kind of another housekeeping question that comes in, and I'm going to actually hand this over to our chairman to answer this question, is that the violations of some countries labeled as CPCs are not as egregious as others, for instance, China versus India, how does USCIRF highlight this nuance in the report?

CHAIR MANCHIN: Well, that's a very good question. Thank you, Vice Chair Perkins, for handing that over to me.

But, you know, many times in our discussions among the commissioners, we will make that distinction that of our CPCs that some countries are, seem more egregious, more systematic, more ongoing than others, but the point is that once a country has exhibited those three characteristics, and it has come to our attention, then it is our--that's what we do, is to designate them strictly on the grounds of freedom of religion.

Now, the State Department uses other,

other criteria. And I think also we look at whether a government is tolerating what these groups, these ongoing groups within a country are doing, but they're not doing anything to stop it, or is the government itself the one that are perpetuating these violent acts.

So it is a combination, and while all countries are not equal, certainly, though, any country that are committing those three levels of acts, "ongoing, systematic, and egregious," belong on the list of being a CPC even if it isn't as bad as another country. If it has those three conditions, then it's certainly, it certainly is bad enough to be, to be on our list.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Chair Manchin.

Several questions pertaining to Turkey and our observations of Turkey. There are grave concerns about Turkey. I'll address this particular question.

We're concerned by a continued trajectory in a negative direction. We saw this year despite

international opposition where the President Erdogan converted back into a mosque the famous Hagia Sophia. It formally had been a church, then been serving as a museum. That's created a lot of conflict.

We're seeing the government failing to protect religious freedom there, and again we see them, similar to China, where they're going beyond their own borders, and that is a troubling trend that we see in Turkey.

And we're hopeful that the Biden Administration will be more aggressive in their interaction with Turkey and with all of these countries that we are highlighting, both in our CPC list and our Special Watch List, that religious freedom will be a part of any negotiations that is ongoing or takes place with these particular countries.

Another question I want to turn to, as it pertains to China, and that is how serious is Communist China's economic leverage on corporations around the world? Are they using that as we talk

about them crossing their borders with their influence?

I'll turn to Commissioner Bauer for that question.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Yes. Thank you, Vice Chairman.

Yes, this is a really serious problem. 25 years ago, we had a big debate in the United States about increasing trade relationships with Communist China, and a lot of well-meaning people, including the American business community, argued that more trade with China would change China, would make it more liberal and progressive and less repressive.

Others, including myself and many others of the commissioners, argued that trade with China was much more likely to change us, and that's sadly what's happened.

We see international companies around the world becoming lobbyists for Communist China essentially by defending them against charges of religious liberty violations. Even companies that are housed or located primarily in the United

States, but have international operations, have sadly turned a blind eye toward China's religious persecution.

We had a major hearing on the fact that some companies around the world, including in the United States, have supply chains that are tainted by the use of slave labor, and corporations again have not been, shown much interest in finding out whether the people that are producing their products in Communist China may, in fact, be working for nothing or basically slave wages.

So while our focus is international religious freedom, we have spoken out as a Commission against any entity around the world, and even here in the United States, allowing itself to be co-opted by the Communist Chinese. It's something that I think every country around the world needs to be very sensitive about.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Two additional thoughts on that I need to share with.

One is that years ago, as Commissioner Bauer pointed out, the international community

mistakenly believed that helping Communist China with the technology, helping them to grow their economy through various programs, will make them just one of us. Obviously that didn't happen.

Conversely, they're using that very influence, economic influence particularly, to go against the world. We want every country to be successful and a good place if they deserve, but the trajectory, the initiatives, the way that they're conducting diplomacy, if I can borrow three "Cs" that Australian policy expert John Garnaut introduced--corrosive, corrupt, and coercive influence operations--using that very economic influence, not only around the world, but here at home. Our U.S. Chamber of Commerce lobbies against the anti-slavery bill in the U.S. Congress. That is unconscionable.

And the United States business community not only doing the right thing but also lobbying previously the Trump Administration, now the Biden Administration, not to take a hard line on China. Technology firms are the same way.

So, it is not only illegal to engage in these behaviors, but it's unconscionable, it's un-American. So I urge the business community to get on to the right side of history and don't forget that during the Nuremberg trials, certain German industrialists stood on trial for their complicity. We may see this movie again.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Turkel.

That brings us to the top of the hour. I know there are other questions, but our staff will certainly work to get answers for all of those questions, but as we wrap up our time together, I want to turn this back over to our chair, Gayle Manchin.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Perkins, for the excellent job of maneuvering through many good questions for our commissioners to deal with.

But a big thank you to all of you out there that came on today to watch this webinar and receive the release of our 2021 Annual Report. It



is important. It is fundamental to global history that we record each year those countries that are the most "egregious, ongoing, and systematic" in their behavior toward their own people in preventing freedom of religion.

Thank you for joining us. A big thank you to our staff and all the work that they did to put this together, and to our commissioners for their passion and commitment and dedication to the work of religious freedom for all.

Thank you so much. Thank you for joining us. Good-bye.

[Whereupon, at 3:01 p.m., the event was concluded.]