

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2022 ANNUAL REPORT ROLLOUT:
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Monday, April 25, 2022

2:00 p.m. ET

Zoom Webinar

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

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nadine Maenza, Chair
Nury Turkel, Vice Chair
Anurima Bhargava
Khizr Khan
Sharon Kleinbaum
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MAENZA: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us. I'm Nadine Maenza, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

We at USCIRF are dedicated to advocating for international religious freedom--a foundational and essential human right.

Today, we are proud to release our 23rd Annual Report, which offers an overview of religious freedom conditions around the world and lays out recommendations to the U.S. government on what it can do to shed light, ensure accountability, and 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, which we have just recently resumed, following the loosening of the pandemic-related restrictions.

I am now honored to introduce the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who will offer brief remarks on the occasion of the release of our Annual Report today.

[Video presentation by Ms. Pelosi follows:]

MS. PELOSI: Good afternoon. As Speaker, it is my privilege to bring greetings from the Congress to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on this important day for human rights--the release of your Annual Report.

Around the globe, worshippers face dangers posed by autocracy, bigotry, and political upheaval.

Today, you are once again shining a spotlight on these grave threats to religious liberty. This report is an invaluable resource for the Administration, the Congress, and the public, as we continue standing up for religious freedoms abroad.

Let us salute the leadership of Chair Nadine Maenza and Vice Chair Nury Turkel, whom I

was proud to nominate. Thank you to all of the commissioners, including another nominee of mine, Anurima Bhargava, who is nearing the end of her final term, and thank you to the hardworking staff who made possible USCIRF's essential mission.

The ability to worship safely and freely is a cornerstone of American democracy and it is a fundamental human right that transcends borders.

When that freedom comes under threat, America has a responsibility to speak out. For more than two decades, USCIRF has helped fulfil that sacred obligation. Boldly speaking truth to power, seven of your commissioners have been sanctioned by China's government. Clearly your advocacy is having an impact and even striking a nerve.

The Congress' longstanding support of your work is bipartisan and bicameral, and in President Biden we are blessed with a leader who is committed to translating your findings into a brighter, more just future. Together we will preserve the promise of religious freedom for all.

Thank you for all that you do to combat oppression and best wishes for a productive event. Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Speaker Pelosi, for those kind words.

I am also honored to introduce Senator Marco Rubio, a senior member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, who will offer some remarks as well.

[Video presentation by Senator Rubio follows:]

SENATOR RUBIO: Hello. I'm Senator Marco Rubio. I'm glad to be able to speak to you all on the release of USCIRF's 2022 Annual Report, and I'm grateful for the Commission's work to shine a light on international religious persecution.

Last year, people around the world continued to be harassed, jailed, tortured, and even killed for who they are or for what they believe in.

In the past year, I'm proud to say that we've made progress in calling out the entities

responsible for religious persecution, especially the Chinese Communist Party.

Both former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and current Secretary of State Antony Blinken have rightly determined that Beijing's ongoing atrocities against the Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic groups is genocide. And at the end of last year, my Uyghur Forced Labor Protection Act became the law.

Soon American corporations won't be able to turn a blind eye to slave labor, but there is more work that remains. In 2021, the collapse in Afghanistan brought a return of Sharia law and sent Hazara Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Christians into hiding.

In Nigeria, terrorists deliberately target Christians--a problem the Nigerian government still fails to address.

And, in 2022, Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine brought the destruction of Holocaust memorials and Jewish cultural sites and the potential persecution of non-Russian Orthodox

Christians.

The United States and the free world must respond quickly to these atrocities and hold those responsible accountable.

The Commission's work is crucial in this effort. It's why I've authored legislation to extend the USCIRF's mandate. I'm hopeful the bill will be taken up soon so your good work can continue without interruption.

The fight for religious freedom will not be over any time soon, but this report is a valuable tool in the war against unjust persecution. I'm grateful to all of the commissioners and their staff for the hard work they've put in, and I urge everyone to consider the report's full findings and recommendations.

Thank you and may God bless you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Senator Rubio.

Under our mandate in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA, we issue a report by May 1st each year with recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and

Congress.

All chapters in this report are approved by a majority vote and reflect the views of a bipartisan group of commissioners from different religious, political, and professional backgrounds.

I'd like to say it's been an honor and a privilege to work with all of you.

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

We invite those with questions to use the Q&A feature at the bottom of the screen to submit a question in writing. You may also post these questions at any time, and we will respond to as many questions as possible following our overview of the highlights from this report.

Before moving on to the content of this year's Annual Report, I'd like to take a moment to thank our professional staff for their phenomenal

work in preparing this report and in organizing this event.

I'd like to especially thank Jason Morton for all his work this year and his commitment to improving the lives of all who want to practice their faith.

The Annual Report is a culmination of a team effort involving each member of USCIRF's staff in addition to our outside copy editor and report designers. Their combined efforts make this report and this release possible.

The Annual Report's primary 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 the SWL.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, or egregious" violations of religious freedom. The Special Watch List is for countries where the violations meet two, but not three, of

that systematic, ongoing, egregious test for CPC status.

This year, our report covers 27 countries. Based on 2021 conditions, we recommend 15 of these countries for CPC status, including the ten that the State Department designated as CPCs in December of 2021: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

In addition, USCIRF believes the State Department should designate five other countries as CPCs: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, and Vietnam.

We recommend that the State Department maintain on its Special Watch List three countries--Algeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua--and add nine countries to that list: Azerbaijan, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

In addition, we also recommend for redesignation as Entities of Particular Concerns, or EPCs, the following seven nonstate actors: al-

Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Islamic State in West Africa Province, also referred to as ISIS-West Africa, and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin.

To meet the legal standard for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, be "outside the control of a sovereign government," exercise "significant political power and territorial control," and often employ "violence in pursuit of its objectives."

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

The cover of our report features images from Afghanistan because religious freedom conditions there went into an immediate and disastrous downward spiral following the full U.S. withdrawal in August 2021 and immediate takeover by the Taliban.

While we had long been concerned about

conditions in Afghanistan, the Taliban's return to power has had an immediate chilling impact on religious freedom and on the broader human rights environment.

Given this precipitous decline in 2021, USCIRF has taken the step of recommending in this year's Annual Report that the State Department designate Afghanistan under the de facto rule of the Taliban as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

USCIRF's last such recommendation was 21 years ago, in 2001--just before the ousting of the previous Taliban regime, which had controlled most of the country since 1996.

In addition to Afghanistan, three countries in sub-Saharan Africa have given us cause for alarm based on shifting circumstances in 2021.

First, we had removed the Central African Republic, or CAR, from last year's Annual Report following improvements in religious freedom conditions in 2020. However, during 2021, Central

African authorities and their partners committed egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom--including targeted abductions, torture, and killings of Muslims--which led us to reinstate our recommendation that the State Department place CAR on the Special Watch List.

We also continue to draw attention to the dire circumstances in Nigeria. The State Department had rightly designated Nigeria as a CPC in 2020 for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended every year since 2009.

But, in 2021, the State Department chose not to redesignate Nigeria as a CPC, and it bypassed downgrading the country to the Special Watch List, thereby indicating that, in its view, Nigeria is a country with no severe religious freedom violations, as defined by IRFA.

In fact, central government failure, state-level government repression, and religiously-motivated violence by non-state actors have turned parts of Nigeria, which is Africa's most populous country of approximately 211 million people, into a

hotbed of persecution--particularly in the north.

Earlier this month, for example, a court in Kano State sentenced humanist leader Mubarak Bala to 24 years in prison for peacefully expressing beliefs that the Nigerian government considers blasphemous. USCIRF maintains that Nigeria should again return to CPC status in 2022.

In addition, USCIRF is deeply concerned about the potential for backsliding in Sudan, which we previously removed from our Annual Report due to its dramatic religious freedom improvements since 2019.

However, the October 2021 military takeover now threatens many of those advancements. USCIRF is closely monitoring the situation.

These countries represent just a sampling of the places in which religious freedom continues to face severe challenges around the world, and I hope that each of you will take the opportunity to read the full report.

Those challenges, after all, are many, and they affect individuals, families, and communities

around the world.

The scope and scale of the violations are disheartening, of course, but for our part at USCIRF, they drive our determination to remain steadfast in our commitment to unflinchingly advocate for the essential right of religious freedom in every corner of the globe.

I'd now like to turn it over to Vice Chair Nury Turkel, who will discuss the implementation in 2021 of some of our previous recommendations, in addition on ongoing efforts to address international religious freedom by the administration of President Joseph R. Biden during 2021, his first year in office.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Chair Maenza.

Good afternoon. Thank you very much for being here.

As in prior years, we can note some of USCIRF's key recommendations that the United States government implemented over the last year.

First, since taking office in January of

2021, the Biden administration has continued many of the international religious freedom-related initiatives from the previous administration, including the implementation of the executive order on Advancing International Religious Freedom, signed by then President Donald Trump in June 2020.

The executive order included several of USCIRF's longstanding recommendations related to the prioritization of religious freedom abroad in U.S. foreign policy, such as increasing related foreign assistance and developing an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad and country-specific action plans.

International religious freedom-related humanitarian assistance also continued to receive attention and resources from the administration in 2021.

Furthermore, we were pleased to see President Biden nominate Rashad Hussain in July 2021 to serve as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. He was confirmed in December and sworn in January of this year.

The administration also nominated Deborah Lipstadt as the special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, granting the rank of ambassador to the position for the first time. The Senate confirmed her appointment just a few weeks ago on March 30th.

Many of our country-specific recommendations were also implemented in 2021. For the first time, the State Department designated Russia as a CPC, which we have recommended since 2017.

And between January and September 2021, the Treasury Department imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on both state and non-state actors responsible for egregious human rights and religious freedom violations in Iraq, Syria, Cuba, Iran, and China.

The China-related sanctions--on two officials for atrocities against Uyghurs and other Turkic people in Xinjiang--were coordinated with other countries imposing sanctions against the same abusers, as USCIRF had recommended.

During 2021, the United States government also implemented two other key USCIRF recommendations related to China. First, in January 2021, the outgoing Trump administration designated China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity.

In March, the Biden administration affirmed that designation when it released the State Department's annual country reports on human rights practices.

Second, in February, the Biden administration announced a diplomatic boycott of the February 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, a step that USCIRF had been calling for since 2020.

For its part, Congress, too, has continued to exhibit a continuing commitment to international religious freedom-related issues. Among other actions, it passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in December, and it convened several congressional hearings on topics related to international religious freedom.

And just this month, Congress passed, and President Biden signed, a permanent reauthorization of the Global Magnitsky Act's targeted actions authority, which USCIRF also had recommended.

While USCIRF is pleased to see evidence of the ongoing commitment to and fulfilment of IRFA, International Religious Freedom Act, by successive administrations and Congress, it's not enough for us to simply look back. We also continue to refine and update our new and ongoing recommendations to the United States government.

Accordingly, among other recommendations, in this year's Annual Report we recommended that the administration promptly appoint a well-qualified individual as a special adviser for international religious freedom on the National Security Council staff and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to fulfill their mandate.

Furthermore, we recommend that the administration increase the use of human rights-related financial and visa authorities to impose

asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses, and coordinate with other countries with similar sanctions regimes on such targeted sanctions whenever possible.

Among the recommendations that USCIRF makes to Congress this year, we urge it to hold oversight hearings on United States international religious freedom policy.

We also continue to recommend that individual members of Congress advocate for international religious freedom by sponsoring religious prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

Like those in Congress involved in the Defending Freedoms Project, we at USCIRF are committed to highlighting illustrative cases of victims of religious persecution around the globe, through our own Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, the RPOC project.

During the year, commissioners advocated

for prisoners and other victims from a range of faiths and beliefs in various countries. Some have suffered many years, such as Panchen Lama, who disappeared in China since 1995, and today is his 34th birthday.

Two such prisoners, Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia and Reda Abdel Rahman in Egypt, were released in early 2022, which USCIRF welcomed.

Regrettably, longtime RPOC Patriarch Abune Antonios died in February while under house arrest in Eritrea at the age of 94.

Thank you again for being here with us. We'll be happy to answer any questions that you may have. And now I'll turn the virtual floor back to our Chair Maenza.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thanks so much, Vice Chair Turkel.

We're now going to spend some time answering some questions so feel free again to put the question at the bottom of the screen, and we'll get to as many questions as we can.

The first question we have submitted is

about Russia and Ukraine. Can you talk about how Russia and Ukraine conflict have regional aspects and how it will affect religious freedom in those areas in the future?

We'll hand that off to Commissioner Khan.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you, Chair Maenza.

Welcome to our audience and participants. I second your compliments to our professional staff for putting this wonderful report together. I very much encourage our audience to read it. You will find it exceptionally useful for under current world circumstances.

I answer your question in that regard that violation of human rights, violation of religious rights, have been persistent in Russia for a very long time, and the Commission had noticed in its previous reports and continues to do so now.

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and USCIRF is concerned that it will extend its religious freedom abuses as seen in occupied Crimea and Donbas to future occupied territory.

Russia has deliberately shelled houses of worship which were sheltering civilians. We strongly condemn that abuse, violation of human rights, violation of religious freedom, and we are keenly, like the rest of the world, are observing these Russian atrocities, and we hope that these atrocities will cease very soon.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, Commissioner Khan.

We have a question about Vietnam that we'll hand to Commissioner Bhargava. I'll read it out to you.

I have a question about the situation of religious freedom in Vietnam. Each year, USCIRF makes recommendations to the U.S. government to improve the situation of religious freedom in Vietnam. How did they implement the recommendations and what were the results?

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you, Chair Maenza.

So there are a couple of ways in which

we've consistently made recommendations to the U.S. government on Vietnam, and over the course of the last year, the Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Vice President Harris both raised concerns about human rights. Two, in their meetings with Vietnam, there has been certainly a lot of engagement with Vietnam over the last year, and part of the goal is to make sure that religious freedom and human rights abuses are part of that conversation.

In addition, the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, Marc Knapper, has made human rights--and we've talked to the Ambassador about religious freedom concerns, and how to ensure a few things. One, that those who have been imprisoned or are being harassed for religious freedom advocacy or because of their beliefs, that we advocate for their release, and that we advocate for continuing upward and in positive directions in terms of how they're being treated in Vietnam, and also for the implementation of the 2018 law on belief and religion, and then that law be implemented in a way

that is not curtailing religious freedom for so many groups.

The last thing I'll say is that in November 2021, it was the 25th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, and certainly religious freedom was part of that conversation in significant ways. And so that's the way in which we've seen some of the recommendations that we've made to the U.S. government come into play in terms of their engagement with Vietnam and certainly want to continue to see that kind of raising of concerns and also pressures to make sure that Vietnam goes in the right direction.

CHAIR MAENZA: Great. Thank you so much, Commissioner Bhargava.

We have a question here about imposing targeted and broad sanctions, including coordinated multilateral sanctions with international partners as appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea.

How can we effectively utilize sanctions regimes in order to facilitate religious freedom in

a hermit kingdom like North Korea?

And I just want to mention that, you know, we do make recommendations for sanctions, both individually and more broadly, you know, but usually there as part--it's not a magic weapon. It's just a piece of the puzzle in a way that the U.S. government can help to incentivize religious freedom.

And in our recommendations, we mention, you know, the violation in North Korea, and also consider lifting certain sanctions in return for concrete progress. So there's different ways to use sanctions. There's certainly no--these are very difficult situations, and so there's a lot of different ways the U.S. government can still bring religious freedom to the table as they're dialoguing on security issues and other issues, and that's what we encourage them to do.

I'd like to now read another question about Egypt, and we'll go to Commissioner Kleinbaum.

What role has Egypt's criminal justice

system, including law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges, played in limiting religious freedom in 2021?

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Well, thank you very much, chair, and I want to add my gratitude to the fabulous professional staff of USCIRF. What an honor it is to work with all of them, and it's extraordinary to be with this group of commissioners, and we're missing a couple today.

But it's an incredible model of the possibility that still exists of bipartisan work together among people who have big differences but also deep respect.

And as maybe I'm the first openly lesbian rabbi who's a commissioner on the USCIRF, on the Commission, I have to say it's very moving for me personally, and we understand as people of faith the power of standing together against the pharaohs of our world who want to destroy the possibilities of religious freedom.

And so I just want to thank all of you. It's so moving for me to be here fighting the

pharaohs, and I want to offer a blessing, "Ramadan Mubarak," to all of my Muslim friends and colleagues during this holy time.

Egypt is a complicated country, of course, when it comes to religious freedom, and there have been some improvements in 2021, but, sadly, the overall situation remains poor and social inequities continue to present systemic and ongoing obstacles to real religious freedom.

There's the continued enforcement of blasphemy laws, as well as the detention and prosecution of religious minorities and religious freedom activists, among others, under these counterterrorism laws that are used in order to imprison those who are trying to practice their religion.

In fact, authorities have issued a smaller number of church licenses, which are necessary for Christians to legalize houses of worship, and promised reforms of national school curriculum or remove material damaging to religious minorities.

I was honored to be focusing on the

religious prisoner of conscience Reda Abdel Rahman, who was released in February we're very, very glad to be able to report. He's a Qur'anist Muslim blogger, and we pray that he will not be rearrested as he has been in the past, and we continue to stand for others who are being arrested under these false charges.

The Jewish community in Egypt has a long and proud history, and most Jews have had to leave, flee Egypt because of the antisemitism experience there, and we hope and pray that the other religious minorities there are treated with respect and are able to practice religion freely.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

COMMISSIONER PERKINS: I would just add to Commissioner Kleinbaum, to dovetail with what she had to say. I'd actually continue the analogy. What plagues Egypt is their bad policy when it comes to religious freedom.

We have seen progress in some years past and we're optimistic that we would see Egypt under President el-Sisi, who's made some very symbolic

but significant steps forward to broaden the respect for all religious entities and bodies.

However, the policies and the laws that remain on the books that Commissioner Kleinbaum made reference to are continuing to divide the country.

We saw in the last few years, a few years ago, there was after making some trips to Egypt, visiting with Egyptian officials, there was movement on the registration of churches. That now has slowed, if not stalled.

We see, as you made reference to, the blasphemy laws are problematic. But also one of the areas that continue to divide the people, especially in some of the more remote parts of the country, is the religious category on the national ID cards.

I would hope that we could see Egypt become a country that is not on any of our lists, but I think we're going to have to see some significant and concrete steps taken by the government there. But, unfortunately, we haven't.

It's like we take a step forward and a couple steps back.

CHAIR MAENZA: That's right. Egypt is a good example of a lot of countries we cover that is, you know, we're rooting for them. We want to see these countries succeed. We want to see them offer religious freedom to the people in their country and understand that they will be more secure, they'll be safer, if they allow freedom of religion and belief broadly throughout the country.

So thank you for that.

Now we're going to go to a question about China, and it will go to Vice Chair Nury Turkel.

Is any policy recommendation for Chinese Christians being persecuted by the government?

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you for that question.

China has been a CPC country since 1999. The International Religious Freedom Act was enacted in 1998. So China has been designated--rightfully--as long as the statute exists, as long as we have the mandate to promote religious freedom around the

world.

China has been specifically, purposefully, systematically attacking particularly Western religion, Islam and Christianity in particular.

Their system is the Communist ideology, the Chinese domestic and foreign policy, by and large shaped by the Communist ideology. The Chinese Communist Party perceives Christianity and other Western religion as a threat to the existence of the Communist Party.

So this is a much broader issue. It's not just a domestic issue. It has a lot of foreign policy ramification, national security ramifications, particularly to the United States.

So number one recommendation that we would make is to recognize that CCP is a threat to religious freedom in China. That has to be recognized. Once you recognize this serious issue, then you can move on to making policy, putting in place legal and policy initiatives.

So one thing that the U.S. government could do, and have done it in the past, and could

expand this to targeted sanctions against individuals, the officials who are formulating, especially the Chinese United Front Work Department, State Administration for Religious Affairs.

These perpetrators, these actors should not be allowed to remain anonymous. The immediate effect of the sanction cannot be seen oftentimes. It is a long-term effect. It cannot be understated.

So we should focus on those individuals and expand the sanctions, targeted sanctions in the network of those entities and individuals.

The other thing is we have to make this a bilateral, multilateral issue because religious freedom is a nonpartisan issue. Religious freedom should be considered as a humanitarian issue, national security issue, the value issue. So this should not be a concern for those who question even about the U.S. foreign policy objectives.

So I recommend the Biden administration continue engaging our allies and partners, like-

minded governments, through bilateral and multilateral means and platforms.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

Another question we have is Kurdistan as part of Iraq on your list. And so Kurdistan--I believe the Kurdistan region of Iraq is part of our Iraq list so it is not specifically by itself evaluated, but we do cover Kurdistan because we cover the country of Iraq, and we do recommend Iraq as a Special Watch List.

I would say that Kurdistan's conditions are positive, a stark contrast to the rest of Iraq. And they accepted over a million refugees during the 2014 genocide. But we've also been quick to point out when we see things that we think they should change. We dialogue directly with them, and we just put out a country report in March that does a deep dive into the conditions in Kurdistan.

You can read more about them. So hopefully that makes that clear.

Going to the next question, it would be about Nigeria, so I'm going to hand this off to

Commissioner Perkins.

With regard to Nigeria's designation and subsequent re--de-designation, what measures are in place to ensure CPC-designated countries are de-designated--redesignated by the State Department on the basis of tangible and sustainable improvements in religious freedom?

So it's a two-parter really about the process and also we can talk about Nigeria a bit, too.

COMMISSIONER PERKINS: Right. The process, I mean since 2009, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended CPC status for Nigeria because of the ongoing, egregious and systematic religious freedom violations, in part, not necessarily committed by the government of Nigeria but tolerated, and that is our concern.

We have engaged the Biden administration on multiple occasions because after the designation in 2020 as an ECP, or rather as a CPC, and then being removed by the Biden administration last

year, there was a lot of concerns because, as the chairwoman made notice of, they were removed completely from the list. So they are now, there's no indication or recognition of the religious freedom violations in Nigeria.

That's actually the first time that's ever happened where you had a country at that level of designation being so completely not downgraded, and so we'll continue to engage the State Department, the Biden administration, on this because the attacks on houses of worship continue. We've had at least 13 religious leaders of different denominations and religious backgrounds that have been kidnapped and held for ransom.

We continue to see militant Islamist groups continuing to control territory, and to terrorize people of faith, and so this, the administration is going to have to engage the Nigerian government to, number one, protect religious freedom and the various religious groups in Nigeria and show improvement.

Now, in full candor, there has been

discussion, some within the State Department and even other governments that are focused on Nigeria because of the size and impact of Nigeria in Africa.

If this continues to trend negatively, some say it's an issue of scarcity of resources, it's an issue between farmers and herders, but clearly the evidence suggests that religion is playing a key component in the conflict there in Nigeria and must be a part of the discussions.

Bottom line, Nigeria must be held accountable. Governments that fail to protect the most fundamental human rights like religious freedom raise questions of their own legitimacy, and so it's to Nigeria's benefit that they work with the criteria that's been laid out and address these ongoing issues of religious freedom in their country.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

This question--I'll go ahead and read this about cultural artifacts. So the United States through the State Department's Administration on

Cultural Property Advisory Committee of ECA currently has established cultural property agreements with Egypt, Turkey, China and other countries whose governments persecute religious minorities by continuing to destroy religious monuments and convert them.

And it talks about a situation in Pakistan as well like that. So I want to just speak to that and say we do monitor situations having to do with cultural heritage, and we have dialogued directly with the State Department about concerns we've had with governments that we feel are harming religious artifacts.

So we'll continue to include that in our reporting and in our public statements so thank you for that question.

The next question is about India. Members of the Hindu community, Dalits, Muslims and Christians face greater threat under the VJP rule in India. How concerned is USCIRF about the ongoing violations in India? Is the U.S. in any position to make India comply and protect its

minorities?

We'll hand that off to you, Commissioner Bhargava.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you, Chair Maenza.

So for the third year in a row, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that the State Department designate India as a country of particular concern for the systematic ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom that are occurring within the country.

And there are many reasons that underlie that recommendation. In particular, we are concerned about the ways in which there has been a move through policy and rhetoric to a more overtly Hindu state that is othering and pushing out those who are religious minorities who are not Hindu.

And that has taken place in a couple of different ways. One, the repression of critical voices and of religious minorities through the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and the Sedition

Law, the ways in which those who are organizations that are actually supporting religious communities, NGOs are being--funds and support to those organizations are being cut off because of the ways in which the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act has been, has been used and wielded by the government.

We're also very much concerned about the ways in which the laws on citizenship, and there's been continued movement in Assam as one state in which there have been citizenship laws that have been used to try and suggest that certain communities do not belong, in particular, Muslim communities, but the ways in which that is continuing to grow as a movement around the country, and, of course, there have been many attacks on religious communities across India of Christians, of Muslims, of Sikhs, of other religious minorities.

And those, those attacks and the ways in which they have been either not addressed or facilitated by government at different levels are

also of significant concern to us at USCIRF.

Lastly, wanted to raise the ways in which we're seeing increasing numbers of laws, anti-conversion laws, in their implementation, are really putting those who seek to do everyday, move forward in everyday ways, get married, be able to partner with one another, be able to live in neighborhoods with one another, the ways in which those are putting communities and people at risk who are religious minorities.

And so by allowing for mob violence to occur, by suggesting that those who, those who might convert to a different religion are themselves breaking the law are not something that should be supported. So in all those ways we are deeply concerned about what has been taking place in India.

And, again, for that reason, have once again made the recommendation to the State Department that India be designated a country of particular concern.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

We have a question here about on China that we'll hand off to Vice Chair Turkel.

Can you address the persecution facing the religious group Falun Gong, which is not at all Western but an indigenous group?

Thank you for your work.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

That's an important question. Falun Gong practitioners are one of the most vulnerable religious groups in China. USCIRF has been monitoring and reporting the Chinese persecution of the Falun Gong practitioners for years.

We continue to do that. We also have been engaging with the Falun Gong practitioners from the civil society. We also have been following up on the organ harvesting issue that is also related to this vulnerable group.

We also made a similar type of recommendation to the U.S. government. The U.S. government has implemented some of it. As you may recall, not too long ago, Secretary Blinken imposed visa restriction on Chinese officials who are

responsible for the ongoing human rights abuses and religious persecution in China.

We will continue to do that. We closely monitor the issues involving Falun Gong practitioners. I personally worry that some of the policies being implemented under other religious groups in China may be the new reality for religious groups like the Hui and Falun Gong practitioners.

Specifically, the slave labor practices. We started seeing it in Tibet.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

Our next question says the IRF Roundtable and other NGOs have asked the Biden administration to make Afghan religious minorities parity for purpose of immigration to the U.S. and resettlement elsewhere. However, we were recently told they will not aid Hazaras, Christians, Baha'is, Ahmadiyyas, and other small groups.

Thousands of members of the smaller groups are in hiding while Hazaras are subjected to targeted terror attacks. What can we do to get

action in this area?

So USCIRF has spoken out very strongly in support of religious minorities in Afghanistan. We have asked the administration to expand the existing P-2 designation for the U.S. Refugee Admission Program to include religious minorities at extreme risk of persecution.

We've also suggested Congress take action to also open up a way for religious minorities to be accepted. So we would just ask that you continue to speak to members of Congress, to the Administration, and to raise the plight of the religious minorities that are at risk in Afghanistan.

So I think we only have a few more questions. So if anyone wants to submit, we have just a little bit more time.

I have a question here about Uzbekistan. In recent years, Uzbekistan has been touted for its religious freedom reforms. In 2020, the State Department removed Uzbekistan from its Special Watch List, yet USCIRF has again decided to

recommend its placement on that list.

Why has USCIRF made this recommendation despite the State Department's decision?

So I think it's important to note that USCIRF does their reporting in really January to December so we look at a 12-month period, and we make recommendations based on that. And so if you look at Uzbekistan during the last four years since I've been on the Commission, it has had stunning improvements.

And so, but this last year, they didn't approve any non-Muslim houses of worship, and while they amended the Religion Law with some improvements, such as changing the registration from 100 to 50, and maintained bans on unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and missionary activity, so it still fit the criteria for being on the Special Watch List, but we're hopeful that conditions will continue to improve in this so in time we can remove them.

We have a question here. How is USCIRF working with partners in Europe and at the U.N. on

combating the issue of contemporary antisemitism?

So any of my commissioners like to talk about our work on that?

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR MAENZA: Sure.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: In this report, the 2022 Report, there is a section that is of tremendous interest, not only to me, but to many in the audience, and this question probably is answered in this section.

The title of the section is "Other Key Developments." And a subsection there is "Religious Intolerance in Europe," and it mentions, because it concerns the Commission, Islamophobia, increasing antisemitism in Europe that remains of particular concern to the Commission. And that is noted in this particular section so we are concerned about it.

We are, we have had a hearing on that particular topic, and we will continue to monitor, as Europe has become again because of the Russian

invasion of Ukraine and its aggression, it has become the focus of the world.

So is the violation of religious freedom in other parts of Europe, and we will be monitoring it with a keen eye.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: I might add that in addition to this Annual Report, which comes out before May 1st each year, there are hearings all year long which are open to the public, and this year there was a major hearing on antisemitism, on anti-Muslim policies in Europe, et cetera, and it's really key, and I invite those who are in the audience to make sure you're following USCIRF's social media on the email list to get information about those hearings.

Holding hearings is one of the important powers of the Commission itself to bring experts as well as victims and government and NGO experts to speak about these issues and highlight them.

And I do want to add that there's a rise in anti-Christian hatred in the world as well, and this only underscores the important, the important

function of this Commission to stand united against religious intolerance and hatred throughout the world.

We are an international commission so our focus is outside of the United States, but these issues that this question raises is of key importance to our Commission.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

And I just want to remind you, as they mentioned, the key developments is actually in the very back of our book.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Yes.

CHAIR MAENZA: It has some really wonderful information.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Page 67.

CHAIR MAENZA: 67. Thank you.

Things like blasphemy law, hate speech, antisemitism, anti--transnational repression, is an important read so I highly recommend that.

Everyone good with that one? Okay. Make sure. Did you want to speak to that? Yes, go right ahead.

COMMISSIONER PERKINS: Well, I'll just add one thing. The reason that the Commission has focused on this, had hearings on it, and has actually put a separate section or a subsection in our report on antisemitism is that it is a harbinger. It is the canary in the coal mine when it comes to religious intolerance around the world.

And any jurisdiction that allows the growth of antisemitism, you can expect things only to get worse. So that is one of the reasons we have given focus to that.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Another question here. Turkey has recently resumed attacks in Northeast Syria and northern Iraq where Christians, Kurds, and Yazidis have historical homelands and have experienced religious freedom.

What can be done to restrain Turkey, which promises in an agreement with the U.S. to stay within the boundaries of land it seized in 2016 and 2019?

So we've certainly seen Turkey targeting

Assyrian areas, Yazidi areas, with strikes, and USCIRF has spoken out against those on several occasions.

I know pretty much everyday in Northeast Syria it seems that Turkey is now shelling into Syrian areas and even recently killed several Syrians including some of the guards that were there.

So USCIRF has made some recommendations, in particular for Syria to support the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, because they do provide these remarkable religious freedom conditions. Very striking compared to the rest of the region.

And it's clear that Turkey has invaded now three times, and each time they've taken land, the conditions in the area they've occupied are closer to the ISIS caliphate than they are to conditions on the Autonomous Administration so what we're seeing is crimes like kidnapping, rapes, forced conversion, and destruction of religious sites.

And so we do hope the U.S. government

takes our recommendation to pressure Turkey to withdraw from those areas and also takes our recommendations to give recognition to the Autonomous Administration, to lift sanctions from the area that they govern, I mean to include them in a political solution for Syria, which we haven't seen.

So we do hope--and we have been talking to them--we do hope that Congress and people watching this broadcast will continue to watch the situation and speak to members of Congress, as well as the administration.

COMMISSIONER PERKINS: I would just add, Chair Maenza, on Turkey, the underlying issue is Turkey's consistent disregard for religious freedom, and we can't expect them to do beyond their borders what they do not do within their borders, and that is to respect religious freedom.

That's why, once again, we recommended that they be on the Special Watch List. So the trend in Turkey within their borders is not good, and certainly what's happening outside their

borders is disturbing as well.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

You know, it looks like we have come to the end of our questions. So I want to say thank you to everyone for attending and for offering those questions and giving us an opportunity to talk about our report.

It has been an honor to be the chair here and to serve with these remarkable people and to talk about such important issues. So I want to say thank you so much for joining us.

I don't know if anyone else has anything they'd like to share before we go?

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Sure. Chair Maenza, I just wanted--as this is our last chance for many of us who are sitting up here to--

CHAIR MAENZA: Yes.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: --be part of an annual report rollout, I just wanted to thank you for your leadership--

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: --over the past

year, to thank Commissioner Perkins for his leadership.

CHAIR MAENZA: And yours as well when you both were chair.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: We've also been chairs over the last couple of years.

CHAIR MAENZA: So thank you.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: And to say how important it has been for us to be able to work with our extraordinary staff and to be able to travel to many of the places we've talked about today.

And I think to our newer commissioners, to Commissioners Kleinbaum and Khan, we hand this over to you with a great deal of gratitude and look forward to your being able to have the kind of experiences that I think we all had to be able to understand some of the complexities and nuances of what's happening in the world around religious freedom and to be able to continue this work in the way that we have.

It is truly an honor to be able to sit up

here with all of you across many different lines of difference and to see what we can do in a common purpose. So thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you so much.

CHAIR MAENZA: It's been a privilege. Thanks so much for joining us.

[Whereupon, at 2:53 p.m. ET, the rollout event concluded.]