

USAID Acting Administrator John Barsa's Remarks
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Panel
Wednesday, August 5, 10:30 a.m.

Remarks as prepared.

(Introduction)

Thank you Dwight, and thank you to the Commission for the invitation.

We are grateful for our collaboration with the Commission and we look forward to building on our partnership to defend the freedom of conscience of vulnerable communities around the world.

I want to first talk about how USAID's work strengthens international religious freedom, and then about how we are implementing the President's Executive Order.

(Importance of International Religious Freedom)

Today, too many people live in countries where religious freedom is threatened, restricted, and even denied.

Believers of nearly all faiths including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Jews have been increasingly persecuted over the past decade.

I want to emphasize that USAID does not condone violence or discrimination against any religious community — no matter what their faith.

Religious freedom...what we as Americans call our first freedom...is both a U.S. national security imperative and a universal human right.

For Americans, religious freedom is grounded in our founding documents and has always been a bipartisan issue.

Under President Clinton, the International Religious Freedom Act was signed, and under President Obama the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act was enacted.

More recently, President Trump signed the bipartisan Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act, which authorizes assistance to victims of genocide and crimes against humanity committed by ISIS.

He also signed the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anticorruption Act, which imposes sanctions against violators of civil rights in Nicaragua.

We've seen increasing cases of Nicaraguan government forces targeting Catholic clergy and worshippers.

Just this past weekend, we saw a Catholic chapel in Managua lit up in flames by arsonists.

All because the Church dares to speak up to safeguard human rights and basic freedoms for the people of Nicaragua.

In June, President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act. This legislation allows the U.S. to take decisive measures against the Chinese government in response to its heinous treatment of the Uyghurs and other minority communities in Xinjiang [Zhin-jiang].

During his speech at the United Nations General Assembly last September, President Trump declared, "with one clear voice, the United States of America calls upon the nations of the world to end religious persecution."

The President followed up on this unprecedented statement of principle by releasing the Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom.

This executive order makes clear that advancing religious freedom is a major U.S. foreign policy and national security priority...one that USAID is proud to play a key role in implementing.

(USAID's Work in International Religious Freedom)

Our mission at USAID is to help countries continue along their Journey to Self-Reliance.

We empower countries to become more free, more prosperous, and more accountable to their citizens.

When governments suppress freedom of religion, they prevent entire segments of society from making meaningful contributions to their country's political and economic development.

This is antithetical to USAID's goal of fostering inclusive societies. Embracing pluralism is fundamental to ensuring stability and prosperity.

USAID is committed to addressing the needs of vulnerable communities, including those of religious and ethnic minorities. Our programs aim to respond to and prevent mass atrocities, including genocide.

Most recently, in northern Iraq and Syria, our efforts have focused on helping communities recover from the genocidal campaign by the so-called Islamic State.

Two days ago marked six years since ISIS's occupation of the town of Sinjar. During this horrific massacre, ISIS launched a wave of destruction and terror, forcing thousands of people to flee their homes. Most of us are familiar with the horrors imposed upon young Yazidi women. Helping these communities heal is a major priority of ours.

USAID is partnering with a number of local organizations, like Nadia's Initiative, to provide water and food, improve access to electricity, and rebuild villages for returning residents.

In the town of Bartella, USAID provided nearly two dozen grants to returning young entrepreneurs and is working to attract investment in the region.

In 2019, USAID launched our New Partnerships Initiative - what we call NPI - in northern Iraq. The initiative marks the first time USAID has worked directly with local groups in nearly 20 years. By leveraging on-the-ground contacts and expertise, we can better respond to the needs of these traumatized communities.

I am pleased to announce that USAID just launched a new NPI solicitation for religious and ethnic freedom in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

This regional solicitation is designed to partner with local and faith-based groups, to identify grassroots solutions to the hardships these communities face on a daily basis.

We are similarly partnering with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch-Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development in Syria to provide valuable job training to religious and ethnic minorities. This training will provide employment and business management skills, and access to credit so people can rebuild their ventures after years of conflict.

USAID is also taking action in West Africa. In Nigeria, we are working to protect Christian communities and other vulnerable groups from attacks and destabilization by Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa, and other jihadists.

We are bringing Muslim and Christian communities together to alleviate tensions, reduce fear and mistrust, and lay the foundation for greater peacebuilding between the two communities.

But the U.S. must do more, and we will. We must partner with the Nigerian government to help preserve its democratic, mosaic, and pluralistic system and protect these persecuted groups.

And we must engage and work more directly with local faith-based organizations so that our aid can reach communities at the grassroots level.

To switch gears to another part of the world, we are extremely concerned about Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

For decades, the Rohingya have been driven out of Burma, periodically forced to flee to other surrounding countries and Muslim-majority nations such as Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.

In August 2017, the Burmese Government launched a violent campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. Over 700,000 people were forced to flee their homes and take shelter in Bangladesh.

USAID, in partnership with the State Department, is leading the global response to this complex crisis. We've provided more than \$950 million in humanitarian aid for IDPs in Burma, and refugees and host communities in Bangladesh.

Lastly, we remain steadfast in our support for persecuted minority groups in Xinjiang, China. USAID supports the Uyghur community and other Muslim ethnic groups who face systematic repression and abuse.

The Chinese Communist Party has forcibly imprisoned over 1 million Muslims and other minorities in a brutal campaign to expunge their religion and culture.

We've all seen the reports of forced sterilization. The CCP's treatment of its Uyghur population is cruel, barbaric, and insidious.

USAID will not stand idly by as the CCP carries out abuses targeting people who simply want to practice their customs and faith.

We are expanding our existing network to alert the world to their persecution. We are ratcheting up pressure on the Chinese government to end its forced labor practices. And we are calling on the CCP to immediately cease the oppression of its own citizens in Xinjiang.

(Faith-Based and New Partners)

I can continue with examples of the work that USAID is doing around the world, but I'd like to highlight another aspect of our work on international religious freedom.

In this context, USAID is advancing religious freedom by working directly with faith-based organizations like Catholic Relief Services, Samaritan's Purse, and Lutheran World Relief.

These organizations do more than just provide humanitarian and development assistance. They turn faith into action.

(Executive Order)

As you can see, USAID has an unwavering commitment to international religious freedom. President Trump's Executive Order on International Religious Freedom cements the important role our Agency plays in carrying out this U.S. foreign policy priority.

Here's how the Order does that:

First, the United States will budget at least \$50 million per year on programs that advance international religious freedom.

USAID is working closely with the State Department to realize this, and ensure that protecting religious freedom is a central tenet of our foreign assistance strategy.

Our programs will focus on preventing attacks on religious minority communities and preserving pluralistic cultural heritage. And we will ensure our assistance addresses the political, social, and economic constraints that religious and ethnic communities face on a daily basis.

Second, the State Department and USAID now mandate that Foreign Service Officers undergo training on how to promote international religious freedom. We've already gotten a head start on this. In January 2020, USAID mandated all its FSOs to take training on upholding religious liberty.

Third, the order states that the U.S. Government will expand the availability of economic tools to support allies of religious freedom and confront bad actors.

This aspect of the Order will likely be carried out by either increasing our support to religious freedom programming, by realigning foreign aid to better reflect country circumstances, or restricting the issuance of visas, and deploying Global Magnitsky sanctions where appropriate.

The Executive Order recognizes that healthy societies protect religious freedoms, just as they protect property rights, legal rights, and human and civil rights of all kinds.

USAID is fully committed to carrying out the President's Executive Order. I am proud to have Samah Norquist leading USAID's implementation as our new Chief Advisor for International Religious Freedom. Samah has led our post-ISIS recovery program in northern Iraq over the past two years, and I can't think of anyone better able to take on this global effort.

(Conclusion)

In closing, promoting religious freedom is about protecting the basic, fundamental right of the individual, and respecting the sanctity of conscience to choose what he or she believes in.

USAID fully recognizes this right and is committed to further strengthening our efforts to advance religious liberty and make sure that countries recognize it as a prerequisite for achieving inclusive development.

Thank you again for hosting me. I know you have some questions and I look forward to talking about any of these subjects in more detail.