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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

RELEASE OF THE 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. ASHBURN: Welcome to everyone this morning. USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report, which covers calendar year 2018, contains USCIRF findings and policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

We have eight USCIRF commissioners here today to discuss the report. Their full bios are available on the tables, but I'd like to briefly introduce them:

Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee is the current U.S. chair. Then House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, now Speaker Pelosi, appointed him in 2016 and reappointed him in 2018.

Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan appointed her in 2016 and reappointed her in 2018.

Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer appointed her in May of 2018.

Gary Bauer, President Donald Trump appointed him in May of 2018.

Anurima Bhargava, then Minority Leader Pelosi appointed Commissioner Bhargava in December

2018.

Nadine Maenza, President Trump appointed Nadine in May of 2018, as he did Johnnie Moore. President Trump appointed him in 2018.

The eighth commissioner is Tony Perkins. Senator Majority Leader Mitch McConnell appointed Commissioner Perkins in May of 2018.

And Commissioner Andy Khawaja was appointed by Leader Schumer. He could not be here and sends his regrets.

Before we begin, please shut off your cell phones. This session is on the record and being taped and live streamed.

We'll start with a welcome from Senator Joe Manchin. We're also expecting brief remarks from Representatives Jim McGovern and Mark Meadows. The vice chair and chair, two vice chairs, will discuss the report, and then I will take advantage of my position as moderator to ask several questions of the commissioners.

After that, we will wrap up with questions from the audience, and when you ask a question,

please wait for a microphone, identify who you are and your organization and ask a direct question to someone if possible.

With that, let me turn it over to Senator Joe Manchin.

[Applause.]

SENATOR MANCHIN: Thank you, Lauren. I appreciate very much being here, and I'd like to thank our chair, Tenzin Dorjee, and all the staff that made this happen, all of you all on USCIRF, thank you for being here today.

Also to Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga, I want to thank Kristina along with all of the commissioners for inviting me to join you here today. Gayle made sure it was on my calendar many, many weeks ago and made sure no one changed it. That's always a challenge in our scheduling.

I'd also like to commend your Executive Director, Erin--I asked Erin to make sure I pronounced it properly--Singshinsuk--did I get it right, Erin--

MS. SINGSHINSUK: Yes, you did.

SENATOR MANCHIN: --for her tireless work to support the commission, the important organization which I think this is.

The very first line in the First Amendment to our Constitution protects our religious freedom. "The Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Think about that. It tells who we are. If there is anything in our Founding Fathers' thought process it was this should be absolutely nonpartisan. No partisanship whatsoever in religious freedom and support.

Our Founding Fathers understood that the free exercise of faith was not just important to the health and well-being of individual people; it's the very foundation of the healthy democracy.

When you give any institution or government the power to tell its people what to believe and how to believe it, you're telling people that their voice and their beliefs and their values don't really matter.

This country is the greatest country on earth and the hope of the world because we recognize, we recognize our diversity and we embrace it. As a Christian, I am proud to share spiritual passages and inspiring words with my friends, Republicans and Democrats, although I know what speaks to my faith may not speak to those in the same way. But we do share back and forth experiences that we enjoy. Sometimes you're at a meeting, and there might be something said, and it's inspiring and you want to share that because other people might not have had the opportunity to be there, so we send those back and forth.

On the Senate side, there's only a hundred of us. The House side, God bless you all, 435. I don't know how you all navigate. I'm proud of you for what you do. I think it's important to have our dialogue, what we do. I think it's important to talk to each other about our faith and about why we care and about what we care about.

I've always said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you

care. My grandmother--I'll tell you where that comes from. One time--I was the first in our family to attend college--finish college. Let's put it that way. And I was so proud of what I was learning. My grandmother--she immigrated from Italy, and she only had a fourth grade education, but she was the most brilliant woman I've ever met.

And she was so full of common sense. One time I came home, and I was just bursting with how much I had learned. I just took accounting classes. I was in marketing. I was just learning all these new things. And I'm just throwing the whole load of hay off. When you come from the country, you talk about you throw the whole load of hay on the horse, you're going to kill the horse. So I threw a whole load of hay on what I learned.

She looked at me and never batted an eye. She said people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And it really has stuck with me. And I never forgot those words. And for me talking about my faith and listening to others talk about theirs is an important way of

expressing that.

As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a former member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I've long believed that in addition to needing to maintain our dominance as the greatest military power in the world, we must also maintain our dominance as the greatest diplomatic power in the world. I've always said the superpower of the world is more than just having super might, military might. It takes an awful lot more than that. And that's where you all come in--truly holding us together.

Since Gayle began serving on this commission, I've been blown away truly by the powerful personal connections she's been able to make with strangers halfway around the world. But it's bigger than that. These individuals that you talk with and fight to protect can and do grab national and international attention because of the work you do.

The release of Pastor Andrew Brunson from Turkey last year would not have happened without

the tireless work of the people in this room here today. Neither would the release of Abdul Shakoor from Pakistan, another religious prisoner of conscience, who was freed last month thanks to the work by Commissioner Johnnie Moore. Johnnie, thank you for your tireless effort there. And the whole USCIRF commission and team.

While there's plenty on which we can agree to disagree here in Washington, this gathering today should remind us all that there's much more on which we agree than what we disagree.

We're all Americans first. We're not Democrats or Republicans. If you want to belong to a tribe, belong to the American tribe. It's a tribe that will continue on.

We all agree that religious freedom is a universal human right. It's one that we take for granted. Children in school today--and when I was going to school, you had prayer in school, and it never hurt any of us. I know it's a whole different world than the one I grew up in, but a moment of silence to recognize that there is some

power greater and higher than any of us is able to lead us in times, good times and bad.

And we all agree that we have a responsibility to protect and promote that right around the world for all people of all faiths wherever they may live and whatever they may choose to believe.

I get frustrated with this place sometimes--I think you've heard me speak out many times about it--because I know we're better than this. We're not showing folks who we are. We are not the country that we have been and that we can be at times when we show our differences and we allow the tribes to divide us.

Wedge issues that come up, I think sometimes are intentional, sometimes maybe not intentional, but they do put us in a position of where we don't show the strengths of America.

We get sucked into the us versus them, what tribe you belong to. Tribalism makes it impossible to do the things we all want to do--fix our roads, health care more affordable, education,

opportunities, but most important, international religious freedoms.

I say this because your voice is an important part of the discussion around here today. This organization needs to be reauthorized, and we need to do it in a bipartisan way, all speaking from the same hymnal.

It's an opportunity to bring folks together in a bipartisan way around a bipartisan goal and which we all agree.

One recommendation I would make for the organization. We have Reverend Barry Black, who is well renowned in the Senate. On the House side, we have Father--I think it's Father Patrick Conroy. Those two people I think very helpful at times for you all to lean on a little bit and bring them into what you're doing, understanding your mission and what your purpose is.

A lot of times those of us in the House and the Senate who aren't directly involved or indirectly involved might not know the great works that you all are doing everyday and why it's so

important to be authorized, why it should not be a political football and playing games with this. This is important for all of us.

I applaud the commissioners and USCIRF staff for the outreach that they have done to date to try to accomplish that goal, and I encourage everyone to keep heart, not lose faith, but keep doing the work that needs to be done to get the bipartisan support we need to reauthorize this important commission. I'm going to do everything I can to make sure those on the Appropriations Committee, which I sit on, understand the mission of USCIRF.

I always say that you can count your blessings; you can share your blessings. Anyone of us today in this room can count our blessings. I think we have to all share them with everybody else, those who are less fortunate, and that's what my grandmother called "faith in action." She used to stop every time we saw someone when I was little, and I was walking with her all the time, and she would take me to places. We were raised

Catholic. If someone was crippled, and she saw a child who was maybe challenged, she would make us stop and say a prayer. She said by the grace of God, it could be you, Joe.

She made us always aware of our position and our ability to help. We had a responsibility to our brothers and sisters to help them along their journey also. I look around the room and see a lot of people who put their faith to work everyday--everyday. I thank you for the work you are doing and will continue to do.

So I want to say to all of you, God bless you, God bless the work that you're doing for all of us. Thank you.

[Applause.]

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much, Senator Manchin.

Next I'd like to turn it over to you.

[Applause.]

MR. McGOVERN: Well, thank you very much and good morning. And my thanks to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,

USCIRF, for the invitation to join you all this morning.

I'm sitting here and realizing that this is kind of an amazing moment here in Washington because I just listened to my very moderate friend from West Virginia, Senator Manchin, open up. In a little while, you're going to hear from my very conservative friend from North Carolina, Mr. Meadows, talk about how important this issue is. And now you're going to hear from a very liberal congressman from Massachusetts, me.

[Laughter.]

MR. McGOVERN: And we're all united in our belief that we need to uphold religious freedom all over the world. There are some things even in Washington that bring us together, and this is one of them. My father used to say you don't have to agree on everything to agree on something.

And this is something we all agree on and we all feel very passionate about. And as a practicing Catholic who has long been concerned about human rights of religious and ethnic

minorities around the world, I welcome the newest USCIRF Annual Report.

Senator Manchin mentioned this. I'm going to mention it again because it's worth us remembering this. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The First Amendment is the basis of our country's long and proud tradition of freedom of religion. In many ways, it's the First Amendment that first defined us as a nation and set out the basic rights and freedoms of which Americans are most proud.

That same tradition informed the drafting of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms that everyone the world over has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

USCIRF's work helps those of us in Congress in our efforts to promote and defend the fundamental right to believe in accordance with

one's own conscience and to express those beliefs however one sees fit.

This right is often at the heart and struggles of so many peoples who due to the vagaries of history and geography have ended up as minorities in inhospitable lands--Tibetans and Uyghurs in China, Rohingya Muslims in Burma, Ahmadis in Pakistan, Christians in Egypt and Sudan, to mention only a few examples.

Each year, USCIRF's Annual Report pulls together information on many of these struggles. It provides a snapshot of trends in the state of religious freedom around the world and identifies the countries where that freedom is most at risk.

Along with many of my congressional colleagues, I rely on the annual report and its recommendations as a starting point in thinking about what more our government can do to protect freedom of conscience and belief around the world.

I also appreciate the way USCIRF builds on its annual reports by delving more deeply into the trends and problems it identifies. For example,

the 2017 USCIRF report on the widespread misuse of blasphemy laws to penalize freedom of expression with grossly excessive punishments, up to and including the death penalty, was a truly important contribution to the debate about religious freedom.

And I would say the same about USCIRF's report on women and religious freedom, which strongly countered the mistaken view that freedom of religion is incompatible with women's rights to equality.

So these kinds of analyses are so important because they remind us of the power of freedom of religion to contribute to a life well and fully lived.

Religion should not be an instrument of repression or be used to justify hate. Rather religion should guide us toward embracing our shared humanity. So I also appreciate USCIRF's willingness to call out egregious violations of human rights as they happen, like the attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday and the mass executions last week of 37 Saudi nationals, a majority of whom

were Shia Muslims.

You know we also need to pay attention to the challenges of religious freedom here in the United States. We saw it just recently--another terrible tragedy, another attack on a synagogue in Poway, California. Antisemitism is still a problem in this country, as is Islamophobia. We see hate crimes all over this country--attacks on Christian churches. So we all have to speak up and we all have to be vigilant. This is important.

And, finally, I just want to thank USCIRF for working with us. I co-chair the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. As you know, Tom Lantos was the only Holocaust survivor who served in Congress, and we have a human rights commission named after him in his honor. But we worked together on a Prisoners of Conscience campaign where members of Congress adopt a prisoner of conscience oftentimes who are in prison because of their religion or because they want to practice their religion.

And we need to continue to be voice to

those people who are defending human rights in their countries.

So let me close again by congratulating USCIRF on the launch of the new Annual Report and by saying how much I look forward to continuing to work together on behalf of freedom of thought, conscience and religion around the world. Many thanks.

[Applause.]

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much, Representative McGovern.

Next is North Carolina Congressman Mark Meadows, chair of the House Freedom Caucus.

[Applause.]

MR. MEADOWS: Good morning. It's great to be with you. I want to just say thank you to every commissioner here, not only for their support, but for your continued work on behalf of what you've now heard a senator, a liberal congressman--there are not too many congressmen to my right. You've got the full spectrum. But it's really your report, but more importantly your advocacy each and

everyday, that makes a difference in the lives of individuals that we get to see up close and personal.

So it's critical that Congress comes behind you and supports you in a long-term way to make sure that this commission not only continues its work now but continues it for decades to come, and you can count on my support.

I see my good friend, Congressman Frank Wolf. There has been no one who has been a greater advocate for this religious freedom issue than Frank Wolf. We miss you. We thank you for your leadership.

[Applause.]

MR. MEADOWS: I want to keep my remarks very brief because many times what we take for granted in the United States other nations do not take for granted.

It is very easy for me in western North Carolina to not only worship as I please but to be able to go beyond that and exercise my faith as I am convicted to believe.

And there is a difference, and I want to make sure that we highlight the difference of those two because so many times we say it's okay to worship one way but just don't take it beyond what you do on this particular day at this particular venue.

And it is this commission that has been willing to stand up on behalf of those who do not have a voice to make sure that that message gets taken not just from the halls of Congress, but that it is a priority for Americans broadly from coast to coast, from Maine to California, from Montana to Florida, and in between, that it is important that religious liberty is the hallmark of who we are.

And no one understands that probably better than me. In the Rotunda of this very building is a portrait, and it is called "The Embarkation," and on there is an individual on the deck of a ship that has a bible that is open, and we know that story pretty well because they were coming from Holland because of religious persecution to hopefully be able to not only

worship as they pleased but exercise their faith as they pleased.

And on the deck of that ship with a bible open is a particular individual by the name of William Brewster, Elder William Brewster.

Now when he came, he had no idea that his portrait would be on the very walls in perhaps the most powerful place on the face on the globe. In fact, he was coming to a place only to exercise what he believed his God had called him to do.

Now I share that story because he didn't believe that his fortune would be there, but he also didn't believe that his 11th great-grandson would be serving in Congress because he's my 11th great-grandfather, and so to understand who we are and tell the rest of the story. How many other William Brewsters are out there in other countries willing to sacrifice it all for their faith and their religion?

This commission has come along side many of them. I've had the opportunity to work with a few of the commissioners here where we've actually

seen unbelievable things happen. And I've been able to in a very small part see the behind-the-scenes of people that are truly unchained.

I think of Meriam Ibrahim and what was happening in Sudan and knowing that Tony Perkins and I were able to work very closely together. I was a freshman member of Congress at that particular time. My wife kept elbowing me, and said, Mark, you got to do something. This is terrible. And I said, well, who am I?

And I guess the question goes out to all of you: who are you? You are one person with a passion, willing to do something perhaps for someone who cannot speak for themselves. So I want to encourage you in that because we know the rest of the story with Meriam because indeed chained to a fort in Sudan, and I got to hold her baby here in the United States of America.

There's not a better story than that. And yet it doesn't stop there. The Senator mentioned Andrew Brunson. Andrew Brunson happens to be from western North Carolina. I drive by where they're

from each and everyday, and it brings it up close and personal to those that we have the ability to serve with.

And when we see that up close and personal, we cannot believe that other countries do not enjoy the same freedoms. We assume that they serve in a free society much like us unless there is someone willing to speak up.

This commission has done this time and time again. It is critical for members of Congress to see the work that you do because with your work-what happens, it starts to highlight. We have a number of priorities each and everyday. And as the congressman from Massachusetts would say, many things that could divide us, but this brings us together.

So let this message be clear for all those who are listening today or viewing this. We are united in our resolve to make sure that religious persecution does not happen not only in America but across the globe. You will find the left and the right coming together, and with your help, God

willing, we'll make a big difference.

Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you, Congressman Meadows.

I'd like to begin with some questions about the report. First one for Commissioner Gary Bauer. The cover of your report highlights the suffering of Uyghurs and other Muslims at the hands of the Chinese.

That's right. All right. Let's go to you to give an opening statement, please, commissioner.

CHAIR DORJEE: Good morning, everyone. And I'd like to thank Senator Manchin, Representative McGovern, and Representative Meadows for your presence and support of us.

I would also like to note the presence of Congressman Frank Wolf for his leadership and work and presence here today. And also our former advisors over there.

Thank you all for joining us today. I'm Tenzin Dorjee, chair of the United States

Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF. We at USCIRF are passionate about the importance of international religious freedom, which is a foundational and fundamental human right.

This year we are issuing our 20th Annual Report, which will give you a snapshot of where religious freedom is in peril and what can be done about it.

Last year was also the 20th anniversary of the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, the legislation that created USCIRF.

For those of you who aren't familiar with us, we are an independent bipartisan U.S. government commission dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. Throughout the year, we monitor religious freedom conditions abroad, including through frequent travel.

Under our mandate in IRFA, we issue a report by May 1 each year with recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress

on how to promote religious freedom around the globe.

This year, our report covers 28 countries. Though we focus on the worst countries in the world for religious freedom, we highlight improvements in those places as well where appropriate, and we certainly saw some positive movement in some countries last year. You can see the full report on our website at www.uscirf.gov, and copies are available on the tables.

Before I describe the report further, I must say that USCIRF, we are blessed with outstanding staff, and I want to thank the entire staff for putting this wonderful report together and this event. And I would also like to thank Jamie Harvey, Amanda Greene of the Government Publishing Office's design shop, as well as our copy editor Erin Mulligan, and Emily Bohner and the translators at CETRA Language Solutions. The entire team's focus, coordination and dedication made today possible.

Please join me in giving them a round of

applause.

[Applause.]

CHAIRMAN DORJEE: The report groups countries into two categories or tiers. A country's tier status is decided by a majority vote of the commissioners.

Tier 1 is the group of countries USCIRF is recommending to the State Department for designation as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs. This is a category in IRFA for governments that engage in or tolerate--I quote-- "systematic, ongoing, egregious"--unquote-- violations of religious freedom.

Sixteen countries are on Tier 1 this year. These include the ten countries the State Department has designated as CPCs, most recently in November of last year, and the names of these countries, I'm not going to go through the list.

The State Department named Pakistan a CPC for the first time ever last year, an important and long-needed step that we welcomed.

In addition, USCIRF believes six others

merit CPC designation: the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

Tier 2 is for countries where we find that the violations meet one or two, but not all three, of the systematic, ongoing egregious test for CPC status. Twelve countries are on the list for Tier 2 in our report.

My colleagues and I will discuss some of USCIRF's key findings and recommendations on some of these countries in more detail this morning. Let me start first with China.

The cover of our report this year tells the story of the appalling abuses against Uighur Muslims in China. Last year, the government of China had been especially pernicious toward religion and religious believers--particularly Tibetan Buddhists, Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, and Muslims.

China was one of three countries that were the primary focus of USCIRF's first annual report in 2000. In that first report, USCIRF found that

Uighur Muslims faced heightened repression of their religious and other human rights, were subject to arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial executions, and were imprisoned for their religious belief, association or practice.

Now, nearly 20 years later, as a Muslim in China, particularly an ethnic Uighur Muslim, you may be forcibly sent to a concentration camp, subjected to unspeakable acts of abuse and alleged torture, and pressured to abandon your faith.

Uighur Muslims are constantly surveilled, their phones confiscated and scanned, their DNA collected, their children prohibited from attending mosque.

The Chinese government has forcibly interned between 800,000 and two million adults in detention camps and relegated some of their children to orphanages.

The U.S. government and international community must swiftly and resolutely sanction Chinese officials and agencies that have perpetrated or tolerated severe religious freedom

violations.

The United States must press the Chinese government to immediately and unconditionally set Uighur and Muslims free from internment camps and also release other prisoners of conscience.

Last year and this year also, we also continued to make religious prisoners of conscience one of our top priorities. As part of our Religious Prisoners of Conscience, or RPOC, Project, I adopted the Panchen Lama, who has been disappeared by the Chinese government since 1995 and who turned 30 years old last week, and Ms. Gulmira Imin, a Uighur Muslim woman unjustly serving a life term in prison in China.

Currently, we have 13 RPOCs in the project. We have seen the release of some RPOCs, including last year. Last year and this year, we also worked to fulfill the victims' list mandate given to us by the Frank Wolf Act. We now have a database platform and are gathering cases to populate the database.

I'd now like to turn to my colleague, Vice

Chair Kristina Arriaga, who will talk about some of our overarching recommendations, the issue of nonstate actors, and a country situation.

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you, Tenzin.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR ARRIAGA: Thank you very much.

It has been mentioned many times this morning the wonderful thing that it is to be bipartisan and to be in a group of commissioners where we passionately agree about almost everything outside of this room and outside of the commission room, but once we're in the commission room, we draft our report to the spirit of consensus building and with major like precision and attention to the issue of religious freedom.

It's really an honor to serve with my colleagues and I will keep my remarks very short so you can all have time to ask them questions.

One of the greatest moments I have had as a commissioner, and there have been many, was when I was with my colleague the first few months he was to be appointed to the commission, Tenzin Dorjee,

in Iraq, and after they issued our helmets and our flak jackets, I told him I'm a little concerned because you get to come back; I don't.

[Laughter.]

VICE CHAIR ARRIAGA: However, he assured me that our karma brought us together so we would both come whether I believed it or not, and that was a very interesting moment for the commission. We have all had similar conversations. A couple of my Baptist colleagues have tried to save me. I won't mention who.

[Laughter.]

VICE CHAIR ARRIAGA: But isn't it wonderful that we live in a country and we are in a place where we don't get arrested on our way out of here simply because we're making our statements like many other countries that we monitor.

So a few very short points. One is our report indicates there has indeed been a tremendous deterioration in many countries when it comes to religious freedom. But we don't take that lying down. We're a commission that has powerful policy

recommendations. We remind Congress, Department of State, Department of Treasury, Department of Commerce, that Congress has given us powerful tools in our legislation, and powerful tools through the Global Magnitsky Act, and through our own legislation which allows us to use targeted measures and sanctions against individuals who have violated religious freedom of many in their own country.

Second, we want to make the point that the world is changing. United States Commission on International Freedom report is not only looking at countries. It used to be when we were first established countries had boundaries, and there was containment of those boundaries. Unfortunately, terrorist organizations all over the world have expanded and have formed countries that extend boundaries.

So we also identified a number of "entities of particular concern." We have a different number than the Department of State. I'll let you read the report. I'll let you ask

State Department how we differ on those numbers.

Their definition is somewhat different, but the point is we're all united in identifying that this problem of religious freedom goes beyond the borders of many countries.

Finally, this coming July, we are going to have a second Ministerial. Last year was the first time since the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was drafted that there was a group of countries that got together to discuss at the ministerial level one issue and one issue alone, and that is religious freedom.

We are encouraged that the administration is going to hold another ministerial in July, and to further emphasize the prioritization of religious freedom by the Trump administration, we would like to encourage the administration to appoint a special adviser to the President on international religious freedom to the National Security Council. This was envisioned by the IRFA bill that created our legislation and was reaffirmed in the Frank Wolf Act, but it has not

been done by any president.

Finally, to speak briefly about religious the Prisoners of Conscience program, you will see in our appendix that many of our commissioners, all of our commissioners, have adopted a certain number of people to live their stories and illustrate the stories and to become a voice for people that do not have a voice.

I, Commissioner Moore, Commissioner [?] who was supposed to lead this year, was mentioned by Senator Manchin. We also of course have a great story of Pastor Andrew Brunson where many people were involved in his release. But unfortunately there's still people in prison--Ivan Matsitsky, a Scientologist in Russia--Dennis Christensen, a Jehovah Witness, members of the [?] in China are facing repression. And also Thich Quang Do in Vietnam. Even though he has been released, he continues to be under state surveillance.

And finally I cannot finish these remarks without mentioning my homeland--Cuba. My parents [?] Cuba to live according to their deeply held

religious conviction. The situation in Cuba has deteriorated dramatically this last year. Just last week, there were two Christian pastors whose only crime--only crime--was to want to raise their children according to their religion.

And they, both of them, were detained in prison. It seems like they will be sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison. The Christian lawyer who just came to attend the trial, just to attend it, to watch what was going on, was beaten severely, all the fingers in his right hand were broken, and he is suffering just because he wanted to see what was going on.

I would like to finish by thanking my fellow commissioners and by passing on the baton to fellow commissioner, vice chairwoman Gayle Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you, Vice Chair Arriaga.

Unfortunately, China and Pakistan and some of the countries that have been mentioned earlier are only a few of the several countries where freedom of religion or belief remained in peril

throughout 2018. Some governments suppress religious freedom under the guise of "public order" or "national security," frequently invoking either real or perceived to be real threats that they feel justify that repression.

Others brand religious and ethnic minorities as "extremists," in part, because these groups believe that they are working under a "foreign influence."

In several countries where USCIRF found deteriorating religious freedom conditions, it also found increased secularization and politicizing of religion. Religion and politics continually start to connect and interconnect, and sometimes that is intentional by those who seek to discriminate against minorities or to restrict the rights of certain religious communities.

And the very governments that perpetuate and tolerate these abuses often decry internal-- that we are restricting internal affairs. And so USCIRF has to be very careful in rightfully admonishing and separating truly deplorable

religious freedom and human rights restrictions.

In 2018, both state and nonstate actors increasingly used religion as a tool to isolate, marginalize, and punish "others" through discrimination and violence.

However, despite all these negative trends in the world today, there are some positive developments, such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Egypt and Kazakhstan. And I am told that these governments are willing to engage with international stockholders and take some actions to improve the conditions of their country.

And I tell them that even living in a bad neighborhood where they come from, they are trying to stand up for what is right even though there is still work to be done. And even in two countries that we still recommend be a country of particular concern, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, we saw continued and sustained efforts by those governments to engage on some ongoing concepts that we are working through with these countries.

Another very positive note is the release

of another of the religious political prisoner of conscience, one that I happen to have been advocating for, Mohammed Ali Taheri, a cognitive researcher and founder of a spiritual group in Iran.

He has been imprisoned for his beliefs since 2011 under various charges and sentences, including twice having been sentenced to death.

We obviously were thrilled to learn just last week that he has been released. We believe that heightening awareness of these types of imprisonments raises scrutiny and improves the chances of a release around the world.

Let me conclude by emphasizing what makes our annual report unique and of significant value to the many stakeholders in government and civil society.

USCIRF's Annual Report, and more importantly USCIRF's mandate from Congress, are different from, but certainly complementary to, the State Department and their Annual Report on International Religious Freedom.

First of all, the State Department writes on every country in the world except the United States.

USCIRF's Annual Report is focused on fewer than 30 countries, and typically those are the ones that are most problematic in religious freedom violations. So that's a very important point.

Second, USCIRF's annual reports unflinchingly describe violations of international religious freedom, our mandate, whereas the State Department must account for overall bilateral relationships in reporting. USCIRF has the independence and the objectivity to call out these violations more bluntly and articulately.

Third, USCIRF's reports, unlike the State Department, analyze U.S. policy with respect to international religious freedom--remember our focus, our mandate--and make extensive policy recommendations both to the Executive Branch of government and Congress.

Over our 20-year existence, USCIRF's recommendations, through research, personal

interaction within visits to these countries, and also here in Washington, have impacted U.S. policy and helped to improve the implementation of IRFA, particularly in ensuring that the State Department designates the worst violators as CPCs.

In addition, Congress has incorporated a number, as we heard from those who spoke this morning, a number of our recommendations to make U.S. religious freedom promotion abroad more effective under the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016.

I thank you for the opportunity to serve on this commission. I am proud to represent the United States, the one country that goes and looks and helps and tries to advocate for religious freedom violations anywhere in this world. It's an honor to be here and serve in this position, and I thank you, and I now return to our moderator, Lauren Ashburn. Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

MS. ASHBURN: We are running a little behind schedule so I will ask two questions for

commissioners today and then open it up to the audience. And now it's time for you, Mr. Bauer.

The cover of the report highlights the Uighur Muslims and their plight against the Chinese government. Religious freedom seems to be deteriorating right before our eyes in front of us in China.

The U.S. and China are on the cusp of a trade, a major trade agreement. So what should the U.S. government be doing to address these atrocities?

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Well, as has been said several times this morning, we have Tier 1 and Tier 2 countries we look at. If we were going to rate the Tier 1 countries, China would be in a category all by itself in the level of persecution. They are an equal opportunity persecutor. They go after anybody of any faith that might compete with the communist atheistic government of China for the loyalty of its citizens.

So it's deeply disturbing to see that some of the countries in our report are not countries of

great influence. China is an expanding power. It's a country getting more and more powerful by the year. To have a country with these ideas and this degree of persecution ought to be something that scares everyone.

We designated them as a Tier 1 country now for 20 years in a row, and the situation is getting worse. So we make a number of recommendations. One of them is that in all the negotiations between the United States and China, bilateral relations, particularly on the ongoing trade debate negotiations going on now, all that is very important, that religious persecution specifically, and more broadly human rights, ought to be a factor on the table in addition to tariffs and other related issues.

And we are continuing to push that idea, and many of the commissioners are working with the administration every chance we get to remind them that it's not just tariffs and jobs, as important as that is, but it's also the basic idea of the right of every man and woman, whether they're in

China, wherever they are, to seek God and worship God as they see fit.

We are also asking this year for specific targeting of individuals. We know the names of people in China that are working for the government, that are engaged in this persecution, whether it's the Muslim Uighurs or the Falun Gong or the Christians or the Tibetan Buddhists. We need to call them out by name. We need to do everything we can to shame them.

We also say, very gently, I think, that we want to work with U.S. businesses, U.S. government, U.S. government work with U.S. businesses to help them do more on this issue.

I'd like to get a little bit more specific. Trade with China was supposed to change China. It ended up that trade with China ended up changing America as more and more corporations became dependent on the goodwill of the Chinese government.

So I will personally say shame on you if you're a U.S. corporation, and you are forgetting

the first part of the description of you. You are a U.S. corporation. You are a corporation founded in a country which was built on religious liberty. How dare you make a separate peace with the Chinese government in order to advance your financial interests.

So we want to keep the pressure. We hope the U.S. government will keep the pressure on U.S. businesses so that they will stand for the values of the country that allowed them to be successful to begin with.

[Applause.]

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much, Gary Bauer.

Tony Perkins, I realize that in this report, Sri Lanka is not covered, but you issued a statement condemning the Easter bombings that killed more than 300 people and injured 500. The Sri Lankan authorities were tipped off earlier, April 9, April 11. International organizations were telling them something was going to happen.

What kinds of things should that

government and other governments just like it in chaos do to prevent these kinds of barbaric attacks?

COMMISSIONER PERKINS: Thank you, Lauren.

As you mentioned, that's not a country that we cover, but the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, as the recent attacks on the mosque in Christchurch in New Zealand, these were horrific, absolutely horrific.

And of all places, regardless of your faith, where you go to worship, you should be safe, and we saw this trend increasing across the countries that we do observe that increasingly houses of worship because they're soft targets are being targeted by terrorism.

There are a few of us commissioners that were in Egypt for the opening of the Coptic church. Just prior to that, there was a bomb tech trying to dismantle a bomb the day before at another Coptic church that was killed in trying to disarm and render safe the device.

It happened that that particular bomb tech

had been trained by the U.S. Department of State's antiterrorism assistance program, a program that I used to work with as a contractor.

We have some wonderful men and women who are serving in our government helping these foreign governments to create safe places over what has historically been vital installations--power plants, government facilities--but where we saw the glaring need was houses of worship as they have now become targets for terrorists.

And so one of our specific recommendations to the Department of State and the Department of Defense is to create and establish programs that would work with foreign governments to provide training and equipment, if necessary, to these houses of worship to secure them.

Unfortunately, it's becoming an industry here in the United States as we well know. With a law enforcement background myself, I understand the importance of working with law enforcement to work with the officials in the various houses of worship to secure those sites.

And this is a strong recommendation that we make to this administration to pursue this quickly so that people of all faiths can go to their houses of worship and do so in safety and security.

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much, Tony Perkins.

We'd like to open it up to questions. If you would raise your hand, we'll bring the microphone to you. Right here in the front row.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: Thank you for holding this. I know there's a lot of issues, but could you--I'm from Breitbart News, by the way-- could you say if you were telling the Trump administration and the State Department, what should be their top priority right now given what's going on?

MS. ASHBURN: Why don't we go to you, Kristina, or--okay.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: I think they should continue to do what they're doing, which is to bring this issue to the forefront so it continues

to be a priority for our government that when we're interacting with countries--we're fortunate in USCIRF, you know, as Kristina pointed out, we look at--our report on religious freedom, you know, laser focused, and only on religious freedom. I know the administration has to look at a lot of different topics when they're making decisions, but continue to make religious freedom at the top and to work that into all of the negotiations with countries is I think one of our strongest recommendations.

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much.

The gentleman in the back.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: [?] from Al Jazeera English. The vice chair mentioned Saudi Arabia, and certainly there's changing rhetoric when it comes to religious freedom there.

As your report makes clear, Saudi Arabia is an intense violator of religious freedom, and Congressman McGovern mentioned the execution last week of 37 people who may be Shia.

Is it time for forceful action against

Saudi Arabia finally? Commissioner Bauer was talking with regards to China about specific targeting of individuals working with U.S. businesses who seem to care more about money than religious freedom.

Is it time for action like that with Saudi Arabia or should the U.S. continue to give the Kingdom a pass?

MS. ASHBURN: Commissioner Moore.

COMMISSIONER MOORE: One of the unique parts of this report that you have in your hands, which hasn't been mentioned here, is that the IRFA legislation makes it explicitly clear that individual commissioners are to have the opportunity to express individual points of view on every issue and on every country.

And, in fact, in these reports that you have, there are several places at the end of the reports we have individual comments on many, many countries. I think I contributed five or six. There are several others here.

The reason why that exists is because

there's a majority opinion on certain issues, but there also is an expertise on this panel of commissioners that looks at the nuance of all the issues.

And so I just have to say here before the commission released a press statement last week that was very, very clear on the most recent incident, but it is also true in Saudi Arabia that there are positive developments that are taking place on a parallel track.

And what this commission is focused on is exploring both/and at the same time, not either/or. You know in our visit to the Kingdom this year, you know, when you sit down and you talk about the efforts to reform the Kingdom, everyone talks very openly about key performance indicators, the KPIs.

So on the basis of the KPIs, unquestionably, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the most egregious offenders of religious liberty. That's why it's a CPC. And so we as the USCIRF commission, with regard to this country or any country in the world, our eyes are going to

roam the world, and when people suffer in darkness, we're going to raise our points of view, and we're going to condemn them because that's what we do.

I would say also we're going to engage, you know, with the positive effects that are happening in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For the first time ever, this commission was allowed to meet with the religious police. That had never happened before. The Minister of Islamic Affairs was clear to us in a meeting that Saudi Arabia is not a kingdom anymore where there can only be one, one religion. It's a kingdom where there are lots of different things happening, some things that are the worst in the world.

And on the same token, there's a glimmer of light, and we're trying to do what we can to shimmy open that door. And you're going to see that level of nuance in this report as you go throughout. It's a report that talks about the terrible, terrible suffering of religious minorities in certain parts of Egypt, but it also acknowledges that the Grand Imam of al-Azhar has

now settled that the Bahai and other religious communities, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, deserve the right to have their own places of worship in the country.

It's a report that acknowledges that the Kingdom of Bahrain still has problems when it comes to the Shiite minority country. It's also a kingdom that has engaged with members of Congress and this Commission at an incredibly, incredibly constructive level.

One of the reasons why some of those actions have taken place is because of the recommendation. So I say all this to say this is not a political commission. This is a commission that calls a spade a spade, and we give credit where credit is due at the same time, and we will not be pulled into political disagreements as we do so.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: I wanted to just add real quick, to answer that, is the commission did put out a statement a few days ago condemning the execution of the Shia Muslims and asking the

government to lift the waiver that is giving Saudi Arabia a pass for these egregious issues.

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you, commissioner.

We're going to take one more question.

The gentleman in the front.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: I'm Sufi Laghari with the Sindhi Foundation. I'm sure you must know that in Pakistan, the Sindh province, more than 1,000 girls, girls, ten to 30 years, forced [?], forced marriages, not only the Sindhi Hindu girls, but Shia, Hazara, and even Sufis are taken by Islamic extremists. And in these countries, Pakistan is the only country who received aid from the United States of America.

I think this report does not give enough accountability to the Pakistani [?]-I want to hear from you what action we have to take against Pakistan to especially those girls, and recently one guy stalked me on YouTube. I really highly recommend that he must be labeled as a terrorist. The Hindu girls--it's not I'm talking--Pakistan human rights commission is talking. Even in your

own report.

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much.

That would be you, Commissioner Moore or Bhargava.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you for your question.

So I think a number of the countries report, including Pakistan, which is a CPC country, [?] raised and many others. One of the things that we are really trying to focus on is the ways in which women and children have been a focal point of violence and persecution on the basis of religious freedom and otherwise.

And so you will see throughout these reports, stemming from our independent report on women, we really do try to highlight the ways in which we see girls, the ways in which we see women, being a focal point of violence, and how do we actually find and figure out that not only is highlighted and explored and investigated, but also that the countries are held to account.

So I think your question is something that

we as commissioners collectively are very concerned about and something that we have noted in the reports throughout the world.

MS. ASHBURN: Thank you so much.

We've reached the end of our time today. Thank you all for coming and thank you to the USCIRF commissioners and staff for a great report.

[Applause.]

MS. ASHBURN: USCIRF has also asked me to thank the following members of the media for your interest in covering this, the NGOs who participated in the IRF roundtable for your commitment to the international religious freedom, and congressional staff as well.

If you have follow-up questions for commissioners, feel free to contact the staff and anyone else with follow-up questions.

[Whereupon, at 11:02 a.m., the USCIRF event was concluded.]