



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
2021 Annual Report Virtual Launch Event

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava, USCIRF Vice Chair:

Thank you, Vice Chair Perkins.

While the annual report focuses primarily on the countries that have been the worst violators of religious freedom, we also highlight non-state actors who have engaged in severe, egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom; religious prisoners of conscience; and key religious freedom trends around the world, which often take root or are borne out in countries that do not meet the statutory criteria for designation as a country of particular concern or to be placed on the Special Watch List.

First, religious persecution and violence is being perpetrated by more than just state actors. The annual report also covers “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs. To qualify for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must commit “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” violations, and must also exercise significant

political power and territorial control; be outside the control of a sovereign government; and employ violence in pursuit of its objectives.

This year, USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate as EPCs the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS; the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, or ISGS; Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin or JNIM; and the Taliban. Although we remain concerned by particularly severe religious freedom violations by other groups, we concluded that they did not meet the statutory requirement of significant political power and territorial control in 2020.

In 2020, USCIRF continued to prioritize our Religious Prisoner of Conscience (RPOC) Project, which highlights individuals imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, and the advocacy of USCIRF Commissioners working for their release. Religious prisoners of conscience were directly and deeply impacted by the crosswinds of COVID, which both exacerbated and highlighted the deplorable conditions of the prisons where far too many RPOCs are being held. We remain deeply concerned about the health and safety of RPOCs as COVID continues to ravage prisons globally. At the same time, we were heartened by efforts in several countries to reduce prison populations for health reasons, leading to religious prisoners of conscience being released or placed under house arrest.

I am pleased to report that during the year, three individuals adopted through our RPOC Project were released: Pastor A Dao from Vietnam, Hamid bin Haydara from Yemen and Mohammad Ali Taheri from Iran. USCIRF has been steadily building and expanding our Freedom of Religion or Belief, or FoRB, Victim's List.

The Victim's List now contains more than 1,000 profiles of victims of religious persecution, to help ensure they receive the public attention and focus their cases deserve.

Chair Manchin and Vice Chair Perkins spoke to a few of the key trends around religious freedom globally— from the long arm of China to the proliferation of hate through technology and social media. Of course, the most prominent global story of 2020 was the COVID pandemic. Governments took sweeping action to protect individuals and communities, including imposing restrictions that impacted the practice of one's religion and faith. Many of those restrictions fall under, and are justified as, public health exceptions defined in international law. Other restrictions – such as cutting off internet and cell service – had a draconian and dire impact on already vulnerable religious communities – including the millions internally displaced or in refugee camps – who faced even greater isolation and deprivation and had little if no safety net or protection. Despite the limitations on travel and gathering information, our 2021 Annual Report documented the deepening of religious divides and intensified religious persecution and violence experienced during COVID.

Lastly, the Biden administration has committed to championing human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and centering the safety and dignity of religious communities as foreign policy priorities. We've made specific recommendations in every chapter of the annual report, to the Biden administration and to Congress to effectuate that commitment. Those recommendations include, for example, urging the administration to definitively and publicly conclude that the atrocities committed – and ongoing – against the Rohingya people by the Burmese military constitute genocide and acting accordingly as the State

Department recently determined regarding China's genocide against Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims.

In February, USCIRF held a hearing on "Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution" and examined ways in which the U.S. government could better support refugees and asylum seekers. Consistent with USCIRF recommendations, the Biden administration announced in February its intent to increase the annual ceiling for refugees resettled to the United States from abroad for the current and upcoming fiscal years. It also indicated that it was considering creating several new priority categories for access to the resettlement program, including for certain severely persecuted religious groups. While President Biden signed an emergency declaration, the administration did not yet raise the ceiling for this fiscal year; the administration indicated that it would increase the refugee ceiling by May 15th. USCIRF urges the President to raise the refugee ceiling as soon as possible and prioritize survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution. We also welcome President Biden's executive order, also signed in February, initiating a review of the Expedited Removal process, the implementation of which USCIRF has monitored under IRFA and has long found to inadequately protect asylum seekers.

It has become abundantly clear in recent years how vital IRF leadership positions are to the advancement of international religious freedom as an essential human right and a vital part of our national security and foreign policy. We urge the Biden administration to move promptly by nominating and appointing well-qualified individuals to key IRF vacancies, and that the Senate quickly confirm those requiring confirmation. Those vacancies include the positions of

ambassador-at-large for IRF, special adviser for IRF on the National Security Council staff, special coordinator for Tibetan issues, and special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism. It is also important that the administration provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to fulfill their mandates.

Thank you, and we look forward to answering your questions. I'll now turn the floor back over to Vice Chair Perkins to moderate the question-and-answer session.