



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

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Chair:

Good day, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Gayle Manchin, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF. We at USCIRF are committed advocates for international religious freedom, which is a foundational and fundamental human right. Today, we are releasing our 22nd Annual Report, which will offer you a snapshot of where religious freedom is improving or in peril and what the U.S. government can do to encourage positive change.

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

Under our mandate in the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, we issue

a report by May 1 each year with recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress.

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

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

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

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

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

[Senator Coons' & Senator Tillis' videos play back-to-back]

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

The Annual Report's main focus is on two groups of countries: those that USCIRF recommends the State Department designate as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs; and those that USCIRF recommends the State Department place on its Special Watch List, or SWL.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations of religious freedom. The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not all three, of the systematic, ongoing, egregious test for CPC status.

This year, our report covers 26 countries. Based on 2020 conditions, we recommend 14 of these countries for CPC status. This includes the 10 countries the State Department has designated as CPCs, most recently in December 2020: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In addition, USCIRF believes that the State

Department should designate four other countries as CPCs: India, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

We recommend that the State Department maintain on the Special Watch List two countries—Cuba and Nicaragua—and add 10 countries to that list: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

My fellow Commissioners and I will discuss a few of USCIRF's key findings and recommendations on some of these countries in more detail. Though the Annual Report focuses on the worst countries in the world for religious freedom, we also highlight improvements, where appropriate; and we certainly saw some positive movement in some countries in 2020.

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

The cover of our report this year depicts the global reach of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not only impacted the global economy, travel, and other sectors, but also international religious freedom. Across the world, public health measures to control the virus' spread restricted in-person gatherings, including religious gatherings. In many cases—but certainly not all—these measures complied with international human rights standards protecting freedom of religion

or belief. Such measures must be necessary to protect the legitimate state interest of preventing disease and proportionate to meeting that aim, must not be discriminatory, and must be lifted once the crisis has passed. Vice Chair Bhargava will discuss further implications of the pandemic for international religious freedom shortly.

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

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