

USCIRF Annual Report Rollout Events
April 25, 2022, 2:00-3:00 PM ET (General Public—Virtual)

Opening Remarks

VICE CHAIR TURKEL:

Thank you, Chair Maenza.

As in prior years, we can note some of USCIRF’s key recommendations that the U.S. government implemented over the last year.

First, since taking office in January 2021, the Biden administration has continued many of the international religious freedom (IRF)-related initiatives from the previous administration, including implementation of the executive order on Advancing International Religious Freedom, signed by then President Donald J. 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. IRF-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 the ambassador at large for IRF. 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, and the Senate confirmed her appointment just a few weeks ago on March 30.

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 abuses 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 Muslims in Xinjiang—were coordinated with other countries imposing sanctions against the same abusers, as USCIRF had recommended.

During 2021, the U.S. 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 continuing commitment to IRF-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 IRF. And just this month, Congress passed, and President Biden signed, a permanent reauthorization of the Global Magnitsky Act's targeted sanctions authority, which USCIRF also had recommended.

While USCIRF is pleased to see evidence of the ongoing commitment to and fulfilment of IRFA by successive administrations and Congress, it is not enough for us simply to look back. We also continue to refine and update our new and ongoing recommendations to the U.S. government.

Accordingly, among other recommendations, in this year's Annual Report we recommend that the Administration promptly appoint a well-qualified individual as a special adviser for IRF on the National Security Council (NSC) staff and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to fulfill their mandate.

Furthermore, we recommend the administration to 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 in this year's Annual Report, we urge it to hold oversight hearings on U.S. IRF policy.

We recommend that individual members of Congress advocate for IRF by sponsoring religious prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) 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 Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and our Religious Prisoners of Conscience, or RPOC, Project. During the year, Commissioners advocated for prisoners and other victims from a range of faiths or beliefs in a variety of countries. Some have suffered for many years, such as the Panchen Lama, disappeared by the Chinese government since 1995, who today is celebrating his 34th birthday. In welcome news, two such prisoners, Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia and Reda Abdel Rahman in Egypt, were released in early 2022. Regrettably, longtime RPOC Patriarch Abune Antonios died in February while under house arrest in Eritrea at the age of 94.

Thank you, and we look forward to answering your questions.

I'll now turn the virtual floor back over to Chair Maenza to moderate the question-and-answer session.