

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2026 ANNUAL REPORT:
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Wednesday, March 4, 2026

3:30 p.m. ET

Capitol Hill
Longworth House Office Building
Room 1539
Washington, D.C.

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Vicky Hartzler, Chair
Asif Mahmood, Vice Chair
Mohamed Elsanousi
Maureen Ferguson
Rachel Laser
Stephen Schneck

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR HARTZLER: Good afternoon, everyone. We're so glad that you're here for our release of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2026 Annual Report.

I'm Vicky Hartzler, currently serving as chair of the Commission. Before we have our main takeaways and our recommendations from this year's Annual Report, I'd like to first thank Speaker Mike Johnson and Representative Jim McGovern for assisting USCIRF in securing today's venue.

Representative McGovern may be coming in and offering some remarks. I believe he is sending some remarks if he can't come in person.

We also have remarks from Representative Jamie Raskin that's been sent in, and we may have other members of Congress who may stop by so if that happens, whoever is speaking, one of the commissioners, after they're done, then we will certainly turn the floor over to the members of Congress.

But additionally before we get into the

recommendations and our findings, I'd like to take a moment to say that we are holding a particular place in our hearts this afternoon for the religious minorities throughout the world, and, in particular, in Iran.

Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Sufis, Sunnis, Yamanis, and Yarsanis are among the many groups who have suffered under the Iranian regime.

This coming Sunday is also the 47th anniversary of the 1979 mass protests in Iran against mandatory hijab laws, which continue to systematically violate freedom of religion or belief for Iranian women and girls today.

Today, religious freedom advocates in Iran continue these religious freedom protests at grave personal risks.

Countless Iranians, lawyers, journalists, doctors, and everyday people have faced brutal repression for speaking in support of religious freedom.

Whatever the outcome of the current

conflict, USCIRF will continue to advocate for freedom of religion or belief in Iran.

Indeed, advocating for those suffering religious persecution is why USCIRF exists. As an independent, bipartisan U.S. legislative branch agency created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, IRFA, USCIRF's mandate is to monitor religious freedom conditions abroad and make recommendations to the U.S. government on how to promote international religious freedom, or IRF, through U.S. foreign policy.

Under IRFA, USCIRF is required to issue a report by May 1 of each year, which we are doing today, which I would note is March 3. So, well in advance of that deadline. We are a dedicated, hardworking group.

The report provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in select countries and highlights important global trends relating to religious freedom during the 2025 calendar year.

It also outlines our recommendations to the U.S. President, Secretary of State and Congress

on what the federal government can and should do to advance IRF by highlighting violations, promoting accountability and encouraging meaningful progress and improvement.

Key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter represent information that USCIRF gained through hearings, fact-finding trips, independent research, and meetings with government officials, non-government organizations, independent human rights advocates, and religious communities.

I'd like to thank my fellow commissioners for their mutual dedication to advancing the freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB, and for carrying out that dedication in a collegial and bipartisan manner while keeping first and foremost on our collective minds those people and communities around the world who suffer under the burden of religious persecution.

I would also like to extend my appreciation on behalf of all of the commissioners to the professional staff, and they're sitting here

on the front two rows here, for their dedicated, tireless efforts to carry on USCIRF's work.

This Annual Report is the result of their team effort along with the vital contributions from our commissioners, the copy editor, Erin Mulligan, and from the Government Publishing Office, in particular our report designer Jamie Harvey, and our report production manager Abe Sussan.

So, thank you to all, and I personally, and I know our commissioners, would like to give our staff a huge round of applause. Thank you, guys.

[Applause.]

CHAIR HARTZLER: These guys are amazing.

Also, I'm pleased to share—although I'm pleased to share with you our new report, which hopefully you've gotten a copy of—there are copies in the back of the room—this year's cover highlights a truly sober and somber context—Nigeria—whose people continue to face religious freedom violations and suffer a deeply tragic and ongoing crisis of violence during this past year.

Non-state actors, such as the non-state militants espousing a violent interpretation of Islam, as well as bandits seeking ransom for the most vulnerable communities, have often targeted and killed Christian churchgoers, school children, farmers, and many others.

USCIRF also recognizes, and this year's cover reiterates, that these same violent actors have also killed and displaced many thousands of Muslims as well.

These two largest religious communities continue to suffer along with practitioners of traditional African religions and others, and the Nigerian government has for far too long been negligent in seriously and directly tackling the violence and its complex underlying factors.

We welcome you to take this hard copy of the report, or you can download it from our website, which is uscirf.gov.

USCIRF's Annual Report focuses on two groups of countries: those we recommend that the State Department designate as Countries of

Particular Concern, or CPCs for short, and those we recommend to the State Department to place on its Special Watch List, or SWL.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate—so sometimes they do it themselves; sometimes they just tolerate other people—doing systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Those are the three parameters that we looked at.

The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not three, of those conditions: systematic, ongoing and egregious.

Based on 2025 conditions, we recommend 18 countries for CPC designation in 2025. They include Nigeria, which President Trump designated as such last year, along with 12 that the State Department last designated as CPCs in December of '23.

Those are Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

We also recommend that the State

Department designate five other countries as CPCs, which they have not done before, but we're recommending these five be added: Afghanistan, India, Libya, Syria, and Vietnam.

For Special Watch List countries, we recommend that the State Department maintain two that it last named in December of '23: Algeria and Azerbaijan.

But we also recommend adding nine countries to that list. They are: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Qatar, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

This year, we no longer recommended including Sri Lanka in the Special Watch List due to some improvements in 2025, such as the government no longer enforcing laws on a religious basis and while also moving to amend or repeal others—just what we would like other countries to do.

However, we are recommending adding Qatar to the Special Watch List for the first time due to worsening systematic and ongoing religious freedom

violations that included a concerning state crackdown on the Baha'i community.

Finally, USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate the following six non-state actors as Entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs: al-Shabaab; Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad, or JAS, formerly known as Boko Haram—why couldn't they have kept that name? I'm just saying. Anyway, the Houthis; the Islamic State-Sahel Province, or ISSP; Islamic State in West Africa Province, or ISWAP, also referred to as ISIS-West Africa; and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, or JNIM, for short.

And for the first time, we recommend the designation as an EPC of the Rapid Support Forces, or RSF, in Sudan.

So, now I'd like to give the floor to USCIRF Vice Chair Asif Mahmood, who will highlight some of the major findings regarding religious freedom conditions abroad throughout 2025.

Dr. Mahmood.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Good afternoon, and thank you so much for getting us started, Chair Hartzler.

As is generally the case, many of USCIRF's CPC and SWL recommendations differ from the State Department's actual designations.

Per USCIRF's mandate under IRFA, our recommendations, as well as our professional staff's extensive research and analysis, are independent.

Our information comes from U.S. government's entities, open-source media, civil society organizations, and religious community representatives from around the world.

USCIRF delegations also travel abroad to observe and assess religious freedom conditions. In 2025, USCIRF delegations visited Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

As a result of these extensive and independent research, USCIRF continues to highlight the systematic, ongoing and egregious violations that governments committed or tolerated throughout

2025.

And religious freedom conditions in those contexts are indeed troubling. In addition to Nigeria's ongoing crisis of religious violence, as Chair Hartzler described, the world's worst violators persisted in their disdain of freedom of religion or belief.

The Chinese Communist Party deepened its crackdown on all religious activities that dared to operate outside its tight-fisted control, arresting dozens of Protestant Christian house church pastors and members, while the Buddhist Nationalist military junta in Burma continued to single out other religious communities as targets of its most violent atrocities: Rohingya Muslims, Chin Christians, and many other alike.

Meanwhile, India continued to deepen its religious nationalist project to marginalize non-Hindus across the country, expelling hundreds of Bengali-speaking Muslims despite their Indian citizenship, and turning a blind eye to mob violence against Christians, Muslims, and others.

In neighboring Pakistan, the government continued to enforce its blasphemy law and accompanying death penalty to punish those deemed to violate or insult Islam.

Even as mob and vigilante violence continued to target and spread fear among religious minorities, including Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

And in Nicaragua, the government sustained its total crackdown on religious freedom by continuing to arbitrarily arrest and imprison religious leaders and adherents.

The regime also adopted constitutional changes that further empowered it to prosecute religious groups, including through forced denationalization.

While some governments in the Middle East and North Africa, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, continue to impose harsh religious restrictions based on their repressive interpretations of Islamic law, USCIRF this year brings additional attention to two countries where worsening

conditions in 2025 merited designation as CPCs: Syria and Libya.

In Syria, the tremendous hope that followed the fall of brutal Assad regime in late 2024 quickly faded for religious minority communities.

Massacres of Alawis in the coastal area and of Druze in Suweida, as well as devastating church bombing in Damascus, received at best tepid responses and little to no investigation from the transitional authorities, demonstrating a significant gap between the authorities' rhetoric and behavior.

In Libya, the internationally recognized government in Tripoli supported the prosecution of religious converts and enforcement of stifling blasphemy laws, while extending significant leeway to its secret police, the Internal Security Agency, to monitor and detain individuals its agents view as engaging in religious dissent.

These countries represent just a sample of the religious freedom violations that persisted

across the world's 18 worst offenders of international standards of freedom of religion or belief, not to mention the additional 11 countries that USCIRF recommends for the SWL, where IRF violations represent persistent or emerging concerns.

I would also point our audience to the Other Global Developments chapter of the report, which addresses countries, global and regional trends, and areas of positive change that fall outside the purview of country-specific chapters.

This year, this section considers the widespread rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim bias.

For example, USCIRF has followed with concern a series of attacks on Jews and Muslims in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Although the governments appear to have taken these incidents seriously, their perpetration demonstrates an alarming rise in societal intolerance toward these communities.

Additionally, the section covers freedom

of religion and belief restrictions in areas of conflict or political upheaval, the weaponization of legal frameworks to restrict international religious freedom, the implications of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies for freedom of religion or belief, the impact of global funding cuts on efforts to address religious freedom, and other issues.

Lastly, we are concerned that the recent conflict may exacerbate anti-Muslim bias and antisemitism worldwide. Such hostilities could also further inflame divisions between the major Muslim sects, Shia and Sunnis.

The challenge before us is immense, and we must remain steadfast and united in defending freedom of religion or belief for all.

I turn now to my colleague, Commissioner Stephen Schneck, to discuss the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA in 2025.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Vice

Chair Mahmood.

Good afternoon, everybody.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Representative Sherman has just arrived. You timed this perfectly. Commissioner Schneck was just going to start. We appreciate your coming—Representative Brad Sherman.

He's such a champion for religious freedom and thank you for coming today and sharing a few words with us.

MR. SHERMAN: Well, thank you. And I want to thank my friend Asif Mahmood for getting me involved with this organization.

I've been on the Foreign Affairs Committee for 30 years. I know I look so young you wouldn't know.

[Laughter.]

MR. SHERMAN: And, Vicky, thank you for your work here.

There is nothing more important to American values than freedom of religion. It is in the First Amendment for a reason, and we need a foreign policy that reflects our values as a

nation, and this Commission shining a light on oppressed religious groups around the world has done a lot to elevate our discourse on foreign policy.

I congratulate the Commission on bringing this report to us. It will get a lot of serious discussion.

This, of course, goes back in our history to the very beginning of our country, and my district is a composite of more religions than are usually taught at the finest theology schools, and whether it is the Armenian Church that is facing some degree of attack in Yerevan, whether it is Assyrian Druze and Alawites, whether it is various Muslim sects in Pakistan, or the Hindu or Christian minorities there, it is good that this Commission is shining a light.

And I want to thank you for your work. I realize it is uncompensated, and it is much appreciated by our country.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

CHAIR HARTZLER: Make sure you get a copy of the report.

MR. SHERMAN: Of course. I've already got one.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you.

MR. SHERMAN: Appreciate it.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you so much, Congressman. Really appreciate your support.

And now we'll introduce Commissioner Schneck again.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Well, good afternoon again.

A key part of USCIRF's mandate includes assessing the extent to which the U.S. government, that is both Congress and the administration, has maintained international religious freedom as an integral component of U.S. foreign policy by adhering to the requirements of the IRF Act, and, as is evident, 2025 saw significant advances for the cause of international religious freedom by our government, albeit with some important deficiencies.

President Trump explicitly raised religious freedom during his remarks at the United Nations General Assembly in September, calling for the global protection of religious liberty.

The following month, he also took the crucial step of designating Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern, which USCIRF has recommended for each of the previous 16 years, and the president continued to raise concerns regarding freedom of religion or belief in that country.

Vice President Vance, as well, voiced the administration's support for freedom of religion or belief in his remarks at the IRF Summit in February 2025 by pledging that the United States would recognize, and I quote, "in our foreign policy the difference between regimes that respect religious freedom and those that do not"—unquote.

The administration also took additional practical steps toward holding IRF violators accountable.

For example, the State Department established two new IRF related visa-restriction

policies, one targeting religious freedom violators in Nigeria and other countries, and another targeting individuals involved in the forced return of Uyghur Muslims to China despite the atrocities that continued to await them there.

In April, the president nominated former Congressman Mark Walker as the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and appointed Yehuda Kaploun as Special Envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism.

While the Senate confirmed Kaploun in December, Walker's nomination expired at the end of 2025 without confirmation, requiring the appointment of a new candidate, although President Trump subsequently appointed him as Principal Advisor for Global Religious Freedom at the State Department in January.

And it must be acknowledged that 2025 saw some areas in which the administration's approach to international religious freedom fell short, such as the protection of those fleeing from some of the world's most dire environments for religious

persecution.

The administration suspended the U.S. Refugee Administration Program in January, halting all refugee resettlement, and a new presidential determination in October left little room to resettle refugees fleeing religious persecution.

Among other repercussions, this policy effectively halted implementation of the bipartisan Lautenberg-Specter Amendment, which has long stood as a vital means of saving the lives of religious minorities fleeing persecution in Iran, such as Jews, Christians, Baha'is, Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians.

Also, the wider administration cuts to and review of foreign assistance in the year led the State Department to terminate or end around 25 existing IRF-specific programs, leaving only a handful in place, and its Office of International Religious Freedom was unable to fund any new IRF-specific programs in the fiscal year 2025.

And very importantly, we are also still awaiting the release of the State Department's 2024

IRF Report, the report from last year, in other words.

And new CPC, SWL and EPC designations are awaited as well, beyond that of Nigeria.

On the congressional side, as my colleague noted, the United States Congress was particularly active on IRF-related matters during 2025. Members held hearings on religious freedom conditions in countries such as Burma and Sudan, as well as joint hearings in December through the House Appropriations and Foreign Affairs Committee that focused on religious persecution in Nigeria.

Members of the House and Senate provided significant, substantive remarks for several of USCIRF's hearings, as well, on country specific and regional IRF challenges, just as we gratefully see so many—well, we just saw Congressman Sherman, for example, appearing before us at this event.

Congressional delegations too raise these issues in challenging contexts, including visits to Nigeria.

Finally, both the House and Senate

introduced bills and resolutions that raised IRF issues at both the global and country-specific levels.

These important legislations are too numerous to recount here, but they include items such as the Stop Funding Religiously Oppressive Regimes Act of 2025, which seeks to restrict funding for countries that enforce blasphemy and conversion laws or ban inter-faith marriage.

As well, the Artemis Act of 2025, which would exempt from expedited removal refugees fleeing CPC or SWL countries.

And let me also highlight House Resolution 738, and I quote, "Expressing concern regarding severe restrictions on religious freedom abroad," unquote, which specifically called out IRF violations in 12 countries that USCIRF had recommended last year for SWL.

It's very gratifying to see such critical work by Congress on behalf of freedom of religion or belief around the world.

Next, I would like to hand the floor over,

though, to my colleague, Commissioner Rachel Laser, who will highlight some of USCIRF's key recommendations to the administration of President Donald Trump in the year ahead.

Commissioner Laser.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER LASER: Thank you so much, Commissioner Schneck and fellow commissioners.

So, as Steve just said, this afternoon, I'd like to delineate some of our key policy recommendations to advance FoRB, freedom of religion and belief, and I want to note that our reporting is closely adhering to international standards as established in agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

First, though, I'd like to highlight that the Trump administration in its first year followed the previous Biden administration in failing to make new CPC, SWL, and EPC designations with a notable exception of Nigeria.

We're now well over two years since the last designations were made in late 2023, and they're expired.

Among our highest priority recommendations then is that the current administration would take the long overdue step of making these new designations and to do so according to USCIRF's independent assessment of 2025 conditions abroad.

And I'll just stress the independent part because it gives our Commission power to make pronouncements and findings that some other parts of the administration don't have.

Additionally, as we have done for many years, USCIRF strongly recommends that the administration use the opportunity of these new designations to avoid issuing "national interest waivers" that have long allowed several CPC countries to escape accountability for their particularly severe IRF violations.

First and foremost, USCIRF again recommends that the administration move quickly to set in place key appointments to lead U.S. efforts

to advance FoRB throughout the world.

Commissioner Schneck just referred to some of them. They include, number one, renominating an ambassador at large for international religious freedom, which is part of IRFA, the law, as well as appointing USCIRF commissioners—we have holes right now in our Commission—a special advisor to the president on IRF on the National Security Council staff—that position is also missing—and a special envoy for North Korean human rights issues.

It's also important that the administration provide sufficient resources to the State Department, NSC, and other agencies to carry out their crucial work, and that it prioritizes IRF in the planning and implementation of U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance programs.

These programs represent one of the most important ways to effect real and positive change, including in countries that the administration designates as CPCs.

In addition, USCIRF recommends that the administration weave efforts throughout its foreign

policy to hold IRF violators to account.

So, what are we talking about? There are many ways to accomplish this goal. The administration can link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to religious freedom improvements in CPCs and SWL countries.

It can make a point to explicitly advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners in its engagements with those countries. We were just meeting with the sister of one this morning.

And it can broadly implement the State Department's policy to apply visa restrictions to foreign government officials who have engaged in violations of religious freedom, including extending such restrictions to their immediate family members. How about that?

Despite their egregious behavior, many such officials still take vacations or send their children to study in the United States, and we should not continue to extend them those privileges as they persist in repressing the fundamental

religious freedom of people in their home countries.

Finally, the administration must reembrace the United States longstanding and bipartisan commitment to protecting individuals fleeing religious persecution.

That commitment can take many forms, such as increasing the annual admission ceiling of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to provide sufficient slots for those at risk, including, may I mention, Iranian religious minorities registered for the Lautenberg-Specter program and even more so now when we should be helping them get out.

It can also mean resuming the resettlement of refugees fleeing religious persecution or reestablishing full asylum access for such individuals, especially to mitigate the risks of their refoulement to repression, imprisonment, torture, or worse in their home countries.

In other words, there is much that the administration can and should do to demonstrate its commitment to U.S. leadership on behalf of IRF, and

it's one of those rare places where it has bipartisan support.

I now turn to my colleague, Commissioner Maureen Ferguson, to discuss some of our recommendations to Congress for steps it too can take to advance FoRB.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: Thank you, Commissioner Laser.

So, I'm going to focus on congressional action over the past year and our recommendations to the U.S. Congress for the coming year, expanding on some of the points that Commissioner Schneck has just made.

But, first, I see so many familiar faces out here, and I just want to say thank you to you for all of the advocacy that you do. We really rely on so many of you out there for our research because you have so many contacts on the ground. So I just want to reiterate our thanks to you for working with us throughout the year and also for being here today.

So, in 2025, both the Senate and the House placed a high value on international religious freedom.

As mentioned earlier, members of Congress introduced over 50 pieces of legislation in the last year that advanced the cause of religious freedom, defending the rights of individuals and communities, persecuted simply for what they believe.

These legislative initiatives send a clear and unmistakable message that freedom of religion is not a peripheral concern of American foreign policy but rather it ought to be an integral part of U.S. foreign policy.

To highlight just a few examples—we could be here a long time giving examples—but both the House and Senate introduced the Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act last fall, followed by the preparation of a report to the White House from the House Appropriations and Foreign Affairs committees outlining concrete actions to counter growing extremist violence in Nigeria.

In November, the Senate passed a bipartisan resolution condemning the Chinese Communist Party's systematic persecution of religious minorities.

That resolution specifically highlighted the detention of Pastor Ezra Jin and leaders of the Zion Church.

It also reinforced congressional concern over the broader repression facing Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Catholics, and other Protestant house church members across China.

In December, both House and Senate introduced resolutions that again called out Iran's state-sponsored persecution of the Baha'i community, among others.

Congress also drew attention to the moral and strategic importance of promoting religious freedom internationally through 11 different congressional hearings, and over 33 members of Congress advocated for religious prisoners through the Defending Freedoms Project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

We greatly appreciate these members of Congress who have championed these efforts. Their bipartisan cooperation reflects the best of our democratic tradition and the recognition that religious freedom transcends party lines.

Whether through floor speeches, hearings, or delegation travel, they've shown that defending this right is a priority of our foreign policy.

Now looking ahead to 2026, we'd like to urge Congress to build on that momentum by implementing some of USCIRF's recommendations.

We hope Congress will continue introducing, advancing, and passing legislation that strengthens policy in this area by, first, reauthorizing this Commission; by providing humanitarian assistance that prioritizes the persecuted and the needs of many men, women and children for whom religious persecution has forced them from their homes, including in refugee and internally displaced persons camps, in Bangladesh, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, Syria, and elsewhere.

A commitment from the United States not

only demonstrates the powerful influence of our government, but it also provides a lifeline to those facing persecution merely because of their beliefs and offers hope to those who may feel that the rest of the world has forgotten them.

Congress also has an essential role to play in promoting accountability. Religious freedom violations frequently persist in Countries of Particular Concern because too often perpetrators face no consequences.

Members of Congress should use delegation visits to explicitly and boldly raise religious freedom concerns directly with foreign governments as they travel on codels, and meet not only with officials but also with religious leaders and civil society because that sends a powerful message of solidarity.

Congress should also condition foreign aid and many other forms of assistance to governments that fail to make meaningful improvements on freedom of religion. American taxpayer dollars should never inadvertently enable repression.

Along those lines, we urge Congress to address the corrosive influence of foreign governments that seek to sanitize their records through lobbying efforts in Washington, as we've seen recently with the \$9 million lobbying campaign from Nigeria.

No individual should receive compensation for lobbying on behalf of governments designated as the world's worst religious freedom violators, and we again recommend that Congress act to prohibit any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of CPC governments.

These governments are responsible for perpetrating religious repression around the world, from China's unjust detention of Jimmy Lai, recently sentenced to 20 years in prison, to Nigeria's failure to rescue Leah Sharibu and other girls like her, and to Father Ervin Lopez, a priest who has remained in detention for years in Nicaragua as part of its crackdown on the Catholic Church.

We urge congressional members to advocate

on behalf of religious prisoners like these and others through USCIRF's Frank Wolf Victims List, which Commissioner Elsanousi is about to highlight here.

These recommendations are just a sample, of course, and there are many more ways for congressional members to engage in these issues.

And I'll hand the floor to Commissioner Elsanousi.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER ELSANOUSI: Well, thank you so much, and good afternoon to everyone here.

I just want to thank you, Commissioner, for concern here, and also thank you especially for thanking our partners as well, those who are in this room and those who are watching us live. So, thank you so much for being here.

We can't do this work without the close collaboration with all of you. So, thank you so much.

So the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 made some key recommendations

and key amendments rather to IRFA, one of which was creating the designation of Entities of Particular Concern, or we call them CPC, EPC, in recognition of the role that non-state actors often play in carrying out some of the world's worst freedom of religion or belief abuses.

To meet the criteria for designation as an EPC, such a group must commit particularly severe religious freedom violations, employ violence in the pursuit of its objectives, wield significant political and territorial control, and operate outside of the control of the sovereign government. So, these are the criteria.

So it is worth noting here, as well, most of USCIRF's recommendations relate to repeat offenders in this regard, and in contrast to CPCs, Countries of Particular Concern, or Special Watch List countries, the State Department has shared our assessment of the six designations that we recommend.

Namely, al-Shabaab has long terrorized people in Somalia and in the region as well. The

people of Somalia and continued to do so throughout the 2025, as has ISSP, Islamic States of the Sahel Province, as well as the ISWAP, Islamic State of West Africa Province, as well as JNIM, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, as well as JAS, Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna, also known as Boko Haram, across the Sahel region and other parts of central Africa.

These various groups were responsible for ongoing religious violence in 2025, including massacring and displacing thousands of Christians, Muslims who disagreed with their violent interpretation of Islam, and others; abducting hundreds of school children; attacking churches, mosques and other places of worship; and a whole host of other atrocities that are committed by them.

Additionally, the Houthis persisted in their crackdown against Yemeni Christians and Baha'is while promoting their deeply antisemitic rhetoric and actions, deliberately conflating Israel's policies with Judaism and Jewish identity.

So, I'd also like to highlight a few

changes to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's recommendations and reporting for 2025 involving groups that we recommend for EPC designation as well as non-state religious violence that may fall outside the EPC standards, and yet deserves our shared attention.

First, we as a Commission no longer recommend the designation of Hay'at Tahir al-Sham, or HTS, in Syria. While the Commission remains deeply concerned about the group's longstanding repression of religious freedom, Hay'at Tahir al-Sham now leads Syria's transitional authorities following the fall of the former regime in late 2024, and as such now functions as the de facto state actor in Syria.

As was just announced by my colleague Chair Hartzler here, we now today USCIRF recommends for the first time the Entity of Particular Concern's designation of the Rapid Support Force, or we call it RSF, in Sudan.

In 2025, the Rapid Support Force came to control wide swathes of territories in western

Sudan, slaughtering civilians while carrying out drone strikes and other atrocities against mosques, churches, and other religious sites in the process.

While the USCIRF Commission has closely watched the conflict more broadly and has expressed its concerns over the behavior of both sides of the conflict, the Rapid Support Force's abhorrent, non-state actions have earned it the designation as an EPC.

And, finally, the USCIRF recognized that the world is full of other non-state actors who violate freedom of religion or belief on a daily basis, often committing horrible atrocities in the name of their religiously motivated ideologies and other aims.

Ethnic Fulani, for instance, gangs, some embracing such ideology, were responsible for a worsening rash of violence against Christian farmers and other religious minorities and other religious communities in Nigeria.

The Allied Democratic Forces, an ISIS affiliate in Democratic Republic of Congo, killed

dozens of churchgoers and other civilians in that country in 2025.

And other ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan, Syria, and Mozambique, as well, continued to join their ideological compatriots in attacking religious minorities and others.

Such groups may not merit EPC designation, but they certainly merit our attention as well as the U.S. policy efforts to counter their violent and hateful actions against individuals seeking to freely and openly practice their religion or belief.

In addition to creating EPC designations, the Frank Wolf Act's amendments to the International Religious Freedom Act also requires USCIRF to maintain a public list of individuals, and I quote, "imprisoned, detained, disappeared, placed under house arrest, tortured, or subject to forced renunciations of religious faith by the government of a foreign country or by non-state actors the Commission recommends for designation as a country or entity of particular concern for

religious freedom.” End quote.

This addition to USCIRF’s mandate resulted in the Frank Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, which we launched in 2019, as a publicly available database, thanks to all of you and to the civil society partners and the international religious freedom advocates around the world who submitted cases, supporting documentations, and additional insight on these victims.

What does this effort mean in practical, in practical human terms? It means the ongoing suffering of brave individuals, such as just mentioned by my colleague Ferguson here, Leah Sharibu.

Leah Sharibu is a young girl, who an ISIS affiliate in Nigeria kidnapped her in 2018, and since 2018, held in captivity due to her refusal to denounce her Christian faith.

They want her to renounce her Christian faith to become a Muslim, but she refused to do that. So they kept her since 2018.

Also, in Nigeria, the authorities in Kano State imposed their strict interpretation of Sharia by arresting and imprisoning Yahaya Sharif-Aminu.

Yahaya Sharif-Aminu is a Sufi Muslim singer. He was arrested on blasphemy charges. He remains in prison to this day.

We can look as well to the cases in China. Pastor Ezra Jin, who Chinese authorities arrested him along with 30 other Christians last year for their network of house churches. They were just worshipping.

And we can also talk about Jimmy Lai, a Catholic Christian who the CCP unjustly sentenced in February to ten years in prison for his advocacy for religious freedom and other essential human rights.

So, we see these personal tragedies, too, in the case of Libi Marhabi, a member of the Yemen's ancient and now nearly vanished Jewish communities in Yemen, who the Houthis forces have held in captivity since 2016. Despite their own appeals court in Yemen having ordered his release

in 2019, he is yet in prison.

We also think of Nguyen Hoang Nam, as well as Hoa Hao, a Buddhist who Vietnamese authorities have detained since July 2023 for practicing his beliefs as a part of an unregistered religious groups, and of Faryozbek Kobilov, who is serving also five years in prison in Uzbekistan for discussing religion while sharing a meal with fellow Sunni Muslims.

Such cases—this this is just a highlight of some cases—are scattered across the globe. We can also mention in Russia, Andrey Vlasov has also suffered six years in prison, with another year remaining in his sentence as a part of that government's ongoing persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses.

We can move to see what's happening in Eritrea, as Eritrea also detained Father Fitsum-Berhan Gebrenegus for a shocking 22 years in prison for just leading a Bible study movement within the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

And also Youssef al-Manasif—we can talk

about Youssef al-Manasif, who also a citizen of Saudi Arabia. Al-Manasif himself awaits a death sentence in Saudi Arabia prison for peacefully protesting for religious rights of his fellow Shi'a Muslims in 2017.

So, these individuals and others that I just highlighted along with thousands of other USCIRF Victims List represent the human face of religious repression across the world.

We are grateful again to all of you who have engaged in tireless advocacy on behalf of all those suffering in captivity for their religion or belief.

And I will continue to express USCIRF Commission's plea for ongoing help, for ongoing help, to basically identify, identify and submit additional individuals and provide reliable documentation to inform their profiles.

It would be simply impossible for the Victims List to provide an exhaustive recounting of all such victims, as access to information from places under authoritarian control is severely

constrained, as you know.

The list is, therefore, an incomplete but revealing record of victims, the countries in which they have suffered, the religions or belief they represent, and other key data points.

So, the list numbered over 2,400, 2,400 individuals by the end of 2025, including, you know, a number of beliefs and religions and traditions, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Humanists, Jews, Sikhs, Falon Gong practitioners, and many others as well.

And sadly, the list continues, continues to grow. So, 29 different governments and entities around the world were responsible for the persecution of these individuals, and USCIRF records indicate more than 1,650 of those victims remain in some form of custody, while 743 of people in this list had been released.

The detention status of 220 cases remain unknown for us, and, tragically, six individuals have died in state of custody.

So I'm just sorry to end with those sad

notes, but I want to turn it to you, Chair Hartzler.

Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

CHAIR HARTZLER: Well, thank you, Commissioner Elsanousi, for reminding all of us what really matters and what is the core mission here, why we do what we do. It's for the people around the world.

We want every individual to be able to have that freedom to live out their faith according to their deeply held beliefs. That's what fuels all of our work.

And we want to thank you for your passion for this as well, for your caring, for your partnership with us, for your prayers, for your work.

We look forward to continuing to work with you, and we hope that next year we'll have even more individuals that we can announce have been released from prison because of our work and highlight countries that have changed their laws

and made improvements, and take countries off the list.

That would certainly be our goal, and that's what we're going to continue to work on the next year together.

So, thank you, and our meeting is now concluded.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 4:35 p.m. ET, the 2026 Annual Report meeting was adjourned.]