



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

March 2026

FORB VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHRISTIANS ABROAD

Vicky Hartzler
Chair

Asif Mahmood
Vice Chair

Commissioners

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Maureen Ferguson

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Stephen Schneck

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USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

On January 13, 2026, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing on [*Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Violations against Christians Abroad*](#). USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler and Vice Chair Asif Mahmood led the hearing. Members of civil society participated as witnesses, discussing restrictions on FoRB for Christians abroad. They also shared recommendations for the U.S. government to advance FoRB for Christians.

[*Chair Vicky Hartzler*](#) opened the hearing with a discussion of threats to FoRB for Christians abroad. She noted concerns about China, where authorities have targeted Christian clergy and conducted mass arrests. Chair Hartzler also noted that Burma's Tatmadaw military authority has compelled Christian communities to provide lists of those who attend Mass and has destroyed churches. She highlighted further restrictions on Christians in Africa, specifically in Somalia, Sudan, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In particular, she highlighted FoRB restrictions on Christians in Nigeria, who face threats of kidnapping and murder. Chair Hartzler concluded by calling for U.S. leadership to advance FoRB protections for Christians.

[*Vice Chair Asif Mahmood*](#) highlighted USCIRF policy recommendations that would advance FoRB for Christians abroad in his remarks. First, he called for the swift confirmation of an ambassador-at-large for freedom of religion or belief to advocate for persecuted Christians abroad. Vice Chair Mahmood also called for the repeal of invasive and often discriminatory registration laws targeting Christian communities. He called on the Donald J. Trump administration to raise cases of Christian prisoners in high-level meetings with foreign government officials. Finally, Vice Chair Mahmood recommended the U.S. Department of State review and reprioritize support for organizations promoting the protection of at-risk Christian communities. He called on Congress to ensure sufficient funding for these efforts as well.

[*Representative Mary Miller \(R-IL\)*](#) focused her remarks on USCIRF-recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) that target Christians. She noted challenges facing Christians in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Nicaragua. Rep. Miller also noted FoRB restrictions in China, including the detention of pastors like Ezra Jin Mingri.

[*Representative Mark Alford \(R-MO\)*](#) spoke about the importance of religious freedom as a human right. He addressed FoRB concerns for Christians as well as Muslims in Nigeria and China. Calling for U.S. leadership on FoRB promotion for Christians, Rep. Alford noted that "silence in the face of this violence only emboldens those who carry it out." He called for sanctions, diplomacy, and international pressure on governments that restrict FoRB for Christians, noting that "America First does not mean America alone."

[Grace Jin Drexel](#) discussed the Chinese government's persecution of Christians and the Zion church, which her father founded. After the church refused to install facial recognition cameras, authorities began harassing church members and threatening their livelihoods, housing, children's education, and parents' retirement accounts. Drexel noted the recent arrests of several house church members and the destruction of the Yayang church building in Wenzhou. She spoke about China's transnational repression targeting her family following the decision to advocate publicly for her father's release after his October 2025 arrest. These actions included threatening phone calls to her mother and vandalism of her car. Drexel herself has been watched and followed, and her husband has faced hacking attempts. She asked USCIRF to "recognize that what is happening in China is not merely a domestic matter but a global threat to religious freedom and human dignity."

[Y Phic Hdok](#) discussed restrictions on his FoRB as a Montagnard Christian in Vietnam. In 2016, Hdok fled Vietnam after being targeted for harassment and arrest. His father was subsequently kidnapped and murdered. He noted that members of his religious community often face arrest and interrogation because of their faith. Hdok raised concerns for the cofounder of his organization, Montagnards Stand For Justice, Y Quynh Bdap. Thailand refouled Bdap to Vietnam despite concerns for his wellbeing. Hdok called for the U.S. government to ask Vietnam to cease religious persecution, monitor Y Quynh Bdap's safety, ensure United Nations Refugee Agency (UNCHR) protection for Montagnard refugees in Thailand, and enforce visa restrictions to prevent transnational repression of Montagnards in the United States.

[Representative John Rose \(R-TN\)](#) noted the importance of designating Nigeria as a CPC, explaining that it now allows the U.S. government to take concrete steps to hold Nigeria's government accountable for human rights abuses. Rep. Rose called for holding Nigeria's government accountable for not protecting its own people, who are often targeted for reasons related to their Christian faith. He also raised concerns over FoRB restrictions and attacks on Christians in Syria.

Chair Hartzler then read remarks submitted by an anonymous pastor from the Chin community of Burma. The pastor's remarks described having to flee with his family to escape persecution by the Tatmadaw. He then recounted several recent incidents of Tatmadaw attacks on Christian houses of worship and religious buildings, as well as the arrest of an ethnic Chin Pastor, Pau Muan Lian.

[Negede Teklemariam](#), a Jehovah's Witness, discussed his conditions living in an Eritrean prison consisting of metal shipping containers for 26 years, where he was frequently subjected to torture after conscientiously objecting to military service on religious grounds. He noted that other Witnesses remain in prison, including 87-year-old Leterbrhan Tesfay. Teklemariam pointed out that in August 2025, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights ruled that his rights had been violated. While he welcomed the decision, he noted that Jehovah's Witnesses "love [Eritrea] and want to serve it in ways that respect our beliefs and international human rights."

[Dr. Rebecca Dali](#) discussed the targeting of Christians in Nigeria, noting the Muslims are also affected by the violence. She explained that Christians are often not allowed to build churches with public funds and noted that churches are often denied titles to their lands. Christians are often subjected to threats of demolition of their churches as well. Dali discussed challenges facing Christian students, who are denied entry to tertiary education even when they possess the requisite qualifications. Noting that "violence will never end violence," Dali recommended the U.S. government eliminate terrorism in Nigeria and prosecute its funders and supporters; support civil society actors advancing FoRB for vulnerable people in Nigeria; and use diplomacy to encourage Nigeria's government to ensure the equal protection of religion.

[Representative James McGovern \(D-MA\)](#) spoke about FoRB restrictions on Christians in Vietnam, noting that the government jails members of the Christian community and other unrecognized religious groups. He also called out blasphemy laws in Pakistan, which are often used to target Christians and can carry a death sentence. Rep. McGovern called on Nigeria to fulfill its duties under international law and criticized the Nigerian government for not holding accountable the perpetrators of attacks on Christians. He called on Secretary of State Marco A. Rubio to bring the U.S. government's CPC list in alignment with USCIRF's recommendations and emphasized that FoRB is linked closely with other human rights.

Martha Patricia Molina's statement, read in English by Muriel Saenz of Nicaraguenses en el Mundo Texas, discussed the persecution of Catholic and Evangelical Christian religious leaders in Nicaragua under the Ortega and Murillo government. Molina, a journalist and Catholic researcher, noted that "the lack of religious freedom has profoundly limited the pastoral work of priests" and details a "fear of being imprisoned or exiled." Molina noted several Christian individuals in Nicaragua who have been arrested, many of whom were later exiled. She also described government tracking of people who purchase religious images used for veneration purposes.

Aneeqa Maria Anthony, a lawyer who has represented Christians in Pakistan tried on blasphemy charges, described the systematic persecution of Christians in Pakistan. She explained how Section 295-C of the Penal Code, Pakistan's blasphemy law, requires "no proof of intent, allows arrests on the basis of accusation alone, and exposes the accused to the immediate risk of mob violence." Anthony described several recent blasphemy cases and also noted the intersection of blasphemy accusations with forced conversion and child marriage. She called on USCIRF to continue designating Pakistan as a CPC, press Pakistan to suspend and reform blasphemy laws, demand accountability for false accusers and mob violence, and prioritize the protection of Christians, particularly women and children.

Pastor Nourredine Benzid spoke about the persecution of Christians in Algeria. He described the closure of his church in Makouda and noted that Algeria's government has closed 46 Protestant churches without justification. He raised concerns that "Christians in Algeria live under constant pressure of arrest, imprisonment, surveillance, professional exclusion" and have permanent security files.

[Senator James Risch \(R-ID\)](#) discussed religious freedom concerns in China and across the Middle East. In regard to China, he noted with concern the government's seizure of funds for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the removal of crosses and Christian imagery. He noted that Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims face FoRB restrictions as well. Senator Risch also spoke about Christian flight from Afghanistan and Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, Iraq, and Iran. He raised concerns about the lingering challenges Christians face from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Senator Risch highlighted concerns over antisemitism as well.

[Senator Ted Budd \(R-NC\)](#) raised concerns about the protection of FoRB for Christians in Nigeria and highlighted the importance of designating it as a CPC. He also spoke about China, noting that the country has "codified religious persecution into law." Senator Budd emphasized USCIRF's reauthorization as an important part of U.S. efforts to promote international religious freedom and called on the administration to nominate an ambassador-level official to advocate for FoRB abroad.

[Representative Riley Moore \(R-WV\)](#) shared findings from a recent trip to Nigeria, noting with concern the killings in Benue State and the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps there. Recalling that "behind every statistic is a suffering human being," Rep. Moore

raised concerns about attacks on IDP camps and their effects on Christians there. Rep. Moore highlighted initial confidence-building measures from Nigeria's government, including the release of Christian farmer Sunday Jackson and U.S.-Nigerian coordination on airstrikes targeting nonstate entities that attack Christians.

Following the witness testimonies, Chair Hartzler led a question-and-answer session in which hearing participants discussed in further detail the persecution of Christians abroad. Several witnesses shared stories of individuals persecuted on the basis of being Christian. Discussion also focused on the particular harms of FoRB restrictions to Christian children. Witnesses discussed why non-Christians should advocate for Christians to have greater FoRB protection and vice versa. They also provided policy recommendations for Congress and the administration to advance FoRB for Christians abroad.

Witnesses suggested several action items for the U.S. government to advance FoRB for Christians abroad. They called on the U.S. government to understand the persecution of Christians as a broader FoRB issue and not one affecting only Christians. Their specific recommendations included reforming blasphemy laws used in countries like Pakistan to target Christians, demanding accountability for violent militant attacks affecting Christians in countries like Nigeria, and continuing to advocate for Christians imprisoned on the basis of their faith. Additionally, they urged for further pressure on Vietnam to fulfill their international agreements including releasing prisoners, respecting rights, and stopping international repression. Witnesses also urged accountability for government officials who restrict FoRB for Christians, including through visa bans and other legal instruments. Witnesses urged for pressure on Nigeria to curtail embezzlement from institutions tasked with protecting FoRB. The witnesses also urged special attention to women and children affected by these FoRB restrictions. Witnesses recommended that in the U.S. government's trade discussions, officials should incorporate the topics of abolishing blasphemy laws and reforming laws that enable forced-marriage and violate FoRB. Witnesses recommended that the U.S. government encourage religious freedom trainings for military and judicial officials in Pakistan. Finally, witnesses recommended that economic sanctions be imposed on the Nicaraguan government and officials for violations of FoRB.

Chair Hartzler concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimony.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.