U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Technological Surveillance of Religion in China

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava, Vice Chair

Thank you very much, Vice Chair Perkins.

In addition to the concerns raised by my colleagues, China's abuse of surveillance technology is affecting religious freedom around the world. China both exports its surveillance technology and provides training to countries, including those that USCIRF recommends for designation by the State Department as "countries of particular concern" for egregious religious freedom violations or inclusion in its Special Watchlist. For example, many of China's neighbors in Central Asia have echoed the Communist Party's narratives about "combatting religious extremism" to justify their own widespread crackdowns on peaceful believers. Chinese "Smart City" programs are spreading rapidly across Central Asia, and observers consider the potential for authoritarian abuse of this technology to rank among the biggest challenges facing the region.

In fact, we have already seen a number of incidents modeled after China's use of surveillance technology to suppress religious expression in Central Asia. In August 2019, police in Uzbekistan's capital city of Tashkent rounded up nearly a hundred

men and forced them to shave their beards, claiming this was to ensure the men could be identified by "smart cameras" as part of the country's nascent "Smart City" project. However, the government of Uzbekistan has long opposed the wearing of beards, which it considers a sign of potential "religious extremism," instead of a peaceful expression of one's religious beliefs. Reports that Uzbekistan's Ministry of Education plans to introduce surveillance technology in the school system raise concerns that this technology will be used to harass and discriminate against girls and women who wear the hijab. Authorities in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are also known to forcibly shave men with beards or harass women in hijabs, and will likely use Chinese surveillance technology to target more of them.

To be clear, China is not the only country to export advanced capabilities to repressive regimes. Other countries, including France, the United Kingdom, and even the United States, also export location-tracking spyware, hi-resolution video surveillance, hacking software, and censorship filtering applications. But China has increasingly become a dominant player in this market and, unlike those other countries, does not allow for a free and open debate about government surveillance.

Even those living in democratic societies are not completely safe. We will hear from witnesses about how hackers likely affiliated with the Chinese government have attempted to use malware to target iPhone and Android devices belonging to Uyghurs and Tibetans living abroad. If successful, these attacks could steal the user's contact information, text messages, and call history.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how the United States can work with our allies and partners to develop a coordinated strategy to deal with these challenges and strengthen religious freedom around the world.

Thank you. I will now turn the floor back to Chair Manchin.