

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
THE IMPACT OF FORB VIOLATIONS
ON CHILDREN

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Virtual Hearing

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

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Asif Mahmood, Vice Chair, USCIRF
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR HARTZLER: Good morning. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing will come to order.

I'm USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler, and I'm delighted to welcome you to this morning's hearing.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. legislative branch agency created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or known as IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Too often children are the ones who bear the brunt of religious freedom violations. Perpetrators target them because they are defenseless, knowing that harming girls and boys can destabilize families and entire faith

communities.

The consequences are severe. Social cohesion deteriorates. Hope for the future fades, and the very survival and identity of these communities are put at risk.

We remain deeply concerned about countries where governments restrict religious education, prevent children from learning or practicing their faith.

These policies are designed to erode religious identity by preventing families from passing beliefs onto the next generation.

In China, authorities have imposed sweeping bans on religious education and practice for Uyghur Muslim and Tibetan Buddhist children.

The government has separated tens of thousands of Uyghur and Tibetan children from their families through state-run boarding schools that enforce Mandarin-language instruction and prohibit all religious teaching.

These policies are intended to sever children from their faith traditions and assimilate

them into state-approved ideology—a core element of the Chinese Communist Party's genocidal strategy targeting Uyghur Muslims and other minorities.

Additionally, Christian children under 18 years old are totally forbidden to go to church. Millions of young Chinese Christian students were forced to sign a CCP-prepared form to renounce their faith in front of their classmates and teachers.

ForB violations are widespread among children in China.

Across Central Asia, governments impose strict controls on children's religious instruction. In 2025, Uzbekistan enacted a new law prohibiting parents from allowing their children to receive any religious education not approved by the state.

This comes on top of long-standing restrictions on parental religious education, religious materials, and a blanket ban on proselytizing.

Repeated across the region in countries

such as Tajikistan where children are also prohibited from participating in the activities of religious associations, these laws make families fearful of teaching their own beliefs, and they weaken communities' ability to pass down their traditions.

We are also gravely concerned about the ongoing abduction and forced transfer of Ukrainian children by Russian authorities, actions the U.N. has concluded amount to crimes against humanity.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, thousands of children have been taken from their families, relocated to Russia, or Russian-controlled territories, and subjected to state-run programs that attempt to strip away their Ukrainian culture, including religious identities.

These policies inflict deep trauma on families and represent a systematic effort to erase the national, cultural and religious identity of an entire generation.

Today's hearing will examine these violations of religious freedom targeting children

and the steps the United States can take to stop these horrific abuses.

By shining a light on these crimes, we can help ensure that no child is ever targeted simply because of their faith.

It's now my pleasure to recognize USCIRF Vice Chair Asif Mahmood.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you, Chair Hartzler.

I would like to welcome everyone to today's hearing and thank our witnesses for joining us.

I also want to take a moment to thank and applaud Commissioner Ferguson for originally bringing this important idea and making this happen.

In many parts of the world, children endure forced conversions, abductions, and other egregious religious freedom violations simply because of their faith.

In Pakistan, these abuses often take the form of coerced conversions through forced

marriages, which disproportionately impact Hindu and Christian girls.

Perpetrators abduct young women and girls, pressure them to convert, and push them into so-called "marriages" that lack both consent and legal legitimacy.

Far too often, courts validate these sham unions, allowing the perpetrators to escape accountability.

One such case is that of Maria Shahbaz, spotlighted on USCIRF's Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List.

Maria was abducted and forced into a coerced marriage at just 13 years old. Yet, this past March, instead of protecting her, Pakistan's Federal Constitutional Court upheld lower court ruling based on falsified documents claiming she was 18, effectively forcing her to remain with her captor.

Pakistan is not the only place where children face these dangers. In Egypt, Coptic Christians report young women and girls

disappearing under suspicious circumstances with little information and minimal cooperation from authorities.

In Nigeria, mass abductions of girls by violent non-state actors who manipulate Islam to justify their use of violence have become tragically routine.

Recent kidnappings from schools, often targeting Christian girls and mosques, have traumatized entire religious communities, closing schools and depriving countless children of an education.

We are also deeply troubled by the Taliban's tight control over the growing number of madrassas in Afghanistan, which they use to impose a rigid state-mandated interpretation of Islam.

Families fear these schools expose children to indoctrination rather than genuine learning.

Girls face even more severe barriers as they are banned from attending school beyond age 12.

The long-term trauma of these abuses is profound. During the 2017 genocide carried out by the Burmese military against the Rohingya, children were deliberately and systematically targeted with horrific violence.

In an effort to extinguish the future of the Rohingya people, the military followed a clear operational pattern aimed at girls, boys, and even at infants.

Those who survived continue to endure profound physical and psychological harm. Their ability to heal is further impeded by ongoing displacement and the destruction of their religious life and community structures.

These violations underscore a painful truth: children are too often the ones who suffer most when fundamental freedoms are stripped away.

I now turn the floor back to Chair Hartzler.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Vice Chair Mahmood.

We'll now turn to the testimony from our

witnesses. Reflecting a range of experiences and perspectives, each of our witnesses possesses their own unique expertise on freedom of religion or belief violations targeting children and ways the U.S. government can effectively combat it.

I'll briefly introduce them now. Gyal Lo is a Tibet specialist and educational sociologist on China's education policies in Tibet, who focuses on the severe threats facing Tibet, including the survival of its religion.

Vladyslav Havrylov is a Global Fellow at the Collaborative on Global Children's Issues at Georgetown University and an expert on the forcible transfer, deportation, adoption, and reeducation of Ukrainian children by Russia.

Maliha Zia is the Director of Inclusion and Development at the Legal Aid Society, where she leads the Legal Aid Society's programming on religious freedom and the rights of religious minorities within Pakistan's justice system.

And finally, Mohamad Imran Bin Zohor, now a university student in Washington, yet his journey

began as a Rohingya refugee who arrived in the United States as a child.

His story embodies the resilience and potential of children who are targeted because of their faith and what they can achieve when given safety, support, and opportunity.

So, with that, I would like to welcome our first witness, Dr. Lo, to begin his testimony.

Dr. Lo, please proceed.

DR. LO: Thank you.

I offer this testimony based on lived experience, direct observation, and the long-term engagement with educational and the religious life in Tibet.

What is happening today is not a series of isolated policies; it's the coherent system, one that increasingly separates Tibetan children and other minority children from their religious identity.

For nearly seven decades, Tibetans have struggled to practice their Buddhist faith. It has been an intergenerational effort to preserve

identity under sustained pressure.

During the Cultural Revolution, minority monasteries were destroyed and religious leaders imprisoned for more than 20 years, pressuring many to marry.

These institutions were not only places of worship but the center of education, culture and the moral formation.

Their destruction disrupted the transmission of the Tibetan Buddhist knowledge system.

In 1995, the recognition of the 11th Panchen Lama was politicized. Only a six-year-old boy recognized by his Holiness Dalai Lama was taken by Chinese government, and has since disappeared from public life until present.

For Tibetans, this represents a profound violation of religious freedom.

In 2008, Tibetans across the plateau called for religious freedom and the return of His Holiness Dalai Lama. Those calls were met with force.

Since then, 159 Tibetans self-immolated, tragic action that consistently expressed the same demand. Those appeals have not been meaningfully addressed.

Today, the focus has shifted towards the children. Since 2016, large number of Tibetan children, estimates over a million, have been placed in China's colonial boarding schools, intentionally separating Tibetan children from their family, language, and religious traditions at a formidable age.

At the same time, the legal restrictions forcefully prohibit the children under age 18 from entering monastery institution. In Tibetan society, this interruption from centuries' old system of education, where children began religious study, training and life.

This is not a minor policy. It is directly cutting off the continuity of the religious knowledge system.

Those restrictions are reinforced in daily life, such as the school students are often banned

from entering monastery. Signs specifically prohibit their presence, and the rules are enforced.

In schools, religious life is further restricted. Students are explicitly forbidden from participating in religious activities, even during holiday.

For example, a few years ago, a 15-year-old girl who held His Holiness Dalai Lama's photo and the Chinese government put him in the jail for three years.

At the same time, CCP's narrative and national press promoted gradually replacing Tibetan religious tradition.

Religious knowledge is entirely absent from formal schooling. So without, many Tibetan children are growing up without the meaningful exposure to their own spiritual culture. Long-term consequences are already visible.

A generation is emerging that is increasingly disconnected from Tibetan Buddhism through structural policy.

This is not simply about religion. It is about identity, continued right of the people to pass their cultural, religious traditions to the future generations.

In sum, what we are witnessing is a systematic reconfiguration of childhood in Tibet, and in China on other minorities. It is operated through law, education and institutional control.

Its effects are cumulative and long-term, and it raises a fundamental question: what happens to a society when its children are separated by design from the belief, practices, values that have defined it for centuries?

I listed a number of recommendations for the government. I'm not going to repeat it here. It takes too much.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Dr. Lo.

Very, very disturbing what's going on, and we appreciate you sharing that.

Next we turn to Vladyslav Havrylov. Please proceed to share with us more what's going on in Ukraine.

MR. HAVRYLOV: Thank you, dear colleagues, for this opportunity.

What especially I want to tell for you especially is that after the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022 of Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church especially supporting Russian government and supporting especially the destruction of Ukrainian citizens, torture against civilian people, and especially they supported forcible deportation and to forcible militarization of Ukrainian children in occupied territories of Ukraine.

You know, it's best from Russian Orthodox Church side, in some ideology, which, quote, "Russian World," and this ideology is about supremacy of Russian Federation and supremacy of Russian Orthodox Church, what they want to do not only to the adult society but to our children too.

And after full-scale invasion to Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church bishops received special documents about how many children in occupied territories of Ukraine, especially

Ukrainian children.

They received operational documents, especially [?], for transporting deportees. Its files especially about how many children in occupied territories of Ukraine studying in school, in occupied territories especially.

They receive documents about how many children can be deported to Russian Federation because they live so closely near Russian border, and in Russian Federation, they have a special department.

It's administrative department from Russian Orthodox Church, what's called a Synodal Department for Charity Helping.

And this Synodal Department of Charity Helping held very close relationships, especially this Ministry of Emergencies Situation of Russian Federation.

So what they do after that? After 2022, they created like a temporary accommodation centers in Russian Federation territory, and they created a system for all accommodation centers, especially

near Ukrainian border.

It's Rostov region, Voronezh region
Bryansk region of Russian Federation. It's
especially closely near Ukrainian border.

And some of these temporary accommodation
centers created especially by Russian Orthodox
Church, by Russian [?] of Russian Orthodox Church,
and Russian bishops from this funded a lot of money
for these temporary accommodation centers.

After that, they input children to the
accommodation centers and held a lot of
Russification lessons for them. They tried
especially to erase identity of Ukrainian children
and they tried to recreate Ukrainian children to
Russian mentality.

And a big part in this process, in this
especially war crimes against best interests of
child held in Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian
bishops and Russian priests, and especially what we
know from independent investigation is that only
for November 2022, at least 58 [?] of Russian
Orthodox Church created in all territories of

Russian Federation these temporary accommodation centers where they input deported children from Ukraine.

Right now, we know about at least 20,570 children who are forcibly deported from Ukraine, and for right now, only more than 2,000 successfully returned to Ukraine. So other children are in dangerous situation because all days they held paramilitarization courses, all day they have Russification courses.

And all day Russian government in consideration and collaboration with Russian Orthodox Church tried to recreate our children.

And especially I want to mention for you not only about that, but about the role of Russian Orthodox Church in persecution of their priests in occupied territories. Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned that at least 67 clergy members killed by Russian occupation authorities.

We know about priest Stepan Podolchak, who was taken from his home in occupied Kherson region, and two days later his wife called from Russian

occupied administration identified his body.

So Russian Federation in occupied territories just cynically killed this priest because only for one issue, because they want to join Russian Orthodox Church.

And especially Evangelical pastors persecuted too. I know personally especially [?] that Russian officials destroyed his church and [?] especially. It's a very [?] policy, and I wanted that you hear that they mentioned all priests and all civil population who don't want to support Russian government in occupied territories and don't want to support especially Russian Orthodox Church.

They said it is like American spies. It's spies from European Union. They tried to find any cases just to persecute these people. And especially they do these policies in children, but for it's much easier for them because children not have deep knowledge about how fighting against some ideology. And they include a lot of these programs.

And last, for a conclusion of what I want to mention that the forcible deportation, it's not the end of the crimes where Russian Orthodox Church supported Russian Federation and Russian government.

They especially created paramilitary groups in occupied territories. Three main groups, it's a young army [?] of Russia and [?]. All of these groups oriented especially to erase Ukrainian identity of Ukrainian children and input Russian identity.

For this case, a lot of lessons from Russian bishops and Russian priests who are joined to support this Russian policy.

So if I can just mention my recommendations for USA government, and if you can support these, it's to approve especially targeted sanctions against high rank bishops and priests from Orthodox Church who support Russian government doing these war crimes and crimes against humanity, and against our children especially.

Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you for that testimony. Truly, truly evil, what's going on there, so thank you for sharing that.

Next, we turn to our next witness, Maliha Zia. Please proceed.

MS. ZIA: Thank you so much for having me today.

At the outset, I would like to emphasize that I am not myself a member of the religious minority community in Pakistan, and I want to say this right at the beginning because it shapes how I approach the work that I do.

While I have personally not experienced what the girls in the cases have endured, but I have sat with them. I have read their files. I have attended their hearings. I have sat with their families.

And I appear before you today as someone who bears witness and who believes that bearing witness creates an obligation to act.

The forced conversion through marriage is a practice where a person, predominantly from the

Muslim communities, kidnaps and abducts girls from religious minority communities, predominantly the Hindu and the Christian communities, and who assists them to both convert to a different religion, namely, Islam, and marry the Muslim perpetrator.

Usually this is done simultaneously. This is not a random crime. It is a very, very calculated one. It targets girls, who are obviously female, children, non-Muslim, and from overwhelmingly impoverished households.

These vulnerabilities of age, religion, sex, and economic status compound each other in ways that make certain girls very predictable targets.

Now, it's important to emphasize that this conversion rarely begins with abductions. Now, normally, when you hear about these cases, you hear a lot of them, they were abducted, they were kidnapped, but in reality it actually begins with ideologically motivated grooming, targeting and cultivating and entrapping a vulnerable child.

The perpetrators reach out and actually find these girls, start communicating with them, and there's an initial period of false relationship building, leading to gradual isolation from family, the creation of dependency, and finally exploitation.

They are often exploited, enticed out of their the houses to meet with supposed boyfriends or somebody who is interested in them, various people who they consider uncles or who they consider even close trusted adults.

And they go out to meet them, and, instead, they are taken away, they are abducted, they're taken to the courts or they're taken to fellow like-minded religious leaders, who not only then convert them to an unofficial illegal conversion certificate, which is not a spiritual event. It is an illegal, informal document, which is used to assert a false age, which is the age of 18, and to create a legal appearance of a voluntary marriage.

This illegal, informal document becomes

the base of an entire legal case that is taken forward. The girls are abducted from the families, raped, sometimes trafficked across provincial boundaries.

Apart from the physical harm, the psychological harm is severe and long-lasting. PTSD, anxiety, depression, that persists long after the physical safety is restored of the few girls who we have managed to recover.

But what is particular to forced conversion through marriage and is often missed is the severing of religious identity. A girl's constitutionally protected faith is documented away from her, and the recovery of the body does not restore what was taken.

And the harm extends beyond individual survivors. Every case that ends without accountability sends a message to minority communities that the girls are unprotected.

As a result of this and for protection, parents end up restricting girls' movement, limit education, and very, very, very often arrange early

under-age child marriages within the community as a defensive measure.

Thus, it generates the very conditions of vulnerability it preys upon.

These girls are therefore not educated, often do not have economic empowerment, or hope of economic empowerment, to be able to come out of the crisis that they're facing, and then thereby generating even further vulnerability, which is what is preyed upon.

However, at the same time, I do want to talk about some of the progress that we are having. Because while this is an absolutely awful case, and as I mentioned earlier on, that the courts often, the courts are used as a technique and a tool to give legal sanctity to such cases.

Because what happens is the parents will take the complaint to court. They will say a girl has been abducted. She's been kidnapped.

The perpetrators will take this young girl to the high court or the supreme court and fulfil a habeas corpus petition saying that I am above the

age of 18, using the state conversion document.

They say I have married of my own free will, and my parents are the ones who are harassing me.

This harassment document is then taken to the trial court, and they're saying, oh, you know, a woman has every right to marry, a woman has every right to change her religion, and therefore we cannot take this case further.

So law is used as a tool, therefore, to actually continue to give legal sanctity and perpetuate even further violence, and for the silencing and further creating fear amongst minority communities as well.

However, while the cases are many, we hear constantly about it, I also do want to emphasize that there has been a certain amount of progress made.

In the last four years, I've been running project, which has, in fact, been funded by the U.S. State Department, working on forced conversion, which as a result of it has created

judicial trainings for forced conversion.

The trainings produced a concrete result. In a period of one week of the trainings, we saw two convictions of cases, whereby ignoring all of the previous illegal documentation, focusing on it, and actually sending two perpetrators to jail within one week.

The judge applied the law, and this is considered a huge success.

In the province that I am currently based, the Government of Sindh is at the table and engaged and willing to put commitments into regulation. The police has agreed to develop a specific standard operating procedure for dealing with forced conversion cases, and the rules of the Child Marriage Restraint Act are being revised to close the procedural gap perpetrators have historically exploited.

Perhaps most significantly, forced conversion for minorities is no longer being framed as a niche minority concern in this province, and the efforts are being made to integrate this into

broader commitment to child protection, which makes the political will to act more durable.

For the U.S. government, I respectfully urge three things: first, designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern under the IRFA with targeted engagement directed at criminal justice institutions, not merely legislature.

We have tried this when we have seen how it can work, and particularly the courts and the police, which is what is being used as tools to exploit these particular circumstances.

Secondly, continue to fund Legal Aid organizations with established trust in minority communities or from the minority communities and the legal expertise to navigate a system designed to exclude them.

Third, support judicial and prosecutorial training built on specific legal framework for such cases, not generic human rights programming, but evidence-based curriculum drawn from documented case law and procedural failures.

The girls I have spoken about, those in

shelters, in the cases before us, are not just statistics. They are children whose lives are derailed by a crime that a functioning legal system could have protected and prevented and a functioning criminal justice system could still prosecute.

The law exists. The failure is purely social and it is institutional. And institutional failures respond to accountability, political will and sustained external pressure.

The U.S. government has the tools, diplomatic, financial and political, to create the pressure. I urge you to use them.

Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Maliha.

That was very, very encouraging that there is some progress, but also very concerning what's going on and what needs to still happen. So thank you for sharing that.

Our final witness before we go to questions and answers session is Mohamad Imran Bin Zohor, and his story is truly both heartbreaking

and inspiring.

Thank you for being here, Mohamad. Please proceed.

MR. ZOHOR: Good morning, and thank you, Chair Hartzler and Vice Chair Mahmood for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Mohamad Imran Bin Zohor. I am a Rohingya.

The United Nations has recognized the Rohingya as one of the most persecuted people in the world, not because of one moment, but because of decades of systematic oppression and the stripping away from our basic human rights.

We are an indigenous people of Burma, yet we have been treated as if we never belonged. Our identity was denied, our citizenship was taken, and our dignity was slowly destroyed, largely because of our faith as a Muslim.

We were targeted not only for who we are but for what we believe. I was born into a life where I did not exist in the eyes of my own country.

The military government denied us citizenship, education, and freedom. As a child, I grew up knowing I was not seen as human.

We were not allowed to travel, attend proper schools, or dream about the future. Fear was a part of everyday life.

I lived in a small bamboo shelter with no electricity, no clean water, and often no food. During the monsoon season, there was a day my family had nothing to eat.

But the hardest part was not the poverty; it was the feeling that our suffering did not matter.

When I was 12 years old, my parents made a painful decision to send me away to save my life. I left home not knowing I would ever see them again.

I boarded a crowded boat, hoping for safety. That journey was something no child should ever experience. I had almost no food or water. People were sick and starving. I saw fear in every face.

I remember the silence at times because people were too weak to even speak. Some did not survive.

As a child, I did not understand everything, but I understood one thing: I might die, and no one would know. When we reached land, I thought the worst was over, but it was only the beginning.

I was sold to human traffickers. I was beaten, held for ransom and saw others tortured and felt completely alone like I had been forgotten by the world.

After escaping, I was captured again and imprisoned in Malaysia. I spent more than two years in a detention center. Imagine being a 12-year-old locked behind bars, treated like a criminal, with no school, little food and no hope.

I did not understand why I was there. I had committed no offense. My only "crime" was being born Rohingya and trying to survive.

I became very sick and received no medical care. My body grew so weak I could barely move.

Then one day, U.N. officials visited the detention center. They saw my condition and understood my story, and helped secure my release.

A month later I was resettled in the United States where for the first time in my life I was given a chance.

Today, I am a U.S. citizen. I have earned associate degree and now studying at the University of Washington's Foster School of Business. I am building a future, but I cannot forget where I came from because right now Rohingya children are still living the life I once lived. Just two weeks ago, about 250 Rohingya refugees were reported missing after boat sank in the Andaman Sea.

Over a decade later, nothing has changed. The Rohingya are still persecuted. Children are still being detained. They are still waiting for someone to see them, for someone to care.

That is why I am here today. The United States has always been a leader in human rights. And I respectfully ask you to continue that leadership.

First, advocate for the immediate release of the Rohingya children from detention centers, especially in Malaysia. No child should grow up behind bars seeking safety.

Second, expand resettlement opportunity for the vulnerable children, especially survivors of trafficking and detention. These children need protection, not punishment.

Third, invest in education, mental health, support and long-term care. Trauma does not end when a child is freed; it stays with them.

Finally, continue to hold the Myanmar military accountable and support efforts to recognize the identity and the rights of the Rohingya people.

I stand here today because someone chose to help me, but there are thousands of children still waiting for that same chance. They are not just refugees. They are future leaders, students, voice. If they are lucky enough to grow up at all, please do not let them grow up forgotten.

Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you, Mohamad.

We really appreciate your testimony and we sincerely hope that more children will have the opportunity that you've had. And thank you for speaking up for them.

So I want to thank all of our witnesses for the crucial testimony that you've given.

Now we're going to proceed with the Q&A session, and I guess I would like to start and then we'll turn to the other commissioners.

I would like to ask Vladyslav a question. Your testimony was really revealing, not only how the Russian government is targeting children and taking them from their families and putting them in these military schools, these indoctrination schools in Russia.

It's just horrific, but you revealed how the Russian Orthodox Church is actually complicit in helping lead that, and I think a lot of people aren't aware of that, how that Russian Church is being used by the government as an arm of Vladimir Putin, and what's going on there, and it's just

heartbreaking that there's over 20,000 children that have been stripped from their families and their faith.

I guess I would just ask how do you think the U.S. government can support justice for these crimes and what barriers prevent Ukrainian children from being reunited with their families?

You said there's about 2,000 that have been reunited, but that leaves over 18,000 or so, at least, who haven't.

So what barriers are there to getting them back and to being reintegrated and what forms of support are needed and how can the U.S. government help?

MR. HAVRYLOV: Thank you so much for the question.

Yes, this is very hard question, you know, and a very hard situation that not so many people understand how church can support the programs or especially how the church can support the war, but it's really true that Russian Orthodox Church, they right now still working like one of institutions

from Russian government, not like a church.

It's main point because they held especially official memorandum with Ministry of Emergency Situation of Russian Federation, the building system for other accommodation centers to input Ukrainian children for these centers, especially in Russian territories.

They create this program of Russification and militarization because I worked in this program. It's like a quasi, quasi-Christian ideology. It's not Christian ideology because I know from last years that congregation of international church said that Russia World ideology, it's heresy.

It's not a Christian especially values, yes, but they tried to change this option, and they tried to input especially this Russian ideology to Ukrainian children, who are especially under dangerous situation from Russian government, especially who are staying in occupied territories and who especially right now deported to Russia.

And one thing that I want to mention,

maybe it's important too, that this 20, more numbers of children, yes, what we know, especially 20,000. Yes, it's only about identified children because different investigators discuss about that it's going to be rather more especially number. It's going to be 50 and 100,000 children.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Wow. That's, that is just horrific.

Due to time, can you just summarize what the U.S. government could do, you think, to help?

MR. HAVRYLOV: Yeah, I think it's one point, maybe one main point, and it's very difficult, it's special sanction of hierarchy. It's high topical bishops from Russian Federation, from Russian Orthodox Church, who can [?] this policy to occupied territories, you know, because when we discuss about some cases of collaborators in occupied territories, maybe it's an issue to national policy of Ukraine. Yes.

But when we're talking about hierarchy policy, hierarchy bishops from Russian Federation, it's so hard to have some techniques, how can you

input them to the jail. I don't know maybe.

But especially international sanctions can be very effective. Yes, so I think the USA government maybe partly can help in this issue.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Okay. Great. Thank you so much for your insights.

Now we turn to Vice Chair Asif Mahmood for your questions.

VICE CHAIR MAHMOOD: Thank you. Thank you to all the witnesses for such insightful details.

My question is geared towards Maliha, Maliha Zia from Pakistan. Thank you for your work and thank you for standing up for all those young girls, not just minority girls, all the girls.

I have two-prong question. One is we know that this thing is ongoing and you very well described how it happens, how they create the relationship, and then abduct them and force them to come to a testimony, and force young girls to speak against their families.

Not only that, the families of the girls are intimidated and threatened. If there is voice,

they will have consequences, not only to this extent. Even the families are told if they have any friends of family, anybody out of the country, are going to raise their voice, even then they will have the consequences.

What should we do on that, number one?

Number two, the major issue in Pakistan is I understand that in last year or two year, three years ago, there was a new amendment. There was a ban on minor marriages for everybody. I'm not just talking about minorities, but everybody, because when we talk about children, we talk about all children, not just the minority children.

That is a major issue, kidnapping and forced conversion, but all young girls. And some of the mullahs have come up and defied that openly, and I was just looking into this thing, saw two statements from a very attended mullah, who said that I will do it, and I will do openly. He would challenge the government that if you want to stop me, stop me.

And I know this firsthand that this thing

is happening every single day. Young girls are being made into wedlock or whatever, in addition to conversions.

What should U.S. government and international partners do instead of just making statements and telling them?

How we can make this happen where we can protect young children, girls or boys, when they are forced into this thing, and most of those marriages are by force or by implication, not just the will of the girls, and even young girls we don't think have the thing?

So that would be a very helpful thing and really we want to do something. And I would add if you can also cover how much the madrassas are supporting those forced conversion marriages and giving them backing because they have street power or the manpower or forced power, which include beating and burning home and burning churches and temples?

Thank you.

MS. ZIA: Thank you for your question.

I think that the social pressures that are used in these kinds of cases are very, very important. As you rightfully said, it's the fear that the girls and the families continue to face because we also have cases where we use blasphemy charges.

A lot of religious minority members are thrown into jail or murdered or, you know, straight away lynched frankly through mob violence because, you know, Islam is used as-it's misused-sorry-it's misused and the tenets, incorrect tenets are used to kind of create that kind of mob frenzy in a certain way.

So what we've been trying to do and what we urge everyone to do is particularly two things, one, as you mentioned, take the decision away from the family in order-and this comes to the legislation I cited where I mention taking it to the courts and working with the courts and the criminal justice system.

The family is the one who has to take the private complaint to the police and carry that

trial all the way through to the end. Take that decision away from the family.

This is something that the government should do, that the police should do, that the human rights instruments should do, the government departments can do, is to be the actual complainants themselves instead of the family.

Therefore, as a result of that, what will happen is that the pressure on the family would decrease because they can't withdraw the case, the state has to take the case forward, which, of course, a lot more powerful and more protected that way, as well, and less vulnerable.

But, secondly, it's very important right now for our justice system to evolve. We are still very much based on live testimonies, paper testimonies. It's all written down by hand or typed up.

But what we should be doing is doing video link recording of testimonies. We still do not have a system, and it might be surprising to many to hear of actually having child psychologists

attached to the courts and interviewing the child.

A child's testimony is taken in court in front of whoever happens to be in that courtroom with the perpetrator often standing there or outside without actually having a psychologist or any trained professional to talk to the child, to identify the psychological violence, the threats and the continued fear, and she's still giving the testimony in those circumstances.

So work towards, and this is where I would urge all governments, anyone who has more experience than us and space than us, particularly the U.S. government, on how to improve the courts in order to create a more child-safe space, to create a system that actually caters to the child's needs and welfare instead of the current status and the format we are currently using.

We need to evolve more, and we need to evolve better. And that is the support that we do need specifically.

Where we are stronger is legislation and I think, I'm very proud to say considering it's

Pakistan, is that one of the biggest battles that we've been fighting is to raise the age of child marriage to 18, and very recently we had that in two, in three provinces, in Sindh, Baluchistan, and Islamabad, we had the age of 18.

And finally the government of Punjab has finally raised the age to 18 as well, which leaves two provinces [?] Pakistan, before we reach that.

So legislation we are stronger. It's implementation that we are having problems with, and that is the support that we do need.

And, again, where it comes down to, if it ever comes down to funding or shared cooperation on how to create a system that is better, where it comes down to diplomatic pressure or international political pressure, to ask questions about how the trial is being done, how many child psychologists do we have, how is the testimony of the child recorded?

Is she forced to do it in court? Where is she? Is she in a shelter home because what happens is she's often taken out of the custody and placed

in a shelter home during that time period.

How many child psychologists with professional, adequate training are sitting and working with her?

But, also, additionally, and I think where it comes to all violence against women and children problem is the economic empowerment that particularly religious minority communities need because they would never—and one of the biggest vulnerabilities is an economic vulnerability, and that if we're able to circumvent that, create economic empowerment, particularly for the girls.

And with e-commerce or with other kinds of forms of education or school-based training, I think that would still be one of the best--

CHAIR HARTZLER: Right. Thank you so much, Maliha. Those were excellent recommendations.

I'd next like to turn to our Commissioner Maureen Ferguson for any questions she may have.

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: Thank you and thank you, Maliha, so much for all of these

thoughts. It was actually a conversation with a psychologist who runs a trauma clinic in Nigeria for girls in similar situations who have escaped their captors and are recovering, and he's teaching them life skills to kind of reintegrate them back into society.

But it was that heartbreaking interview with him, because this is, this is very common in the northern states of Nigeria, in particular, but it was that that sort of once I noticed the pattern here in Pakistan, and honestly it was also the statement of President Tinubu's wife when she was asked about the kidnapped girls that are forced into marriages.

And she brushed it off and said, oh, some of these girls don't even want to be rescued because they fall in love with their captors, something like that, which is just a jaw-dropping statement from the first lady of, you know, one of the largest countries in the world. But, so thank you, again, for your work on that.

My question is for Mohamad. I'm really

speechless after listening to your testimony. Thank you so much for your courage and presence here, and I'm so struck by your resilience and the hope that your story offers amidst such tragic circumstances.

So I'm so curious. I'd love to know how you, how you have this resilience and what sources of support were most critical in helping you to rebuild your life after, you know, experiencing such trauma?

How were you given these opportunities? I would just love to hear more about your, your path to this spot where you are now as a student here in the United States?

MR. ZOHOR: Thank you.

It's been an—since like I was, since I came to the U.S., I always like work like extremely hard to represent my people. Especially I always feel like that is like I was like thousands of Rohingya children in the detention center.

I still remember them. They are still there. I just want to work really hard to like

make them, their case awareness. And it's been challenging, lots of challenging actually, but I have gone through like daily basis and I, I work really hard with our Congressman Adam Smith and Senator Cantwell and other people as well.

And I also, about two years ago, I also like brought my whole family here from the Bangladesh refugee camp, and since then I have been taking care of them and doing this work at the same time.

COMMISSIONER FERGUSON: Well, we would love to have a follow-up conversation with you to learn more and to hear more about your recommendations on how other children might be saved in the way that you were.

Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you so much.

I'll now turn to Commissioner Rachel Laser.

COMMISSIONER LASER: Yes.

I want to thank you all so much for providing your testimony. It's been really

helpful, and, Mohamad, I just wanted to say my heart really went out to you.

I'm so glad that you're doing so well. You know, that's sweet victory. So that's really nice to see.

I actually just wanted to ask—I know we're nearing the end of our time, so I wanted to ask Maliha—sorry, I was looking for you on my screen—just a quick question, which is have there been any changes in one way or another in sort of the Pakistani sort of public zeitgeist or feeling towards these child bride conversions?

Like I know that they're happening and they're sort of part of the, part of the culture, but I'm just wondering whether there's any changes, again, you know, which way or whether you feel that, that that could happen, and what could make that happen?

MS. ZIA: So I would say that there has been positive change. The fact that I've been working in this field for 20 years, and my mother before me. So as I often say, I have two lifetimes

of experience on this.

And the example I've given, 2012 or 2013, when we started first talking about forced conversions, we would actually face actual death threats.

People would refuse to engage with us. It would be very hush-hush, and I remember back in 2016, I was conducting a training in a judicial academy, and I started talking about forced conversions, and some of the judges took out their phones and started filming me.

And that was the first time I felt fear because I didn't know what they were going to do with that documentation. What are they going to do with those videos?

Fast forward to 2026, where we're training and we're engaging, and the judiciary and the police are actually trying to understand the situation.

The fact that we have been able to still pass the legislation raising the age of 18, it does show a decreasing acceptance of child marriages and

particularly forced conversion cases.

I have seen in this last three or four years, particularly working on this project that I mentioned earlier on, which is a very targeted project, on forced conversion, the expansion of the discussion and understanding and discourse.

And I think that just from my own anecdotal experiences, I can see a positivity in more, you know, more exposure, more discussion, less threat. As a Muslim, I would say that because, not for the religious minority members who still face a great deal of threat, continue to face a great deal of threat, but as a Muslim ally, I can say where previously I was under threat, as well, there's less threat to me at this point in time.

So there is a positive change, absolutely. But what I see as essential is to continue a correct discourse, and with all due respect, we see a lot of, of course, the reports, the Freedom of Religious Belief, even the U.S. report, we have a lot, the U.N. report that all come up.

It's very important to have documented on-

ground data from Pakistan. And I don't mean numbers. And I don't—because numbers are very hard to calculate entirely because you have, you know, and it is true where girls do run away from their own free—adult girls who choose to marry of their own freewill are often also targeted by patriarchal groups who will say, no, bring her back.

You know, use to exploit this—but what is important is to document exactly what I said. We publish two reports, very much breaking up the concept of force. Because what the courts would look for is there physical force? Was there threat? Are there marks of violence?

And now we're talking about, okay, the force is psychological. It's grooming; it's predators; it's predatorial. How do we prove that?

So there has been a shift in conversation. Having those conversations on a regular basis with the largest stakeholder and variety is very important in changing the social norms, the discourse, and eventually the mindset of those who still are either in a grey zone for whatever reason

or those who continue to support and perpetrate.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you for that, for those insights.

And now I turn to Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Chair Hartzler.

I realize we're at the edge of time, but I would like to ask a question to Dr. Lo in these closing minutes.

Dr. Lo, how has the separation of Tibetan children from their culture and their people affected their ability to retain their faith, retain their religious traditions?

And I wonder if you can speak to your own personal experiences in this regard as well?

DR. LO: Thank you, sir, for your question.

I did experience, through grade one to the university professor, the 50 years in Tibet under China's colonial policy implementation, and I think China using the education system as an institution that were completely, entirely excluding the

religious ideology and the religious practices.

For last time, they promote a more new law that also legalizing assimilation at the same time widely, not only Tibet. It's the Uyghurs and Mongolia and other ethnic groups too.

China is systematically using the education as a tool to cutting off children in excessive religious practices.

For myself, I just struggling, struggling between monastic education and the school of education. So until now, I have a struggle.

For example, over the last few years, colonial body school campaign. Even my dad passed away last year. My family couldn't contact me. And my uncle passed away. They couldn't contact me either.

So my wife here because of my work here, hasn't contact, speaking with her mom for four years now. So this is firmly targeting the Tibet people who defend their religious freedom and cultural identity and also demanding their culture and religion.

I'm an educational sociologist, and throughout my analysis China is entirely cutting this, religious institution across Tibet. It's not one place.

They have a systematic policy being implemented throughout the seven decades. So it's really China using their state power, cutting the children from their religious tradition and the religious practice in every possible way.

For example, before they ban the kids getting to the monastery under age 18. Last year, they posted a sign in the monastery gate, says children are not allowed in the monastery, to see the, even to see the religious context.

This year, after that new law they passed, this year they using increasingly empowering the school system that completely cut off the children in participating, even when children could not participate. One day a kid's grandmother passed away, to get home to participate in religious ritual process.

So this, China systematically

implementing, cutting off the entire, all the minority practice of religion in China.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Thank you.

DR. LO: Thank you.

CHAIR HARTZLER: Yes. Thank you, Dr. Lo, and thank you to all of our witnesses.

I think we heard today about particularly egregious, and I would say evil that is occurring in the world with religious freedom violations.

Our Commission deals with this all the time, and we make recommendations to our government. But I think we've seen and heard today examples of governments who are actually targeting children in order to facilitate their own ideology and to wipe out faith in this world and in those countries.

And we've heard how Pakistan, how people are targeting girls and having them forced conversion and marriage as children, young girls, and this is horrible.

We heard how the Russian government complicit with the Russian Orthodox Church is doing

the same thing with Ukrainian children, taking them from their families and putting them in military schools and indoctrinating them, denying their Ukrainian Christian faith and teaching them how to be little soldiers.

And we've heard what's going on in Burma with the Rohingyas and this has been going on for too long, how children are being denied not only their faith, but their existence and their hope and their future.

And we've heard how in China what's going on, how the CCP is targeting children, and I think, in sum, I want to summarize his written testimony, Dr. Lo summarized it, and I think it holds true.

He says, in sum, what we are witnessing is a systematic reconfiguration of childhood, education, and religion. It operates through law, policy, institutional transformation, and curriculum design.

Its effects are cumulative and intergenerational, and at its core raises a fundamental question: what happens to a society

when its youngest members are structurally separated from the spiritual and cultural traditions that once defined it?

Thank you for that summation. I think that really says it all, and we are certainly going to continue to encourage our government to do all it can to speak up for these children and to interact with these governmental leaders and to urge them to allow children to have religious freedom.

So thank you to our audience, everyone who is listening live online and in person. So you can find this recording in the future of this hearing. Please share it with others, and the witness testimony is on our website, which is www.uscirf.gov, and with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:08 a.m. EDT, the hearing was adjourned.]