



Hearing on The Impact of FoRB Violations on Children

Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Chair Vicky 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 am 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 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, preventing 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.

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 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 UN 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 cultural, 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 such 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 is now my pleasure to recognize USCIRF's Vice Chair, Asif Mahmood.

Vice Chair Asif Mahmood

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

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

FoRB 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 a 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 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.

USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler

Thank you, Vice Chair Mahmood.

We'll now turn to testimony from our witnesses. Reflecting a range of experiences and perspectives, each of our witnesses possesses their own unique expertise on

FoRB 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.

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

Witnesses proceed with their testimony in the order in which they are listed above.

Many thanks to our witnesses for sharing such crucial testimony. We will now move along to the Q&A session.