



## **FoRB Violations Against Christians Worldwide**

*Opening remarks as prepared for delivery*

### **USCIRF 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. Also, we are grateful to Senator Budd for sponsoring the room for this morning's proceedings.

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.

There are many accounts of Christian persecution that have remained with me over the years. Many of us have seen horrific footage and gruesome images from around the world that has intended to terrorize Christians. One story that particularly haunts our collective conscience is that of a Christian Nigerian girl, Leah Sharibu. When she was only 14 years old, Islamic State – West Africa Province or ISWAP terrorists kidnapped her and over 100 girls from their school in an attempt to force her to convert to Islam. Because Leah refused to renounce her faith, she was not released. Now, she has suffered eight long years of captivity facing unimaginable exploitation and the denial of her religious freedom.

She is not alone. Persecutors around the world deny religious freedom to untold numbers of Christians. The stories you will hear today are not offered simply to inform, but to call us to a sense of urgency about the persecution of Christians. It is imperative that we confront a heart-wrenching reality. As we speak, innocent men, women, and children are losing their homes, their livelihoods, and even their lives, simply for being Christians.

This hearing also highlights the extent to which foreign governments repress and restrict religious freedom. These restrictions range from legal limitations on

worship to outright violence targeting Christians because of their faith.

Governments in various countries severely limit Christians' religious expression, including teaching, worship, and practice, with countries like Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia among those who impose such ongoing, systematic, and egregious restrictions. We'll hear about a number of governments that engage in these violations today and bear witness to the stories of the people they persecute merely for asserting their freedom of religion or belief or FoRB.

Reports of Christian persecution abroad paint a dark picture for religious freedom.

In Burma, the current military authority, also known as the Tatmadaw has banned house church gatherings since 2023. Police have compelled some Christian communities to give them lists of individuals who attend mass, restricting their freedom of worship and endangering their privacy. Organizations monitoring the military's ongoing violence in Burma estimate Burmese authorities have destroyed more than 200 churches and killed more than 85 clerics. The strikes perpetrated by the Burmese armed forces have also killed worshippers, including children.

International monitors have called for investigations into these attacks on civilians and religious sites as war crimes. In the meantime, Christians in Burma are at

grave risk and suffer repression by Burma's military regime.

In China, the government arrests and imprisons house church leaders - including the father of one of our witnesses today. Last month, Chinese authorities conducted a series of mass raids on churches just ahead of Christmas. Chinese authorities routinely target Catholic clergy who refuse to join the state-controlled Catholic organization. Religious leaders and laypersons, including Jimmy Lai, face spurious charges of "fraud" and "subversion." In recent years, the government has demolished churches and removed crosses from public view. Additionally, the government strictly polices Christian religious material and bans certain Christian apps as well.

The persecution of Christians abroad is a stark illustration of just how far governments will go to unjustly restrict freedom of religion or belief. The U.S. government should work to prevent refolement of Christians fleeing religious persecution to countries where their lives are at risk. The United States has a critical role to play in holding accountable those engaged in this persecution. At a time when Christians abroad face attacks simply for their faith, U.S. leadership is critical now more than ever.

A core aspect of the United States founding is rooted in religious freedom for all. As we approach the 250th anniversary as a nation, we must remind ourselves that this fundamental freedom is at the center of what it means to truly be free. As the United States advances its foreign policy, USCIRF calls on the U.S. Congress and the Administration to protect this universal freedom for everyone.

With that, I would like to now turn the floor over to USCIRF Vice Chair Asif Mahmood.

**USCIRF Vice Chair Asif Mahmood**

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

As Chair Hartzler correctly noted, the persecution of Christians abroad is a FoRB issue that affects everyone because FoRB is universal. When governments deny Christians the right to gather peacefully for worship, live according to the tenets of their faith, or live in freedom, it restricts FoRB for us all.

For example, across Africa, governments have restricted FoRB by preventing Christians from using houses of worship. In Somalia, the government has reportedly prevented the rebuilding of old churches and the opening of new ones. In Sudan, the Sudan Armed Forces destroyed a Pentecostal Church in El Haj Yousif without notice. Nonstate actors have brutally attacked Christians in Africa as well. In Cameroon, Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, AKA JAS/Boko Haram abducted a priest this past May. And Allied Democratic Forces, or ADF, in the Democratic Republic of Congo continued to kill Christians in attacks throughout 2025. And these are just a few examples.

Furthermore, USCIRF remains particularly concerned that Nigeria's government continues to tolerate attacks on Christian communities and houses of worship by ethnic Fulani militants, armed insurgents, and bandit groups. Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt report they are afraid to gather for worship for fear they will be violently attacked. These fears are, sadly, well-founded. In May, al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru fighters reportedly kidnapped 160 mainly Christian children and killed eight people in Niger State. Assailants from ISWAP, also executed three Christians, and shared images of these grotesque executions on social media. And in October, bandits killed Reverend Yahaya and abducted 20 others in Kaduna State. When President Trump designated Nigeria a country of particular concern,

or CPC in October, USCIRF welcomed the designation, and called for “a tough plan” to “ensure that perpetrators of violence are held to account.”

The threats facing religious freedom around the world are enormous. Yet the United States is not powerless in the face of this persecution. The Trump administration and U.S. Congress both play an influential role in addressing the religious freedom restrictions that USCIRF has reported on over the years.

Firstly, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom plays a critical role in U.S. efforts to promote FoRB abroad. Administrations led by both parties have nominated - and Congress has confirmed - strong defenders of freedom of religion or belief. USCIRF calls on the Administration to renominate an IRF Ambassador and for Congress to swiftly hold confirmation hearings for this position.

Next, the administration should work for the repeal globally of blasphemy laws used to target Christians and other religious minorities. Ninety-six countries around the world have blasphemy laws, which violate protections on religious beliefs

including those that offend. USCIRF's blasphemy law compendium details the full scope of these laws, and is accessible on our website, [USCIRF.gov](http://USCIRF.gov).

In other ways, the Trump administration has indicated its interest in protecting FoRB for Christians. Many of the threats Christians face abroad relate to registration laws. These laws create undue burdens on Christians and often reflect government interference with Christians' ability to exercise FoRB. Administration officials should advocate for the repeal of registration laws unfairly targeting Christians, or advocate they be equitably applied to all organizations.

Discriminating against Christians or any religious minority runs afoul of protections on freedom of religion or belief.

The administration should also raise the cases of victims of FoRB in high-level engagements with foreign government officials. The White House's outspoken approach to the promotion of international religious freedom is squarely aligned with public advocacy for FoRB prisoners, especially in those countries that target Christians and other religious minorities. These include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan, and Russia. Governments must understand that to harass, imprison,

mistreat, or pressure Christians on the basis of their faith is not only an affront to religious freedom but also a violation of international law.

Finally, the U.S. Department of State should review its policies and support organizations promoting the protection of at-risk Christian communities abroad. These include early warning systems that protect Christians from violence on the basis of their faith, inter-religious programming, and resource distribution by faith-based groups who build trust and dismantle hatred toward Christians.

For its part, Congress, should ensure that the administration's efforts to protect Christians abroad are funded. It should continue to hold hearings about conditions facing Christians, such as the one the held in 2025 on Nigeria, where they face religious persecution. I thank the witnesses for being here today to help shed light on these issues through their testimony.

I now turn the floor back to Chair Hartzler.