



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Vice Chair:

Thank you very much, Chair Perkins. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

Non-state actors, including terrorist organizations, are often responsible for the types of vicious attacks that Chair Perkins highlighted. Branches of ISIS have claimed responsibility for the killing of worshippers in their place of worship in countries such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. In the worst such incident in Egypt, in November 2017 ISIS fighters bombed a mosque in North Sinai and then fired on mostly Sufi Muslim worshippers as they fled the carnage, killing 311 and injuring over 120. In Nigeria, Boko Haram's campaign of mass terror has similarly included countless attacks on churches and mosques. These attacks are particularly savage, aiming to decimate the sanctuary of houses of worship and instill widespread terror.

These kinds of attacks also impact the victims in unimaginable way. As explained by Yamini Ravindran, one of the victims of the terrorist bombings on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka that spoke at the State Department's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom this past summer, the impact of the attack has left the Christian Community "with a fear psychosis like never before." At the Ministerial, Ravindran told the story of a 6-year old girl that suffered severe injuries that left her blind. The girl lost both her parents in the attack, and now lives with her grandmother. She is too young to understand what happened, and repeatedly ask her grandmother where her parents are and why it is so

dark. How do you answer questions like this or console a child in this situation? Many of the victims in Sri Lanka, like this girl and her grandmother, are left broken, forced to face inconceivable questions.

Vigilante mobs have also targeted places of worship to harm specific religious communities. For example, in Pakistan in May 2018 a mob destroyed a 100-year old Ahmadiyya mosque in a city in Punjab. The mob was instigated in part by a law that permits the imprisonment of Ahmadi Muslims who call their house of worship a mosque. Mobs in Sindh Province of Pakistan also attacked and vandalized Hindu temples after a Hindu principal was accused of blasphemy in September 2019.

Alongside these horrific attacks on houses of worship, we are also deeply concerned about less overt tactics that threaten them. States often employ these less violent techniques as part of a wider campaign to restrict religious freedom.

One technique we see frequently imposed by states, for instance, is the impermissible seizure of places of worship or other holy sites belonging to specific religious communities. Without a place of worship, a religious group's ability to manifest its religion or belief is often extinguished. For example, in May this year, Iranian intelligence agents changed the locks to the 100-year old Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Tabriz, Iran and removed the cross from the building. Although the cross was eventually restored, the congregation is still not permitted to worship in its historic church.

Other alarming tactics we have observed are the malicious surveillance of holy sites to intimidate worshippers, the misuse of registration procedures to target the houses of worships of specific religious communities, and the physical destruction or demolition of holy sites and other forms of religious and cultural heritage, specifically because of their religious significance.

I would like to invite you all to take a copy of USCIRF's factsheet on protecting houses of worship, released today, which further outlines the types of assaults on houses of worships and provides illustrative examples of these attacks that have occurred in 2019. I also want to thank the journalists at the U.S. Agency for Global Media, who are with us here today, for their help in raising awareness of our Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. You can view some of the excellent editorials they have produced on the RPOC pages of the USCIRF website.

Commissioner Maenza will now turn to U.S. and international efforts to combat these violent and restrictive tactics.

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