



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Vice Chair:

Thank you very much. In light of the myriad of threats to houses of worship outlined by my fellow Commissioners, worshipers of every religion are in urgent need of international support to safeguard their protection in their places of worship. While the momentum to address these issues is increasing, we must ensure that the United States is effectively doing its part to support protection measures and coordinating with international efforts.

Houses of worship and other holy sites are representative of the history, social fabric and traditions of religious communities. The destruction of such sites and the loss of their associated spiritual significance often strikes at the very heart of those who practice their faith or find religious meaning there.

In response to the increasing number of attacks against religious sites, President Trump announced last month that the United States would dedicate an additional \$25 million to protect religious sites and relics. This additional allotment of funds will be essential for expanding programs that train security forces overseas to provide the protection needed to ensure that religious sites are not soft targets and that worshippers can peacefully practice their faith without fear.

To ensure the preservation of religious and related cultural heritage, the United States government has sponsored several initiatives that support its protection. Notably, the

Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation contributes toward post-conflict and post-disaster recovery efforts. Since 2001, the program has awarded \$74 million for close to 1,000 projects in more than 125 countries, including many projects that preserve and restore religiously significant buildings and objects. Just this month, the first regional conference on Cultural Heritage Protection for Religious Communities was held in Morocco to further explore opportunities to protect religious sites in the Sahel region. We look forward to hearing more from Ambassador Brownback regarding these programs and other U.S. government initiatives.

Alongside the U.S. government's initiatives, there are several noteworthy intergovernmental and interfaith efforts that strive to protect houses of worship. In the hopes of guaranteeing the sanctity of religious sites, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilization developed a Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites that provides concrete recommendations to support countries in their efforts to ensure the safety of religious places and worshippers. Search for Common Ground and a coalition of NGOs has also developed the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites that aims to improve the protection of holy sites and promote inter-religious reconciliation. We will hear more about these two initiatives today and consider opportunities for the United States to contribute to their implementation.

On behalf of USCIRF, I look forward to hearing recommendations from our witnesses about what more the U.S. and the international community can do to ensure that houses of worship remain peaceful sanctuaries.

Thank you, and I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Perkins.

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