



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

USCIRF 2020 Annual Report Press Conference

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Vice Chair Manchin.

While we did see some positive developments in some countries, we also noted a noticeable deterioration of religious freedom in others. For example, Nicaragua and Algeria appear in USCIRF's reporting for the first time as recommendations for the Special Watch List. In Nicaragua, the government and its supporters targeted religious institutions – most notably the Catholic Church – with attacks on clergy, worshippers, and Church property. And Algeria escalated its ongoing repression of religious minorities, systematically cracking down on the Evangelical Protestant community.

Perhaps the steepest, and most alarming, deterioration in religious freedom conditions was in India, the largest democracy in the world. In 2019, the BJP-led government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across the country, especially for Muslims. Most notably, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act provides a fast track to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan already residing in India. This potentially exposes millions of Muslims to detention, deportation, and statelessness when the government completes its planned nationwide National Register of Citizens. In addition, the national and various state governments have tolerated widespread harassment and violence against religious minorities. Based on these developments, USCIRF recommends CPC designation for India in this report for the first time since 2004.

While our report focuses primarily on the worst violators, a new section of the report highlights key trends around the world, including in countries that do not meet the statutory criteria for CPC or Special Watch List recommendations. The trends discussed include: the Chinese

government's harassment of human rights advocates outside its borders; a spike in attacks on houses of worship; the adoption of harsher blasphemy laws in some countries; and a surge in anti-Semitism in Europe. We hope that identifying these emerging issues will aid those defending religious freedom to swiftly respond to these threats.

Unfortunately, religious freedom is under assault by more than just state actors. Our report also covers "entities of particular concern," or EPCs. To qualify for such designation, a nonstate group must commit "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations, and it also must: exercise significant political power and territorial control; be outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employ violence in pursuit of its objectives.

This year USCIRF recommends six groups for EPC designation, based on their conduct and control of territory in 2019. Five are already designated as EPCs by the State Department: al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Houthis in Yemen, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. One group—Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria—has not yet been designated. In addition, USCIRF remains concerned by particularly severe religious freedom violations perpetrated by other groups even though USCIRF concluded that those groups did not meet the statutory requirement of significant political power and territorial control during the reporting year.

The importance of taking action against state and non-state violators is clear: in addition to endangering individuals and communities, severe violations of religious freedom threaten nations' stability and security. As our report details, U.S. law provides a range of tools to address these violations—including in the International Religious Freedom Act, also referred to as IRFA, the Frank Wolf Act, and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. USCIRF urges the Trump Administration to continue to elevate religious freedom as a foreign policy and national security priority by vigorously implementing all of these tools.

Our 2020 Annual Report contains several recommendations for how the Administration and Congress can prioritize international religious freedom, which we hope to see implemented this year. For example, under IRFA, a CPC designation requires a presidential response, but the State Department regularly reimposes existing sanctions or reissues waivers on taking an action. In our Annual Report, we call on the State Department to stop this practice and instead, for each such country, take a unique action specifically in response to religious freedom concerns. We believe that utilizing the strong responses provided for in IRFA will demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change.

Thank you, and we look forward to answering your questions. I'll now turn the floor back over to Chair Perkins.