



Conversation with USCIRF: The President’s Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom

Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Tony Perkins, USCIRF Vice Chair:

Thank you, Chair Manchin. I would like to echo our thanks to Acting Administrator Barsa for taking the time to join us here today.

USCIRF was thrilled when President Trump signed the Executive Order on Advancing Religious Freedom in early June. The order not only states that “religious freedom for all people worldwide is a foreign policy priority” but also a “moral and national security imperative”. In practice, the order further elevates the U.S. government’s prioritization of religious freedom in several significant ways.

First, it increases foreign assistance funding to \$50 million annually to advance international religious freedom, doubling the amount the State Department has had for such programs in recent years. Specifically, it calls on funding initiatives to improve the safety and security of houses of worship, one of USCIRF’s top

priorities, and it calls for programs to protect and preserve the cultural heritages of religious communities, among other things.

The Executive Order expands mandatory training on international religious freedom – currently required for State Department Foreign Service Officers – to more federal officials in a variety of government agencies at least every three years. It encourages the utilization of economic tools and more explicitly integrates international religious freedom into U.S. bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

The Executive Order requires the development of an overarching strategy along with country-specific action plans. In particular, the Secretary of State is charged with developing a plan to prioritize international religious freedom in the planning and implementation of foreign policy and in foreign assistance programs. In addition, in all countries that engage in or tolerate violations of religious freedom, including Countries of Particular Concern and countries on the Special Watch List, the diplomatic missions must develop comprehensive action plans to improve the situation. USCIRF has longed called on the U.S. government to develop an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad, as well as country-specific action plans, and we welcome the fact that this Executive Order requires the State Department and USAID to do exactly that.

The Executive Order requires government officials to raise concerns about international religious freedom and cases involving religious prisoners of conscience when meeting with foreign officials. While many diplomats routinely discuss these issues with their counterparts, we were encouraged to see this type of advocacy codified into law, and that religious prisoners of conscience, another of

USCIRF's top priorities, was explicitly mentioned. As Chair Manchin noted, USCIRF Commissioners advocate on behalf of specific individuals imprisoned because of their beliefs through our Religious Prisoners of Conscience project. Through this work, we have seen that U.S. government engagement in and attention to these cases can have a positive impact, and in some cases, led to the release of religious prisoners of conscience.

With that background on the Executive Order, I will now turn it over to Acting Administrator Barsa to discuss USAID's efforts to prioritize religious freedom.