



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Briefing

Silencing Religious Freedom in Africa: **The Impact of Speech Restrictions**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) briefing on *Silencing Religious Freedom in Africa: The Impact of Speech Restrictions*. Thank you very much to Representative Jim McGovern and his staff for reserving this room for us this morning.

I am Tony Perkins, the Chair of USCIRF. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government body that monitors religious freedom worldwide, using international standards, and makes recommendations for U.S. policy to Congress, the Administration, and the State Department. USCIRF was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA. USCIRF is not part of the State Department, which has its own Ambassador at Large and office for international religious freedom, also created by IRFA, but we work closely with the Ambassador and office.

We are glad to be able to hold today's briefing in celebration of International Human Rights Day. As we celebrate the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, we reaffirm our commitment to

upholding human rights, including the closely linked freedoms of religion and expression, enshrined in Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR respectively. Across the world, we see how governments continue to find new ways to silence individuals. They block social media to keep people from expressing their views. They target and restrict religious groups whom they view as threats. Even though some laws that impact free expression may be created with good intentions, such as to reduce hate or discrimination against certain groups, they should be carefully crafted, and should not become tools of oppression.

USCIRF's newest report on this topic is entitled "[Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa](#)." This report surveys speech restrictions in Africa and their impact on religious freedom, and includes policy recommendations to address the impact of these restrictions in Africa.

We have a great panel lined up for you today, and I would like to thank each of our panelists for being a part of this event. Each panelist will give some opening remarks on the topic and then we will take questions and have what I hope will be a robust discussion. First to speak will be USCIRF staff members and authors of the report Kirsten Lavery, who is our International Legal Specialist, and Ferdaouis Bagga, who is our Policy Analyst monitoring several countries in Africa. They will give an overview of the report and of the impact of speech restrictions on religious freedom in Africa. We will then hear from Mike Jobbins, the Associate Vice President of Global Affairs and Partnerships at Search for Common Ground, and Dunia Tegegn the Almami Cyllah Africa Fellow at Amnesty International USA to discuss strategies to combat discrimination and hate.

Thank you all very much for coming, and with that we will start with remarks from Kirsten.

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