



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

USCIRF 2020 Annual Report Press Conference

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:

Good day everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Tony Perkins, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF. We at USCIRF are committed advocates for international religious freedom, which is a foundational and fundamental human right. Today, we are releasing our 21st Annual Report, which will give you a snapshot of where religious freedom is improving or in peril and what the U.S. government can do to encourage positive change.

For those of you who aren't familiar with us, we're an independent, bipartisan U.S. advisory body dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. Throughout the year, we monitor religious freedom conditions abroad, including through frequent travel.

Under our mandate in the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, we issue a report by May 1 each year with recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress.

All chapters in the report are approved by a majority vote and reflect the views of a bipartisan group of Commissioners from different religious, political, and professional backgrounds. In the limited cases where commissioners have differing views – in accordance with the IRFA legislation – each Commissioner has the right to include his or her individual views in the annual report. Different Commissioners have done so many times over the years, and some have done so in this year's report.

Key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter represent insights and information gained through USCIRF hearings, factfinding trips, research, and meetings with government officials, human rights advocates, and religious leaders.

Before I describe the report further, I would like to thank everyone for tuning in for our virtual release today. While we wish that we could have released the report in person, we remain committed to sharing it as widely as possible, even in these uncertain times. The global COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted all of our lives, but it also has reinforced why we must continue our work to protect religious freedom.

We invite those with questions to use the Q&A feature on the bottom of your screen. Please be sure to identify yourself and your media outlet. You may post these questions at any time, and we will respond to as many questions as possible following our approximately 20-minute overview of the highlights from this year's report. Commissioners will be available to answer additional questions this afternoon, following our noon-1:00 pm video conference with members of the IRF Roundtable and NGOs. If you would like to request a telephone, Skype, or Zoom interview with any of the commissioners, please provide your contact information in the Q&A feature and our staff will follow up with you immediately following this event. If for any reason there are technical difficulties during the Webinar and we have to shut it down abruptly, please email our staff at media@uscirf.gov to set up an interview.

I want to thank our professional staff for their outstanding work preparing the annual report and for organizing this event. This report every year is a team effort that involves everyone on USCIRF's staff, as well as Jamie Harvey and Amanda Greene of the Government Publishing Office's creative services department, Erin Mulligan, our copyeditor, and Emily Bohner and the translators at CETRA Language Solutions. The entire team's focus, coordination and dedication made today possible.

As you will notice, there were some key changes to content and format of the report from previous Annual Reports. First, the report's main focus is on two groups of countries: those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs, under IRFA, and those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its Special Watch List, or SWL. The second group is different from past years, when USCIRF had its own "Tier 2"—a category USCIRF created long before Congress required the State Department to have the SWL. The change to making SWL recommendations is intended to better conform with the statutory scheme and with USCIRF's oversight and advisory role.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations of religious freedom. The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not all three, of the systematic, ongoing, egregious test for CPC status. This is a change from USCIRF's previous Tier 2, which required only one of the elements of the systematic, ongoing, egregious test.

In addition, the country chapters this year are more concise to better emphasize the key findings justifying the CPC or SWL recommendation and to make more targeted and actionable recommendations for U.S. policy. To supplement our Annual Report, USCIRF releases

publications and holds hearings and events throughout the year. Relevant materials are referenced in each country chapter and also available at www.uscirf.gov.

This year, our report covers 29 countries. Based on 2019 conditions, we recommend 14 of these countries for CPC status. This includes the 9 countries the State Department has designated as CPCs, most recently in December 2019: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In addition, USCIRF believes that the State Department should designate five other countries as CPCs: India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

We recommend that the State Department maintain on the SWL four countries—Cuba, Nicaragua, Sudan, and Uzbekistan—and add 11 countries to that list: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic (CAR), Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Turkey.

My fellow Commissioners and I will discuss a few of USCIRF's key findings and recommendations on some of these countries in more detail. Though the Annual Report focuses on the worst countries in the world for religious freedom, we highlight improvements in these places, where appropriate; and we certainly saw some positive movement in some countries in 2019.

The cover of our report this year depicts the remarkable story of positive change in Sudan. The top three photos show the brave, grassroots protest movement that brought down the Islamist-led regime of former president Omar al-Bashir a year ago, and led to the establishment of a joint civilian-military transitional government. One of the notable advancements made by the transitional government was the repeal of a repressive public order law that the former regime used to punish individuals, particularly women, who did not conform to its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The transitional government has closely engaged with USCIRF, and transitional Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok is shown on the cover in a December meeting with USCIRF. The final photo is of a Sufi worship ceremony that USCIRF witnessed during a visit to Sudan that I led two months ago.

USCIRF has recommended Sudan for CPC status since USCIRF's first set of CPC recommendations in 2000. Now, 20 years later, we recommend the country for the SWL for the first time. There is still much work to be done before there is religious freedom for all Sudanese, but we have been inspired by the progress to date. Our Annual Report includes recommendations to the U.S. government to further support Sudan in this pivotal moment, including supporting the Ministry of Education's program of comprehensive curricular reform.

I'd now like to turn to Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, who will discuss additional positive developments, the Administration's prioritization of religious freedom, USCIRF's Victims Database and our Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.