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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE  
AND NGOs

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P A R T I C I P A N T S

## COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Tony Perkins, Chair  
Gayle Manchin, Vice Chair  
Nadine Maenza, Vice Chair  
Gary L. Bauer  
Anurima Bhargava  
James Carr  
Tenzin Dorjee  
Johnnie Moore

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR PERKINS: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us today. I am Tony Perkins, chairman 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 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 may not be familiar with us, we are an independent bipartisan U.S. advisory body dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion 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 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 as well.

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

Before I further describe the report, I would like to thank everyone for tuning in for our virtual release today. While we wish we could have

released the report in person on Capitol Hill, we remain committed to sharing it as widely as possible, even in these troubling 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 organization.

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.

I want to thank our professional staff for their outstanding work preparing the Annual Report and for organizing today's 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 copy editor, 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 that USCIRF created long before Congress required the State Department to have the SWL recommendation. 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 three elements of 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 recommendations and to make more targeted and actionable recommendations for U.S. policy.

Now to supplement our Annual Report, this year USCIRF has released publications and we hold public hearings and events throughout the year. Relevant materials are referenced in each country chapter and are also available at [www.uscirf.gov](http://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 nine countries the State Department has designated as

CPCs, most recently in December of 2019: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

In addition, USCIRF believes the State Department should designate five other countries as CPCs: India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

We recommend 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, Egypt, Indonesia, and Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Turkey.

My fellow commissioners and I have a few of USCIRF's key findings that we'll share. We'll 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 improvements in countries during 2019.

The cover of our report this year depicts

the remarkable story of the 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 just 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 curriculum reform.

I would like to turn now 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.

Vice Chair Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you, Chair Perkins and a special welcome to the IRF Roundtable, who are joining us here today for this very special moment as we release our Annual Report.

In 2019, we certainly were heartened to

see improvement in religious freedom conditions in some of our countries. It is not every year that we can report such advancement, and we hope that this year's progress will inspire positive change for years to come.

In addition to the advancements in Sudan, highlighted by Chair Perkins, Uzbekistan also took significant steps in 2019 to fulfill its commitments of the last few years to improve religious freedom conditions.

The Uzbek government ended its longstanding practice of raiding religious communities and closed its infamous Jasliq Prison. Although there are significant religious freedom concerns, including the country's problematic religious freedom law and the continued imprisonment of many peaceful Muslims, based on encouraging changes, USCIRF is recommending the country for the State Department's SWL in this Annual Report, after having recommended it for CPC designation every year since 2005.

Sudan and Uzbekistan both made this

progress in close consultation with USCIRF. We are particularly appreciative when countries are eager to engage with international stakeholders and take action to improve religious freedom conditions.

We similarly acknowledge the willingness of other countries, such as Bahrain, to dialogue with USCIRF during 2019. I led a delegation to Bahrain in 2019 and we were encouraged that Bahrain's synagogue in Manama hosted its first service in over 70 years for American Jewish attendees at the Peace to Prosperity conference.

USCIRF also moved Central African Republic from a CPC to a SWL recommendation this year. The government and 14 nonstate armed groups signed a peace agreement, which includes a commitment to respect religious freedom and led to decreased violence against civilians based on their perceived religious affiliation.

While implementation of the peace agreement remains a challenge, there is hope that this agreement, alongside ongoing truth and justice efforts, will minimize separatism and the

manipulation of religious and ethnic differences in CAR.

In addition to improvement in some countries, we also are encouraged to see the prioritization by the Trump administration of religious freedom in 2019.

In July, the State Department convened the Second Annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and a third Ministerial will be hosted by Poland this year in July. In September, President Trump dedicated an additional \$25 million to programs to protect religious freedom and religious sites.

The U.S. government's allocation of funds to protect religious sites was a key recommendation in USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report and an advocacy priority for USCIRF throughout the year.

Furthermore, in February 2020, the administration appointed Sarah Makin to be the first-ever Senior Director for International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council staff. USCIRF for years had urged successive

administrations to establish and fill the position and welcomed this long-needed action.

Another area we can share encouraging news relates to religious prisoners of conscience, which continued always to be a USCIRF priority in 2019, before and beyond. Pursuant to the mandate given to us by the Frank Wolf Act, in October, we launched our Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Victims List. The FoRB Victims List is a database that catalogs select victims targeted due to their freedom of religion or belief.

To date, more than 400 victims have been added. We hope the database will be a robust resource that supports religious freedom advocacy, raises the profile of individual victims, and demonstrates the scale of religious persecution.

I am particularly excited to share an update from our Religious Prisoners of Conscience, RPOC, Project. Through the Project, I adopted Mohammed Ali Taheri, a cognitive researcher and founder of a spiritual group in Iran.

He was imprisoned for his beliefs in 2011

under various charges and sentences, including twice having been sentenced to death. We were thrilled to hear that last month Mr. Taheri safely arrived in Canada after being granted asylum there.

In our Annual Report, we urge the U.S. government to give safe haven to victims of religious persecution, just like Mr. Taheri, by raising the refugee resettlement ceiling to its previously typical level and fully implementing the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

While we are encouraged by the positive developments we saw during 2019, religious freedoms declined in certain other countries.

Let me now turn the floor over to our other Vice Chair, Nadine Maenza, who will speak about some of those countries that saw a marked deterioration of religious freedom, another new addition to our report, our recommendations related to non-state actors, and some additional recommendations.

Thank you, Nadine.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: 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 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 that are 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 a Special Watch List recommendation.

The trends 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 those 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, and egregious" violations, and it must also meet these additional criteria: 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; the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan; and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

One group--Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) 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 has concluded that those groups did not meet the statutory requirement of significant political power and territorial control during the reporting period.

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 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 a 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 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 to Chair Perkins.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Maenza and Vice Chair Manchin. Thank you so much. And thank you all again for joining us today.

Again, if you have questions, at the bottom of your screen, you will see--and you will see me occasionally looking down to it as I'm kind of looking forward to questions that I'll be sorting through those and allocating them to commissioners--you'll see at the bottom it says Q&A. Type in your question, begin with your name and your affiliation, your organization.

And some of you may not be familiar with one of the changes we've taken at USCIRF at least during this past year, is that we have divided the countries up that we monitor to each commissioner. So each commissioner serves point on about four or five countries, then serves secondary on about four or five countries. That enables us to go a little bit deeper.

So some of you may ask a question on a particular country to a particular commissioner,

and I may redirect that question to the commissioner who is best versed on that particular country.

I'm going to start with a question pertaining to China, and this is going to go to Commissioner Gary Bauer who focuses on China.

Arguably, China is the worst violator of religious freedom in the world. In the past, Uighur Muslims, Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, and Tibetan Buddhists within its borders were targeted, but is there any evidence that China has become an exporter of religious persecution?

Commissioner Bauer.

[Pause.]

CHAIR PERKINS: Gary, I think you may be muted.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Ah. I'm sorry. There you go. That must have been a Chinese hacker right there, but at any rate forgive me.

Mr. Chairman, you're absolutely right. The Chinese Communists have declared war on all

religious faiths within their borders. It doesn't matter whether it's Muslims or Christians, Buddhists, followers of the Falun Gong. China demands that there be no loyalty among its citizens higher than their loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party.

Unfortunately, China is setting themselves up--Communist China is setting themselves up as a model for other countries around the world. They're exporting their oppression of religious liberty.

They're talking literally to developing countries and saying, look, this is an alternative path to the path that some Western countries have chosen of allowing each individual to seek God in the way that they see fit.

So we're very concerned about this as a commission. There's evidence that even here in the United States the Chinese Communists have staged suppression activities that keep Americans from finding out about what's happening inside Communist China, and there's also been intimidation here and

in a number of other countries of Chinese citizens that have left China and speak out against the Chinese Communist government.

China has also used their power in international bodies including the United Nations to stop action by those international agencies that might single out the horrible practices that Communist China is pursuing.

And one other comment on this. When the United States had its First Ministerial on Religious Freedom, Secretary of State Pompeo informed us that China literally called countries in that were developing nations that China had lent money to and told those countries that if they knew what was good for them they would not come to the United States to even participate in a meeting to discuss religious liberty worldwide.

So China, Communist China is being very aggressive and I believe that the great challenge for the next three decades, which is why USCIRF is so strongly condemning them, the great challenge for the next three decades will be this model of

persecution and oppression that China is holding up to the world and the model that I think USCIRF stands for and the United States stands for that says every human being has dignity, value and worth, and has the right to pursue God as their heart and soul directs them.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Bauer.

This question from Anna regarding the country of Uzbekistan. While I'm very pleased to hear Uzbekistan has improved, I am also concerned about the fact that there have been numerous reports of Uzbek law enforcement raiding, raiding homes of religious minorities now during the pandemic.

Uzbekistan is very much of a trend setter for that part of Asia. I'm very concerned that reducing its status from CPC to SWL could serve as a bad example for other countries. I don't think they have quite deserved it yet. Do you know about the recent raids? Will you please continue putting pressure on Uzbekistan? Again, I appreciate your

work.

I'm going to pass that to Commissioner Maenza to address. Nadine.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, thank you for the question.

We do recommend Uzbekistan as the Special Watch List because they have not corrected every problem they have in their country when it comes to religious freedom. You know we certainly have seen them not raiding unregistered communities the way they had in the past.

We visited the trip--that country in 2019 and were able to meet with religious communities who were able to tell us that their own personal experiences had changed and how they were treated by the government. So we really felt like we did see enough changes.

They didn't meet the criteria for systematic, ongoing, and egregious, but we do know that they did--that we--they don't want Muslims to wear hijabs or have beards. They did forced beard shavings of over a hundred men in a couple

different incidents.

So we're still going to keep watching and calling out any violations that we see, but do have to acknowledge that they are moving a country--just something--egregious violations they had just a few years ago, they're so far away from those that we're encouraging them to continue the journey they're on to move towards more religious freedom. But we will continue to keep an eye on them for sure.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Maenza.

Go to a question now from Peter. How much does USCIRF refer to the systematic and comprehensive Department of State Annual Religious Freedom Report and its independent judgments? How does USCIRF currently coordinate formally or informally with the State Department through IRFA or through embassies and countries of any degree of focus?

Well, we, we obviously communicate with them quite frequently. The teams, the professional

teams at USCIRF and at State are constantly in contact. But I will remind everyone that we are an independent agency created by--a commission created by the Congress. We do not report to the executive branch. We report our findings to them. We report to the President, Secretary of State and to Congress.

So we're a creation of Congress. So we operate independently with a sole focus on religious freedom. That was the reason for our creation is that we only look at one issue, and while we understand the State Department has other factors when they look at countries, they may come to a different conclusion at the end of the day. But that does not alter how we look at the issue.

We don't try to figure out where State Department wants to be. We just kind of call balls and strikes as it pertains to religious freedom, and we do use under the legislation, IRFA legislation, the definition, and I'll just remind everyone it's under IRFA, particularly severe violations of religious freedom means "systematic,

ngoing, and egregious violations."

And then of course it's defined in there, and that is what we look at. We don't measure country by country to rank countries. We just look at what is happening within the borders of those particular countries as it pertains to this definition and what is happening.

Next question is from Jill from Radio Free Asia. Many religious sites being destroyed in China. What resources are available to help protect religious sites in the Uighur region? What if anything can you do?

I will again give that question to Commissioner Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Well, the USCIRF report this year makes a number of recommendations to try to get at this persistent religious persecution by Communist China.

One of the things we've zeroed in on is that we can identify--the Commission can identify, the U.S. government can identify specific Chinese officials in the government, in the Chinese

Communist Party, that are directly implicated in the persecution of Muslims or Christians and other religious groups, and we're urging the United States government to sanction those individuals, if possible to freeze their assets, to restrict their travel to the United States when we can do that.

We've also endorsed several pieces of legislation now pending in Congress that we hope that Congress will act on quickly: one that references the violation of religious liberty in Tibet by the Chinese Communists and another piece of legislation that would ban the import from areas of China where the Uighur population is, and if that population is being persecuted and sometimes used for slave labor.

So we want to try to make sure that none of those goods make their way into the United States so there's a number of things we've zeroed in on, but then overall we've made more widespread recommendations about calling out China's persecution, including raising questions about whether U.S. government officials should

participate in the upcoming Olympic Games in China, in Communist China, as long as this persecution continues and is actually increasing in China against all religious faiths.

CHAIR PERKINS: [Inaudible]. In particular, Leah Sharibu remains a prisoner of conscience. She turns 17 in less than two weeks, and the Nigerian government has said very little and done even less. What is being done for her and other girls still in Boko Haram captivity?

I'm going to turn this question over to Commissioner, to Johnnie Moore. He is the primary on Nigeria although I will just make this comment because Leah Sharibu is personally my prisoner of conscience. I'm constantly having conversations. I've met multiple times with her mother. I've spoken with the White House. They are very much following and tracking what is happening with Leah.

This is one of the factors as we look at Nigeria and their either inability or unwillingness to protect religious minorities or to protect all religious people, their citizens, in their country.

But with that said, I'm going to ask Commissioner Johnnie Moore to address what is happening in Nigeria. Commissioner Moore.

COMMISSIONER MOORE: I'd just first like to add my commendation to Chairman Perkins for his unrelenting advocacy for Leah Sharibu. I was in the first meeting when he walked into the room and said we have to do something about this awful situation.

So not only is he an advocate for her, he is a relentless advocate for her, and the strength of her faith has inspired all of us as commissioners despite the fact that as a Commission we come from different faiths.

Nigeria is an important country. It is the largest economy in Africa, a leading oil-producing nation, a strategic and important ally of the United States of America. And they have an enormous problem on their hands, which they are more capable of solving than they are doing, and it is our intention in our report this year, not only to name them as a CPC, as we've done yet again, but

to call upon them to take some very, very specific actions.

In many ways, Leah is symbolic of the suffering of many, many Nigerians, including different communities and different faiths within the country.

But one of the things I know about Nigeria is Leah is one of thousands upon thousands. There are thousands of Leahs, and as a Commission we have a conviction that a country like Nigeria with elections that is an ally of the United States, that is a country with a historic diversity, nearly split in half in terms of Christian and Muslim, not to mention, you know, every sect of Christianity and every sect of Islam, they have a special responsibility to do more.

And I'm afraid that if they don't do more, then the terrorists in the northeast of the country are going to totally decimate the Christian community. They're going to kill every single Muslim that stands in their way, as they have done, and there are plenty of people in other parts of

the country that are inspired by them.

And this Commission has taken a particular interest. You know when you have this discussion about Nigeria, and I'll leave my thoughts here, there's often a debate about whether the conflicts within the country are motivated by religion or motivated by resources. This has been a longstanding public policy debate. And I am persuaded in one direction on that debate, but I'm more persuaded that the debate is now irrelevant.

The situation is so egregious the government needs to step in and fill the gap so that more people don't unnecessarily die and so we don't lose this jewel of pluralism that is the anchor for all of western Africa because, God forbid, we see the failure of western Africa, you think the Syrian crisis is unbelievable, we would have a Syria again and perhaps multiplied many fold.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Moore. Absolutely correct. Nigeria is one that probably--there's a lot of hot spots, but that one

in particular is very troubling when we see what's happening there just because of the size of the country and the implications it could have for the entire continent and even into Europe.

Our next question--actually there's several questions that have been submitted on the country of Pakistan and our interaction with them, how has their response been, what are conditions there, and so I'm going to ask Commissioner Anurima Bhargava, who focuses on that country, to kind of give an overall address of those various questions that have come in.

Commissioner Bhargava.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you,  
Commissioner Perkins.

So one of the questions was whether or not the status of Pakistan had changed, and we once again recommended that Pakistan be a Country of Particular Concern for a number of reasons, including the continued enforcement of blasphemy laws which have imprisoned and/or given a death sentence to 80 people within Pakistan, and then the

continued concerns about what those both kinds of blasphemy laws and other laws that restrict certain communities have allowed in terms of false accusations and violence by non-state actors.

In addition, we remain concerned about what's happening with the Ahmadis population and community in Pakistan, who have been effectively criminalized and not allowed to have the places of worship for them designated mosques.

And lastly about continued conversions of those who are in non-Muslim communities within Pakistan to Islam. And I would like to say, however, that one of the things that has been really important for us with regards to Pakistan and engagement with the Pakistani government is that they have, they have, the Pakistani government has been willing to engage and to really understand some of the concerns that we have raised and to engage in dialogue about how it is that those concerns can be addressed.

In addition, we look forward once we are able to travel to be able to visit Pakistan and to

understand more on the ground about what's been happening within the country. And so for those reasons, it's been, we see some positive engagement with the Pakistani government. We really appreciate that, and we hope that that will help us to address some of the concerns that we've been seeing.

But, again, the status of Pakistan this year is once again that we're recommending it to be a Country of Particular Concern.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Bhargava.

This question from Nathan. In your trips and conversations with persecuted people around the world, what would you describe as hearing from those that suffer of what they hope for from America and American citizens?

A really great question. I'm going to ask Vice Chair Manchin if she would like to address that question.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: One of the most wonderful experiences being a commissioner on

USCIRF is our ability to travel to some of these countries and not just meet with the ministerial leaders and the embassies but to actually have a chance to go out into the communities and meet with the local people.

And I am continuously impressed by two things. One is countries really care about what the United States thinks of them, and how we designate them and how we sort of watch over what they're doing. They care. And so when we put them as a Country of Particular Concern or on the Special Watch List, there is generally an immediate attention being paid to the points that we make. We hope that they are paying attention, and that they make an effort.

But the second point that touched me so deeply was as we talk to these people, the hope that organizations like a commission like USCIRF and many of the organizations out there that work everyday in the trenches, working with these people, it gives them hope that someone cares, that someone is listening and watching what is

happening.

And that's the other thing we see with our political prisoners of conscience. When prisoners are interviewed, one of the things that they say that makes them so hopeful is that as a prisoner of conscience, they know that we have not forgotten them, that we know their face, we know their story, that we keep raising that awareness home and abroad so that the world knows that there are many people out there being held in prison for no other reason than because of their faith.

And so we continue to strive, but it is so refreshing and overwhelming to know that just as a commissioner on USCIRF and the work that we do inspires hope for people around the world.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Manchin.

This question from Mireille [ph] Phillips. Considering strong bilateral relations between Egypt and the U.S., what do you recommend to the State Department in dealing with violations against Copts and other religious minorities?

Egypt is one of the countries that I focus on so I will take that question and answer it. Actually what we've seen in Egypt is actually trending tentatively in a very positive direction so we're encouraged by what we see happening in Egypt.

But this is one of the areas that continue to cause us concern, especially in the rural areas. The religious inequalities and bigotry continue to plague Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

So a couple of the recommendations that we're making to the State Department--and I'll just say that we have--this is one of the countries, there is a few--actually probably six or seven countries that have very intentionally engaged with USCIRF in trying to improve conditions for religious freedom in their country and to them we're very grateful, and we want to continue having those conversations and having that dialogue.

But at the end of the day we want to continue to see tangible improvement, and we've

seen some improvement in Egypt where more churches have been registered. There is still a backlog, but they're moving forward on that.

The president, President el-Sisi, is certainly putting out messages that embrace religious diversity and tolerance. So we're grateful for that.

But our key recommendations to the U.S. government as it pertains to Egypt is that we recommend that they be on the State Special Watch List. We urge the Egyptian government to stop ceding legal authority to customary reconciliation councils to deal with incidents of sectarian mob violence, particularly in the rural areas which often is turned around and used against the religious minorities.

And then allocate a portion of U.S. assistance to support efforts to reform public school curriculum and teacher training as a way to advance long-term religious inclusivity, and again the president is taking a lot of steps to do that, and very grateful that that is taking place, but

still areas of improvement are needed.

We've also gotten several questions on Syria that have come in, and I'm going to ask Chairman Nadine Maenza to address those questions.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Chair Perkins.

You know, in Syria the most notable positive development was the destruction of the Isis Caliphate in March. But in October, Turkey invaded the area governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, a place that USCIRF has long commended for their religious freedom conditions.

And this forced Kurds and Christians and Yazidis and others to flee from this area that they invaded and so Turkey has begun to move in refugees from other parts of Syria and sort of have forced religious ethnic and cultural replacement that they enforced in Afrin in 2018.

So for that reason, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government press Turkey for a time line for withdrawing from northeast Syria and also

expand its engagement and assistance to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and also work towards lifting sanctions from the area that they govern.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Maenza.

Several more questions regarding China that have come in, quite a few questions. China obviously a country of great interest to a lot of people, and I'm going to turn once again to Chairman Bauer to address some of these questions.

In part, can you speak to the forced labor of Uighur Muslims in China? Also, how is it possible the Chinese representative was chosen to be one of the five panelists of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations? And how do you think the CPP, the CCP, the Communist--China Communist Party has been taking advantage of the coronavirus pandemic regarding suppression of religious freedom?

Commissioner Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you, Mr.

Chairman.

Well, as I said earlier, the forced labor with the Uighur Muslims is just another example of how the Chinese Communists are regularly ignoring and violating the norms that most civilized nations follow.

In the case of forced labor, we should remember that the Chinese Communists have been doing a variation of this for decades. You know sadly there's been a market for Chinese products around the world because they're cheaper and in many cases in the past they've been cheaper because they're being made with the equivalent of slave labor.

This is an area that I hope all of us will get better at, to not buying anything that might be made under those circumstances.

So this is an issue with the Uighur Muslims that international pressure should continue to be put on the Communist Party of China.

On the issue of China having representation on the Human Rights Commission at

the United Nations, I'm seldom speechless, but when I first saw that story, I thought it had to be some sort of misprint. This is like bringing the head of the drug cartel in to talk to school children about why they shouldn't use drugs.

And the fact that China is on, one of the panelists is a testament to their boldness and aggressiveness that they show even as they are one of the world's leading violators of religious liberty, and sadly it is also a testament to how cowardly some UN bureaucrats are that they didn't resist that and say that with the record you have that's Communist China, you have no place on such a commission.

And then the third part of that question, Tony, I'm sorry?

CHAIR PERKINS: I'm not sure which one you, which part you answered. I'm sorry. I was reading the next question.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Yeah, I was talking about the slave labor and also about the Communist Party being on the Human Rights Commission. But

there was also a third.

CHAIR PERKINS: I think, I think that covers it.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Okay.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Bauer.

There is one other aspect of China, a question that was asked, but I'm going to go to Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee to address that issue, and it pertains to the Dalai Lama and China's interference there. So I'm going to go to Commissioner Dorjee.

Commissioner Dorjee.

COMMISSIONER DORJEE: Thank you. Thank you, Chair Perkins. And thank you for the question.

In our Annual Report, you know, we have acknowledged that China has designed their laws to control and to interfere in the reincarnation successions of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other lamas, and this is a very serious matter, and it certainly violates international religious

freedom standards.

So I'm very grateful that Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom of the United States and ex officio of USCIRF Sam Brownback who traveled last year to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama to discuss this topic and internationalize this issue.

And so in our report, in our recommendations, we have stated that the members of the Congress should pass the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which includes elements addressing this political point, how China should not and cannot interfere in the reincarnation successions of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

And so I mean China among the CPCs is the worst, you know, country, classic case story here, and it is a country that has intentionally used their high-tech surveillance networks and artificial intelligence to track down especially Uighurs and Tibetans and, you know, identify them, and these are serious matters. So for more details, you can look up in our chapter on China

that includes Tibet.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Dorjee. Appreciate that.

Commissioner Moore, I think, also had one aspect of China that he wanted to address as well.

Commissioner Moore.

COMMISSIONER MOORE: One of the trends that we're seeing with China as cited in the key development chapter is that China is exporting their own intolerance around the world, and a key part of that strategy is manipulating the international systems to do so.

And so this appointment that was referenced in the question, it's far more catastrophic than China having a seat at the table because this table is the table that determines who the special rapporteurs on the various human rights areas of focus of the UN will be chosen.

So China has systematically and deliberately managed to increase their influence in all of these international organizations over the last decade, and they have now managed to have this

key role in determining the independent watchdogs of the United Nations.

And this is a particular problem for our Commission because our Commission in our legislation, it explicitly states that we're not to judge the world on the basis of American standards, but on the basis of international standards, and yet increasingly those international standards are being violated by the very international system that was created, and now China has taken that very, very important seat at that table because the international system allowed it. This is not a small issue. It is catastrophic.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Moore.

We have a few questions that have come in pertaining to India. One question from Harvest [ph] is India's new Citizenship Law. Is there evidence that India is going to move toward the mass deportations of Muslims?

And, secondly, have you seen that the law has changed public attitudes towards Muslim

communities or empowered anti-Muslim sentiment?

Another question regarding India. Ariel [ph] asks because India is a strategic partner of the U.S., what is the best way for the U.S. government to address religious freedom violations in India without ruining the partnership we are trying to develop with India? And I think a couple other questions have come in, essentially the same.

India, just by frame of--by historical reference, India has been on USCIRF's Tier 2 list since 2010. This is a country we've been watching very closely, and the trends have been very negative and concerning.

In particular, the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the CAA, and the approval of the National Population Register at the end of the year is what really creates a lot of concern.

Now this is presently only in one of the 28 states, in Assam, but when you see that it's being used to exclude Muslims from citizenship, potentially as this whole scheme is carried out and

government officials suggest that this is what they want to do nationally.

Now, we have to look in historical context of what happened in Burma where something very similar occurred, and you ended up with a large stateless population. But I will address simply the systematic aspects of the religious persecution in India, as I mentioned the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the national government's abrogation of Article 370 of the constitution in August of 2019 which removed the autonomy of Kashmir, the use of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act to limit religious groups activities, and it's ongoing.

We've seen continued enforcement of anti-conversion laws, the enforcement of anti-cow slaughter laws, continued incitement to violence against religious minorities by government officials, and there are a lot of them.

And then it's egregious from the standpoint of the impunity for violence by non-state actors against religious minorities. And

there is evidence to suggest that this has intensified.

And so we are very concerned about this, acknowledging that this is an ally of the United States, but we look at religious freedom. Whether friend or foe, we are focused on religious freedom.

And friends point out weaknesses among friends in the hopes that they will become stronger friends, and so our goal here is to obviously strengthen religious freedom in the country of India, but at the same time we are hopeful that those relationships will be strengthened.

I will say this, additionally that USCIRF has not been granted entrance to India, and we certainly would like to go to India and observe these things for ourselves. So that's on India.

A question coming in regarding North Korea from Kim from Voice of America. I am wondering if there's any unique aspect to North Korea's persecution of religion, and is there any sign of improvement of treating people of religious beliefs in North Korea?

I'm going to again go to Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee to answer that question. Commissioner Dorjee.

COMMISSIONER DORJEE: Thank you, Chair Perkins, again, and thank you for the question.

North Korea is, of course, among the worst violators of international religious freedom, and it's one of those countries where international media have no access, and it's very hard to get any information out of the country on any aspects of life, including religious freedom issues.

And so, but we do know that there are many prison camps, labor training camps, holding tens of thousands of Christians there. They have something called "Songbun" system, which is basically a test of loyalty towards the regime, and those who don't kind of hold to that standard so the Christians and Buddhists there so they're deprived of opportunities of education and things like that.

And so anybody who is worshipping outside the state-sponsored house of worship are persecuted, and so the story is very grim there,

and so that's why we highly recommend to the administration that they should fill in the vacancy for Special Envoy for the North Korean Human Rights so that we will be able to assist the North Koreans to be able to have some human rights and hopefully all the human rights. And so for more details, of course, you can go back to our chapter on North Korea.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Dorjee.

A question pertaining to Iran religious prisoners of conscience. What is the view of Baha'is in Iran?

I will go to Commissioner Gary Bauer who focuses on the country of Iran. Commissioner Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Clearly, the Baha'is in Iran are under increasing persecution. We outline this in the chapter on Iran. Conditions generally in Iran on religious liberty are abysmal. It's not just Baha'i, but it's also Christians and some other small religious groups.

Another thing that the Commission this year made special note of is that we, we agreed with the Special Envoy on anti-Semitism that Iran is, its very philosophy of its country has been informed by anti-Semitism, and it's one of the greatest purveyors of anti-Semitism around the world.

So whether it's the Baha'i or anti-Semitism or persecution of Christians, Iran has an abysmal record, and we need to keep the pressure on.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Bauer.

We're going to take one more question. This question pertains to Vietnam. Any change in recommendations for Vietnam?

And I'm going to go back to Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee to answer that question. Commissioner Dorjee.

COMMISSIONER DORJEE: Thank you, again. Vietnam, as best we know, the situation hasn't changed. So therefore we once again

recommend to the State to recommend them as CPC country, and we get many reports about how authorities harass and even physically assault independent Cao Dai and in other groups like Hoa Hao Buddhists, and we know that an estimated 10,000 monks and Christians are rendered stateless and have been deprived of identity cards.

So the situation in Vietnam is still very dire, and so therefore, you know, although State differs from us, and haven't designated Vietnam as CPC country, but we most highly recommend it so that through our diplomatic relations, we can influence the Vietnamese authorities to bring changes to the religious restrictions and provide the religious freedom to their people.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Dorjee, and I want to thank all of you for joining us today, and as we wrap up our time together, I just want to bring our attention back to what I think is a remarkable story of what has transpired in Sudan, and it should give all of us encouragement to continue in our work to pursue

religious freedom for all people.

A year ago, we never would have thought that the changes that have taken place in Sudan would have been possible. As I mentioned at the beginning, I led a delegation. Commissioner Bhargava, myself and some of the professional staff went to Sudan. We met with the prime minister. We met with others, and we were very grateful for the opportunity to meet with the prime minister and members of his team.

Very encouraging to see what they're doing, but this is a part of the entire religious freedom effort--NGOs working on this. This was a grassroots effort in which the people--it's from bottom-up--that it shows once again that fundamental human right that people yearn for, and we have a unique position in the United States of America to shine a light on that, to encourage it, and where possible to come alongside to assist and to help.

And with this administration's focus on international religious freedom, with a vibrant

collection of non-governmental organizations dedicated to religious freedom, I think we live in a very unique time, a time filled with possibility and opportunity.

But we must not grow weary in pursuing this mission, pursuing this goal of religious freedom for all men, women and children anywhere on the planet.

So I want to thank you for your commitment to this, and I hope that you're encouraged by some of the progress we've seen this year, and I hope when we gather again next year with the 2021 report that there will be even greater stories of success of religious freedom that we can tell in our annual report.

So again I want to thank all of our commissioners. As most of you know, we're all volunteers. We do this out of a passion of our hearts for religious freedom, and this is a true privilege for me to have served as chairman of the Commission, this bipartisan Commission, and I can assure you the collegiality that you've seen here

on the screen is reflective of what happens when we get together.

It's been a privilege to get to know my fellow commissioners, to travel with them, to see their passion for this, and it gives me hope once again that in America when we focus on a problem, and we come together across lines that historically have divided us, we can solve those problems. We can make the world a better place.

So thank you so much for being with us today, and again I want to thank the USCIRF staff for making all this possible. And thank you and have a great afternoon.

[Whereupon, at 1:06 p.m., the event was concluded.]