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

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Gayle Manchin, Vice Chair
Nadine Maenza, Vice Chair
Gary L. Bauer
Anurima Bhargava
James Carr
Tenzin Dorjee
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR PERKINS: Good day, everyone, and thank you for joining us today. I am 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 are not familiar with us, we are 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 mandates 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.

Our key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter represent insights and information gained through USCIRF hearings, our fact-finding trips, research and meetings with government officials, human rights advocates and various 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 on Capitol Hill, 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.

Now we invite those with questions to use the Q&A features on the bottom of your screen. Now please be sure to identify yourself and your media outlet.

You may post the 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 to 1:00 p.m. video conference with members of the International Religious Freedom 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 this morning.

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 this Annual Report and for organizing this event today. 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 Offices' Creative Services Department, Erin Mulligan, our copyright 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 USCIRF created long before Congress required the State Department to have the SWL. The change to making SWL recommendations is intended to better conform to 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 through the year. Relevant materials are referenced in each country chapter and are 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 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 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, Uzbekistan--and add 11 countries to that list: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq and Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Turkey.

My fellow commissioners and I will discuss a few of USCIRF's 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 movements in some of the countries in 2019.

One of the most notable 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 achievements 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 the 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 people, 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.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you, Chair Perkins.

In 2019, we were indeed heartened to see improvement in religious freedom conditions in some countries. It is not every year that we can report this much advancement, and we hope that this year's progress inspires more positive change for years to come.

In addition to the advancements in Sudan, which were highlighted by Chair Perkins, Uzbekistan also took significant steps in 2019 to fulfill its commitments of the last few year 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 still significant religious freedom concerns, including the country's problematic religious freedom law and the continued imprisonment of many peaceful Muslims, based on the 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 the 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 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and a third Ministerial will be hosted by Poland this 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 the long-needed action.

Another area we can share encouraging news relates to religious prisoners of conscience, which continued to be a USCIRF priority in 2019.

Pursuant to the mandate given to us by the Frank Wolf Act, in October, we launched our Freedom of Religious 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, thrilled to share an update from our Religious Prisoners of Conscience, or RPOC. 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 learn 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, 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 freedom conditions continued to decline in some other countries.

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

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 Special Watch List recommendations.

These 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 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, and egregious" violations, and it also must 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; Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan; and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

One group--Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, also HTS--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 actions 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 recommends 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 it 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 by 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.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chairs Manchin and Maenza. Thank you so much for your comments and your work on the Commission. I thank all of our commissioners for the dedication that they have given.

In just a moment, we're going to go to your questions. Again, at the bottom of your screen, you see the Q&A. You can put in your name and organization, and we're going to move to those questions in just a moment, but first USCIRF works in a bipartisan manner.

Not only is the Commission made up of nine commissioners from different parties, different backgrounds, but we work on Capitol Hill with both sides of the aisle. Religious freedom knows no boundaries, and so I'm very glad to announce a special guest with us. Joining us today as we roll out the 2020 Report is Representative Jamie Raskin of Maryland.

Congressman, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule today to join us.

As he comes on, let me just, for those that may not be familiar with Congressman Raskin, he is a strong advocate for international human rights and religious freedom in the House of Representatives. He has worked tirelessly to end the use of blasphemy and apostasy laws around the world and advocate on behalf of prisoners of conscience abroad.

We're grateful to have such a committed partner in the work that we do on behalf of religious freedom.

Congressman, thank you so much for joining us, and the floor is now yours.

MR. RASKIN: Chairman Perkins, thank you so much for inviting me to say a few words on this occasion. Congratulations on the release of your very important report on the state of religious freedom around the world.

This is a critical tool for those of us in Congress to figure out what's going on around the world so we can best apply our energies to assist the values of religious freedom and tolerance, and it's also, I know, a critical tool for people in the State Department as well.

So I'm delighted to be part of this. It also gives opportunity to renew our commitment to the values of religious freedom which were really at the heart of America's Constitution and American Revolution.

Our forefathers and mothers broke from centuries of religious warfare and religious superstition and inquisition and Crusades and witchcraft trials and the union of church and

state, which our founders thought would inevitably corrupt government and degrade religion and subject the people to a combined political and spiritual tyranny, and it is one of the great gifts that the United States of America has to offer the rest of the world that we figured out a way to separate church and state to allow for the flourishing of religious freedom, but also allowing for government to be a place of science and reason and not religious imposition and dogma.

So we're the champions of those values all over the world, and that's what we're standing up for when we stand up against religious tyranny, and I appreciate the fact that your report gives us the opportunity to focus on the way in which authoritarian regimes around the world are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to discriminate against religious minorities, and as mentioned by other speakers, this is happening in India now with the discrimination against Muslims, the blaming of Muslims for the crisis, the stereotyping of Muslims, the very bad situation going on there just

like in China with the systematic persecution of the Uighur Muslims, nearly two million of whom are in essentially prison labor camps, right now the use of slave labor against the Uighurs in China.

And all over the world we continue to see the passage and then the abuse of so-called blasphemy laws or apostasy or heresy or witchcraft or sorcery, all of these imaginary religious offenses that have been used to put hundreds of people behind bars where now they are exposed to not just abuse and scapegoating and violence, but also exposed to the virus in cramped and dangerous quarters.

So I have taken a special interest in Pakistan and what's going on there. I hope all of you are familiar with the case of Asia Bibi, who is a Christian who was sentenced to death for allegedly committing blasphemy in Pakistan. She was, after an international campaign, she was released last year and granted asylum in Canada.

But there have been several extrajudicial killings in Pakistan as a consequence of her case

still taking place in Pakistan.

I introduced with Congressman Meadows a resolution favoring the repeal of all blasphemy laws, apostasy, heresy, sorcery, witchcraft, which are creating religious prisoners around the world. Right before the COVID-19 crisis erupted, we got this resolution out of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and I hope whenever we are next back in session, and we have the opportunity to conduct regular business, we will actually be able to pass that resolution and put the U.S. formally on record and Congress on record, and I'm hoping the State Department will work with us on implementing it to try to get all of these laws repealed around the world because they're causing tremendous discrimination against Christians or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists, depending on what the society is, and another one of ingenuous insights of the founders of our Constitution was that anybody can be a victim of religious discrimination. It's just a question of who gets into power.

And so the two main principles of

religious freedom in America--no establishment of religion and free exercise of religion--stand best when they stand together. The reason we have free exercise is because we've prevented any religious group from taking over government and then oppressing other religious groups.

The biggest fear that religious groups have is other religious groups taking state power and then using that power to oppress them.

So thank you all for your hard work and standing strongly for religious pluralism, toleration, separation of church and state. Thank you for inviting me to say a few words, and please keep the heat on during this very difficult time because we know that religious minorities all over the world are facing danger with all of the new powers that are being asserted by governments, and I yield back.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Congressman Raskin. We appreciate your taking time out to join us, and we do appreciate all the work that you do on behalf of religious freedom and the persecuted

around the world. So thanks so much for joining us, and we look forward to working with you further on some of the legislation that is advancing that we have joint interest in.

MR. RASKIN: Absolutely.

CHAIR PERKINS: We'll now go to questions from the media that are on the call. Again if you have a question, go to the Q&A at the bottom, and type in your question, identify who you are with, and your name.

We first have a number of questions actually coming in about North Korea so I'm going to go to that, and since there are a number of people asking about that, I'm just going to kind of lump them all together.

But North Korea--I'm going to read one-- North Korea, which is--this is from Josh Shepherd-- North Korea, which USCIRF has long criticized for its egregious religious freedom violations, has been in the news over the past week.

Could you comment on the current uncertain situation in North Korea and whether the outlook,

and whether the outlook for religious freedom or religious minorities there could perhaps improve?

A number of our commission--the way we have kind of a division of labor so that we can go deeper into these countries is each commissioner takes on about four or five countries that they focus on very intently, which allows them to be more, better versed in what's happening in the country and track what is taking place.

So that question I'm going to give to Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee, who is focused on North Korea.

Commissioner Dorjee.

COMMISSIONER DORJEE: Thank you, Chair Perkins, and thank you for the questions about North Korea.

I can answer them together, and North Korea remains among the worst violators of religious freedom, and during our reporting period, we haven't received or seen any sign of positive changes there, and as a matter of fact, we all know that it's very hard to get any news out of North

Korea because international media have no access to North Korea, and so anybody who worships outside state-sponsored, you know, worship, is, you know, how shall I say it, penalized.

So there are many labor camps and prison camps where tons of Christians are imprisoned there, and they have what we call the "Songbun" system to test the loyalty to the regime, and so under that, so the Christians and the Buddhists, they're deprived of opportunities such as for education, and so North Korea remains to be a CPC country, and that's what we have committed the State to do, to submit it as a CPC country, and so we ask the State Department to fill in the vacancy for a Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights, that position, so that will, you know, how should I say, prioritize the human rights advancement in the country.

And as we all know, listening to the news reports, that Kim Jong Un is in a situation which is uncertain, and they even don't know who's going to lead North Korea after him. So there are so

many things which are complex and uncertain right there, and we just have to watch very carefully and do everything we can to support the North Koreans in freedom of belief or religion there.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Dorjee.

Also, Commissioner Gary Bauer focuses on that country. Commissioner Bauer, do you have anything you'd like to add?

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Yes, I would. Hope springs eternal obviously, but North Korea, as my fellow commissioner just pointed out, is essentially a prison masquerading as a nation state. And inside that prison masquerading as a nation state, there is a system of prisons in which there are tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience.

There used to be a vibrant, fairly vibrant, Christian community in North Korea, and that has essentially been wiped out, and we believe that tens of thousands of the hundred thousands prisoners of conscience in North Korea are

Christian.

So one can always hope for better days ahead, but it's hard to see even if the current thuggish leadership left, it's hard to see how anybody that would replace it would be any more open to allowing their people to have any loyalty higher than the loyalty to the state.

In fact, speaking for myself, if there was a category even above Countries of Particular Concern, I would put North Korea and Communist China in that special category because no other country around the world reaches that level of persecution.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Bauer.

The next question is from Chase Winter. He is from Radio Free Europe. And he wanted to ask why the State Department has not designated countries such as Russia to the CPC list despite our recommendations?

I just have to say you need to have that conversation with the State Department. One of the

issues, just to kind of make it very clear--I mentioned this I think in the opening--that our focus, USCIRF's focus, is strictly on religious freedom. We are not a part of the administration. We were created by Congress to report both to the President, Secretary of State, and to Congress.

So we're independent. We do not have consider or look at, and we're not supposed to, the other factors which the State Department takes into consideration. So we, we hold no ill will against the State Department for the decisions they must make. Our role is simply to report to them based upon the issues of religious freedom.

They then have to factor in all the other issues. But we make strong, unyielding, unflinching recommendations as it pertains to religious freedom. So I couldn't provide anything further than that on their decision.

Secondly, Tim--Chase rather has a question regarding India. Separately, what, if any, message are you trying to send to State and to the Indian government about religious freedom in the world's

largest democracy?

A good question, one that I'm sure that many are going to have. Again, we look at each country based upon the criteria in the International Religious Freedom Act. We look at whether or not there is systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

Now, for historical context, India has been on USCIRF's Tier 2 list since 2010, but as we, a majority of the commissioners, believe that this country is trending in a very negative direction. One of the tipping points in terms of the systematic violations was the passage of the Citizenship Amendment and approval of a National Population Register.

Now this is only in one of the 28 states, in Assam, but if you extrapolate out what this is doing, potentially we could see 100 million people, and the intentions of the national leaders are to bring this about throughout the entire country, making it difficult for Muslims, in particular, who have to prove their citizenship, potentially being

left out of the country.

As I said, if you extrapolate what is happening in Assam with the National Register of Citizens, you could potentially have 100 million people, mostly Muslims, left stateless because of their religion. That would be obviously an international issue if you have 100 million people stateless.

There are ongoing issues as you look at the continued enforcement of anti-conversion law, something we just mentioned--Congressman Raskin mentioned--continued incitement of violence to religious minorities by government officials, and egregious in that we see impunity for violence by nonstate actors against religious minorities.

So is there a message we're trying to send? Only that we believe that religious freedom is extremely important, and we also want to learn from history. We saw Burma take a very similar approach, but on a much smaller scale, and we're simply again looking at the criteria.

This is not measuring country by country.

It's simply looking at each country and what is taking place as it pertains to religious freedom within those countries. So that is, that is our take on India.

Next question from Kelsey Dallas. Will the coronavirus pandemic derail progress that has been made on protecting vulnerable religious communities? What issues are you watching for during this difficult time?

I'm going to ask Commissioner Johnnie Moore if he would like to answer that question?

COMMISSIONER MOORE: Yeah. I'd be more than happy to. As the Congressman alluded to, in order to contain the virus around the world, we're seeing governments basically do whatever is necessary.

So in a democracy like the United States, and I should say USCIRF is, in our legislation, we are, part of our explicit mandate is that we aren't--reflects upon religious freedom in the United States. Our mandate is outside of the United States.

But in a country like the United States, we have checks and balances, we have robust systems in our--and when it comes to civil rights and the rule of law and our religious freedom isn't just in the first clause of the first sentence of our First Amendment. We have centuries of refining what that means in certain circumstances.

So in a democracy like ours, we're even challenged with this question. So you can imagine in authoritarian regimes around the world where the bar is often so low to begin with that questions that we would struggle over, as to where the limits are in terms of protecting public health and sustaining the primacy of our, of our First Amendment, aren't even questions at all in many of these countries.

In fact, this morning, I was reading back to some research that I did several years ago where I met with Chinese pastors reflecting upon SARS in 2013, and one of the, one of the observations they made was the way religious life in the country was not only shut down, but was, there wasn't an

attempt as we see in our own country to sustain religious life despite the necessities of protecting public health.

You know, the pastor whose transcripts I was reading said explicitly basically all religious life was shut down, shut down indefinitely with little regard for freedom.

And so our concerns are in two directions. Number one, in authoritarian regimes who aren't even paying attention to religious freedom as they try to contain the virus, and number two, as it relates to the way in which the present situation is slowing progress in certain countries that have momentum as it relates to improving religious freedom. In a moment like this, they sort of default back to the old way of doing things.

It's also worth noting that two of our CPC countries, China and Iran, are at the very, very heart of the coronavirus discussion. You know, very, very early on, the amount of transportation between the two countries and other decisions that were made probably had the effect of expediting the

growth of the virus throughout the Middle East.

And so, yes, you cannot untangle the present coronavirus and the question of religious freedom, and you can't untangle it from any other economy or anything else in our world. It's a very, very good question.

Again, our concerns are twofold: authoritarian regimes who are defaulting to old ways of behavior or violating human rights in order to protect health; and secondly, those countries that were making significant progress, and that progress seems to be slowing down out of a necessity of managing this great and invisible enemy.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Moore.

Vice Chair Manchin, would you like to add to that?

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Just a couple of points. In this global pandemic that we are working through, we understand that restrictions become necessary at some level and some point. So

USCIRF, what we're monitoring is are the restrictions that are being placed on faith, religious activity, are they universal? Do they treat all religions within their country the same? Are the restrictions the same across the board or are minorities being treated differently?

Another point that was sort of notable in that South Korea did a pretty remarkable job in their testing and in controlling the pandemic in their country, and yet they have stepped out and accused one of their religious minorities of actually causing the coronavirus.

So you see these mix of countries that, on one hand, are doing well and moving forward and doing the right thing for their people in terms of testing, but then on the other hand, they revert back, as Johnnie mentioned, they revert back to old habits of persecution.

So we have to watch very--it's up to USCIRF to just continue to monitor, understanding that absolutely certain restrictions are necessary at this time, but also understanding that they

should not be prolonged or they should not be egregious in terms of how they're treating the other people in their country.

So it is something that we will continue to monitor because it is an opportunity for countries that want to persecute and harass. In certain ways this becomes a perfect opportunity for them.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Manchin.

A question from Voice of America. What does being on the Special Watch List mean? What are the main challenges for Uzbekistan now and for the U.S. as well as it works closely with the Uzbek government on strategic issues?

I'm going to go to Vice Chair Maenza if she'd like to answer that question.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

So to meet the criteria for the Special Watch List, it means that you meet two of the three, systematic, ongoing, or egregious,

violations of religious freedom.

And so really the State Department is watching that country. Obviously a country that's come off the CPC could go back on if they met all three again.

With Uzbekistan, we--I had the opportunity to lead a delegation to Uzbekistan in 2019 and continue to work with the government even from here, and we've appreciated their willingness to engage with USCIRF, and the specific steps they have taken to move their government towards religious freedom and improve the conditions there.

The government banned law enforcement authorities from raiding religious communities and announced of course closure of the prison we mentioned earlier, but we also, you know, the big, really the challenge they have before them is the 1998 Religion Law, which is one of the harshest really in the world, and their registration process has been very difficult. I think there's like 11 different levels to get a house of worship registered.

And I do know that the government is taking input this year for that, and they have every indication by the end of the year of giving revised text for this law. So that is their main-- the main thing we really want to see them continue to, as they move, is to change the legal structure. We're encouraged that we have seen these positive changes, but we do, we would like to see some additional changes as well.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Maenza.

We have a question regarding--I'm having a hard time reading the print here--as of now, the United States government has been leading international conversations in denouncing China's treatment of Uighur Muslims. But of now there have been no implementations of legal actions like the Magnitsky Law and International Religious Freedom Act.

What is your specific suggestion in moving forward, and does the report identify how much religion plays into China's oppression of the

Uighurs compared to how much their cultural differences play into the oppression?

I'm going to ask Commissioner Gary Bauer who focuses on China to take that question.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me take the last part of the question first. The Commission always wrestles with this question of whether particular oppression is taking place because of the religion of the individual or group that's being oppressed or whether it's a larger question of ethnic differences or oppression of a particular ethnic group.

And sometimes it's hard to discern the difference. I think in the case of Communist China, however, it's not that difficult to figure out because Communist China has literally declared war on all religious faiths. So whether it's Uighur Muslims or Christians or Buddhists or spiritual movements like the Falun Gong, the Chinese government makes it absolutely clear that they believe Chinese citizens cannot, must not have

any loyalty higher than the loyalty and commitment to the Chinese Communist Party, which is why China is becoming such a global problem.

This is a country that persecutes more people, more different religions than any other country in the world. And they're attempting to export their model around the world. They're using their influence in international bodies to intimidate other countries to not speaking out about their religious liberties and human rights abuses.

USCIRF has specifically pointed out that there are influence operations underway in the United States by the Chinese Communists trying to suppress information available to the American people about what's happening to the Uighurs and other groups, the Christians, et cetera, in China.

As far as specific actions that can be taken, USCIRF is recommending that U.S. government single out by name individuals in Communist China that are particularly responsible for the persecution, the religious persecution we're seeing

taking place, and if we can freezing their assets, preventing those individuals from entering the United States for conferences and other reasons.

In addition, we have supported several pieces of legislation on Capitol Hill. One particular piece of legislation would ban the importation from the province in which the persecution of the Uighurs is most taking place in any products coming from that province entering the United States because there's a good chance that those products are being made by slave labor.

So there are things that we can do; we've advocated them. We commend this chapter to those interested in what's happening to China at a time when Communist China is in the news for a lot of other reasons that are not within the purview of the Commission, but when you have a country that persecutes so overwhelmingly like this, based on religion, you can expect them to be a bad actor on many other things of concern to the world community.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner

Bauer.

Our last question, which should round out our time today, and again I want to thank each of you for joining us and thank you for your interest in international religious freedom, Hang Pham, a Vietnamese broadcaster from Radio Free Asia, says thank you for the opportunity.

My question is the law in Vietnam allows the government to override human rights including religious freedom for reasons of national security, which the government has based on to suppress multiple religious groups and organizations throughout the country, purportedly taking over their lands, property, taking away their IDs, and leaving thousands ethnic groups stateless. What actions can be taken to support these suppressed groups?

Thank you, Hang Pham. I will give that question to Commissioner Anurima Bhargava.

Commissioner Bhargava.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you, Tony, and thank you, Hang, for the question.

As you know, the Vietnamese government continues to enforce the law on belief and religion, which mandates registration of religious organizations and requires that religious activities, that people give notification of any religious activities that they're engaging in.

And for that reason, there are many across the country who seek to worship but have not been able to do that and to do that freely. And so we have certainly advocated that the process of requiring people, particularly for independent religious groups, like the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao Buddhists, for them to be able to worship, that they have to go to the government to be able to do so is something that's inconsistent with the way in which they want to practice and with the ideas and very fundamental notion of what it means to be able to practice your religion freely.

And so we've advocated that the process by which those, those groups can actually be able to worship should not be dependent upon getting government approval, and that what we're seeing

quite a lot of in Vietnam is that there are certain groups that have gotten approval to be able to have their, have those who are members of those religious groups worship, but that many have tried to do so and have not been able to do.

And so those are, those are the kinds of concerns we're seeing. We're also looking in Vietnam at an area and a time of unprecedented growth, economic growth, and for that reason, there are ways in which places of religious worship that have themselves historical traditional value but also have been centers of communities being able to come forward and worship together, those are being destroyed or they're being threatened.

And there have been concerted efforts around the country to try and protect some of those lands and those sites, and we certainly want to encourage and have put pressure on the Vietnamese government to make sure that those kinds of sites and those places of worship are not destroyed in this process that they're going through right now of economic growth.

And, lastly, what we've seen is that there are religious prisoners of conscience who remain in prison for advocating for religious freedom, for trying to practice their faith. There is significant harassment of those from a variety of religious groups who are trying to actually organize and practice their faith as well.

And we've asked the Vietnamese government to release prisoners like Nguyen Bac Truyen, who is a religious prisoner of conscience, who I have sponsored, and to take other efforts to try and make sure that people can worship freely.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Bhargava.

Commissioner Moore, would you like to add to that?

COMMISSIONER MOORE: Sure. I was struck on the question by the referencing of national security and religious freedom, and it's probably good to say that this is one of the hardest questions that we struggle with as a Commission because there are countries around the world--I

think of Iran in particular--which very often exports their bad behavior under a religious covering.

And, yes, simultaneously, Shiite Muslims in many countries of the world, particularly in Sunni majority countries, are also terribly, terribly persecuted, and we spend hours as a Commission looking at this very, very difficult question at the nexus of national security and religious freedom and other, other human rights.

For instance, my prisoner of conscience is in Yemen--one of my prisoners of conscience. I'm also advocating for the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Eritria. But the one I'm thinking of now is a Baha'i in Yemen, Haydara. The Houthis--there has been a ruling that he should be released along with all the other Baha'is in prison, and yet, you know, they haven't released him, and now we're weeks and weeks and weeks after this legal, legal ruling.

And without question, the relationship between the Iranian regime and the Houthis has

exacerbated the persecution of Baha'i in Yemen, and Iran in many circumstances in many countries around the world very often has found a clever way of sort of covering their abhorrent behavior under the cover of religion.

And so all that to say the question about national security and religious freedom is one that needs an enormous amount of work in the religious freedom community, and I always take the opportunity to emphasize this is not an easy thing to untangle, and researchers and human rights lawyers and scholars around the world across countries and religious communities really, really need to do more work on this question because we're often leaning on opinions and hearsay and looking at certain circumstances in isolated incidents in what is a very, very big issue.

Countries have to be able to protect their national security, and countries must, must have total religious freedom in order to preserve this, this freedom of religion and belief, and that includes the freedom to not believe anything at

all.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Moore. We thank all of our commissioners. I want to thank the members of the media and those concerned about the issue of religious freedom.

We'll be having a similar gathering later today with the International Religious Freedom Roundtable and the NGOs.

But I want to, again, thank you for joining us this morning. It's been a privilege for me to serve as chairman of this Commission this year as we've put together this report, and I'll just say this. I say it privately, but I want to say it publicly, how deeply I respect each member of the Commission and what a privilege it's been to work alongside them.

I think our country would be a lot better if we, coming from different backgrounds, focused on a common problem and came up with common solutions. And so it's been a real privilege in this process, and I want to thank all of my commissioners, all of the commissioners, for the

hard work and dedication that they've given.

This is all voluntary on behalf of the commissioners. We do this in our private capacity, and it's because we all care deeply about the fundamental human right of religious freedom, that every man, woman and child should have the ability to choose how or if they want to worship.

And so that's our mission. That's what we stay focused on, and I'm really honored and proud to say that that is exactly what this set of commissioners have done.

So, again, thank you for joining us today. And we again appreciate the work that you do covering this important topic. Have a great day.

[Whereupon, at 11:02 a.m., the event was concluded.]