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Front Cover: KHUSHPUR, Pakistan, March 4, 2011 – Pakistanis carry the coffin of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's slain minister of minorities, who was assassinated March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for campaigning against the country's blasphemy laws. Bhatti, 42, a close friend of USCIRF, warned in a Washington visit just one month before his death that he had received numerous death threats. More than 15,000 persons attended his funeral. (Photo by Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images)

Back Cover: JUBA, Sudan, January 9, 2011 – Southern Sudanese line up at dawn in the first hours of the week-long independence referendum to create the world's newest state. The referendum vote was the final milestone in the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended more than 20 years of north-south civil war in Sudan. (Photo by Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images)

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The 2011 Annual Report is dedicated to the memory of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Pakistani Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs. Shahbaz was a courageous advocate for the religious freedoms of all Pakistanis, and he was assassinated on March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for those efforts.

Venezuela

FINDINGS: Violations of freedom of religion or belief continue in Venezuela. These violations include: government failure to investigate and hold accountable perpetrators of attacks on religious leaders and houses of worship, and virulent rhetoric from President Hugo Chavez, government officials, state media, and pro-Chavez media directed episodically against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Venezuela on its Watch List in 2011. Venezuela has been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2009.

Since 1998, there has been a steady increase of government rhetoric, and in some cases government actions, against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities and Protestant groups supported by U.S.-based counterparts. These developments occurred against a backdrop of efforts by President Hugo Chavez to extend political control over the economy, non-governmental organizations, and society, as well as his backtracking on democracy and respect for human rights. While there are no official restrictions on religious practice, actions by President Chavez and other government officials have created an environment in which Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are vulnerable to attack.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: The U.S. government should increase its efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in Venezuela, stress the importance of holding perpetrators of attacks on religious institutions accountable and continue to speak out against attacks on religious leaders and institutions when they occur. The U.S. government also should work with countries such as Brazil that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage it to end issuing anti-Semitic statements; fully investigate attacks on religious communities, institutions and leaders; and hold perpetrators accountable. Importantly, considering the poor state of relations between the two countries and President Chavez's opposition to the United States, all activities must be conducted in a way that minimizes the risk to religious communities. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Venezuela can be found at the end of this chapter.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Impunity

The government of Venezuela has not taken sufficient action against the perpetrators of two attacks in January 2009, one on a Jewish synagogue and the other targeting a Catholic institution. The Venezuelan government also has failed to take action against the perpetrators of other attacks on religious institutions.

The investigation into the attack on the Tiferet Israel Synagogue remains open. The incident occurred over a five hour period during which masked men overran security guards and broke into and vandalized the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas, throwing Torah scrolls on the floor and spray-painting hateful messages such as “Death to all” and “Jews, get out.” Within a week, 11 men were arrested for the attack. No actions have been taken against them and they have yet to be prosecuted. Representatives of the Jewish community do not expect the case to ever be brought before a judge.

No state actions have been initiated in response to tear gas canisters being thrown into the Apostolic Nunciature. The Nunciature was attacked because it provided asylum to student activists and opposition members. A pro-Chavez organization, “La Piedrita,” has publicly taken credit for the attack as well as earlier ones against the Nunciature. No investigations into this incident or arrests have been made despite this public statement.

In addition, no arrests or prosecutions have occurred for the February 2009 forceful entry and occupation of the residence of the Archbishop of Caracas by Chavez supporters to hold a press conference denouncing Catholic leaders and the Papal Nunciature. Furthermore, no one has been arrested for the February 2009 vandalism of the Beth Shmuel synagogue, or the March 2009 robbery and vandalism of the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque.

Anti-Semitism

There were some welcomed improvements for the Jewish community during the reporting period, especially the reduction of anti-Semitic statements in state media and the government’s efforts to provide security to synagogues during the Jewish holidays. However, the Jewish community continues to feel at risk of being deemed responsible for actions taken by the government of Israel by President Chavez, government officials, government controlled media, the President’s supporters and others.

Anti-Semitism has appeared in waves corresponding to important international events related to the state of Israel, such as the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict and the 2008 Israel-Gaza conflict. In this reporting period, following the June 2010 Gaza flotilla incident, President Chavez called Israel a “genocidal state.” In that same speech President Chavez also said that he is not an “enemy of the Jews” and that he did not believe that Venezuelan Jews would support the actions of Israel, thereby implying that the Venezuelan Jewish community must choose between its ties to Venezuela and Israel. In past years, following such incidents and statements, Jewish institutions were vandalized and individual Jews were threatened. According to the State Department’s religious freedom report, in this reporting period, Jewish institutions and businesses continued to be graffitied.

President Chavez’s and other senior government officials’ severe criticisms of the state of Israel frequently cross the line into anti-Semitism. They include comparing the actions of Israeli officials to those of Nazis, blaming Israel and Jews for the world’s problems, and promoting stereotypes of Jewish financial influence and control. Government media spreads anti-Semitic sentiments across the country through cartoons and opinion pieces, radio programs and rallies. Anti-Semitic cartoons and graffiti repeatedly have equated the Star of David with the Nazi swastika.

During the reporting period, anti-Semitic statements made by government officials and in state media declined from the levels seen at the end of 2008 and early 2009. Much of the decline followed a September 2010 meeting between President Chavez and Jewish community representatives, during which these representatives presented him with a dossier of anti-Semitic statements in state media. A few months after the meeting, Jewish leaders reported a noticeable decline in such statements in state and state-supportive media. The improvement also followed statements by Cuba leader Fidel Castro, President Chavez's mentor, against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's denials of the Holocaust, saying, "I don't think anyone has been slandered more than the Jews."

The Venezuelan Jewish community also has expressed concern about the increasingly-documented diplomatic, military, financial, and trade ties between Venezuela and Iran, and about the growing relationship between President Chavez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Given President Ahmadinejad's history of anti-Semitic and anti-Israel statements, the community sees a link between this relationship and the increase of similar statements by President Chavez. Of particular concern is the fact that direct flights between Caracas and Tehran undergo less stringent security checks than other flights to Caracas.

Government-Catholic Church Tensions

Given that more than 90 percent of Venezuelans are Catholic, the Catholic Church is a large and influential entity in Venezuela, and therefore a potential threat to President Chavez. President Chavez and his supporters often try to discredit the Church in statements and in state media to try to neutralize the Church's criticisms of government actions. Tensions between the Catholic Church and the Venezuelan government increased in 2010 as Church leaders intensified their criticism of government actions against independent media and the opposition. In response to criticism, President Chavez has claimed that Venezuela's Catholic Church and the Vatican are conspiring with the United States against his government. On several occasions, he has accused the Church of attempting a coup or being party to plans to assassinate him, and has called Catholic leaders "oligarchs" and "the devil." In 2010, such statements against the Catholic Church and its leadership began to be replicated in state media and pro-Chavez media. In July, the President threatened to end the Concordat following criticism by Catholic leaders, although leaders of the Catholic Church did not take the threat seriously.

Legal Environment

The Constitution of Venezuela provides for freedom of religion on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order. Religious groups are required to register with the Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice, but this is largely an administrative requirement, and no groups were refused registration in the past few years. The DJR provides religious groups with subsidies to conduct educational and social programs that historically have been distributed to Catholic organizations. Recently, the government has reduced subsidies for Catholic organizations and the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela and increased funding to evangelical groups implementing government-approved social programs and state-operated social programs.

In a positive development, the government did not implement provisions of an education law and an initiative to protect nationally important historic buildings that could negatively impact religious communities. However, these troubling provisions continue to exist and can be implemented at any time. Such provisions include: the creation of ruling party-dominated "communal councils" to oversee the curriculum, teachers, and school administrators of all public and private schools, including religious schools, and the authority to confiscate historic Catholic Church property, including churches, schools, and other ecclesiastical buildings.

It also is positive that despite threats at the end of 2010 to do so, the National Assembly took no action on legislation drafted in early 2010 by President Chavez's party that would increase the oversight of non-governmental organizations, including religious organizations. However, if passed, this law would require all non-governmental organizations that receive at least 10 percent of funding from foreign sources to obtain advance government approval of their activities and funding sources and provide the government with information on their sources of funding, organizational leadership, and activities.

As in previous years, the Venezuelan government restricted foreign missionary activity in the country, particularly for those with close ties to U.S. religious groups. Foreign missionaries are required to hold special visas, and for several years the rates of refusal for first-time applicants have increased and the rates of renewals decreased, particularly for groups based in the United States.

U.S. Policy

U.S.-Venezuelan relations remained poor during the reporting period and deteriorated further in late 2010 when President Chavez refused to accept the newly-appointed U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, Larry Palmer. During his confirmation hearing, Ambassador Palmer commented on low morale in the Venezuelan armed forces and on Venezuela's providing shelter to Colombian FARC rebels. His comments instantly drew criticism from President Chavez. In response to Venezuela's actions against Ambassador Palmer, the United States revoked the visa of the Venezuelan Ambassador to the United States, Bernardo Alvarez Herrero.

There are some areas of cooperation between the two nations, principally on trade and oil. The United States is Venezuela's most important trading partner, with approximately 60 percent of Venezuelan exports going to the United States. Venezuela is the United States' third-largest export market in Latin America. Previously, the two nations cooperated extensively to stop narcotics trafficking, but in 2005, the Venezuelan government accused the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of espionage and ended its cooperation with the agency.

The U.S. government continues to be concerned by President Chavez's efforts to increase his control over state institutions and silence independent and critical voices, including opposition politicians and independent media, and increased its criticism of this throughout this reporting period. U.S. government assistance in Venezuela is relatively small, only \$5 million in fiscal year 2011. There is no USAID presence in the country; programs are carried out by U.S.-based and indigenous non-governmental organizations. U.S. funds support both pro-government and opposition civil society organizations in order to increase dialogue and positive debates between the two sides. Funds to civil society groups support efforts to promote and protect human rights in the country through training in community activism, increase civic engagement, and develop strategies to protect human rights defenders. One-fifth of the funds are devoted to increasing political competition and pluralism in the nation.

The U.S. government routinely meets with members of religious communities and speaks out against anti-Semitic attacks as they occur. Given the poor state of relations between the two nations, there is little interaction between U.S. Embassy officials and Venezuelan officials, preventing further discussion of ways to improve freedom of religion or belief between the two nations.

Recommendations

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government take a number of critical steps to advance religious freedom in Venezuela through key programs and policies and through multilateral efforts.

I. Advancing Religious Freedom through U.S. Programs and Policies

The U.S. government should:

- at the highest levels, urge the Venezuelan government to address the growing climate of impunity by immediately investigating, arresting, prosecuting, and holding accountable individuals responsible for all attacks on religious institutions, including the 2009 attacks against the Tiferet Israel synagogue and the Papal Nunciature, the vandalism of the Beth Shmuel synagogue, and the robbery and vandalism of the Ibrahim al-Ibrahim mosque;
- at the highest levels, publicly denounce Venezuelan government rhetoric and raids against, as well as societal attacks on, religious communities, institutions, and leaders;
- at the highest levels, speak out publicly and continue to draw international attention to state-sponsored anti-Semitism and to recently intensified efforts to pressure and silence the Catholic Church in Venezuela;
- dispatch the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism to Venezuela to report on religious freedom abuses in that country;
- work within the current overall policy framework to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief, and related human rights, are included in all bilateral discussions with the Venezuelan government, including economic and energy sector discussions; and
- ensure that funding for democracy and human rights promotion in Venezuela includes support for activities advancing freedom of religion or belief.

II. Advancing Religious Freedom through Multilateral Efforts

The U.S. government should:

- work with countries that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to address the climate of impunity by immediately investigating attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders, and holding perpetrators accountable, including prosecuting those persons arrested for the attack on the Tiferet Israel Synagogue and arresting and prosecuting individuals of La Piedra, the group that took credit for the January 2009 attack on the house of the Apostolic Nunciature;
- work with countries that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to end its instigation, complicity, promotion of, or acquiescence in anti-Semitic activities taking place in the country, including anti-Semitic statements by government officials and anti-Semitic cartoons and statements in the state media, as well as to fully investigate all reported incidents of anti-Semitism and hold perpetrators of abuse accountable;
- work with countries that have influence with the Venezuelan government to encourage the government to end its recently intensified efforts to pressure and silence the Catholic Church;
- work with the Organization of American States, including the OAS General Assembly and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, to investigate and condemn religious freedom violations in Venezuela, including attacks on religious communities, institutions, and leaders;

- encourage the UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Expression to request a visit to the country; and
- support a UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Venezuela, and calling for impartial and effective investigations and for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable.