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The Dire State of Religious Freedom Around the World

Excerpts of opening remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)
Washington, DC—July 18, 2023

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations on the *Dire State of Religious Freedom Around the World*, will come to order.

Today we will examine religious freedom around the world—and we will focus on several countries where religious freedom is under serious assault.

On June 22nd, our subcommittee focused on anti-Semitism and anti-Israel bias in the UN Palestinian Authority and the NGO community.

We heard from the heroic human rights champion Natan Sharansky—and an amazing panel of leaders.

I pointed out that the rising tide of anti-Semitism worldwide is cause for serious alarm.

With no sign of abating anywhere, Jewish women, men and children continue to suffer bias, cruelty, hate and violence simply because they are Jewish.

And that this pernicious manifestation of evil needs to be exposed and more effectively combatted.

The purveyors of anti-Semitism never take a holiday—nor should we.

Today, we continue to focus on anti-Semitism and the dire state of religious freedom around the world.

Tragically, billions of people around the world—half of the world’s population—are not able to practice their faith freely.

Many are persecuted by oppressive governments or extremist groups—brutally attacked, tortured, jailed, and even slaughtered for their beliefs.

I have chaired over forty congressional hearings and authored four major laws on religious freedom. I have led human rights trips to many countries to meet with the oppressed and advance their cause with the oppressor.

Today, I am more concerned than ever about the further deterioration of religious freedom.

Religious liberty is one of America’s founding ideals—a cornerstone of our democracy—and it is an internationally recognized human right. It is the right to practice one’s religion according to the dictates of one’s own conscience. This God-given right—like all fundamental human rights—flows from the innate dignity and value of every human being, and it deserves to be protected everywhere—without exception.

Promoting religious freedom remains a pillar of U.S. foreign policy. Assaults on religious freedom are a major threat to U.S. national security, and they are intensifying. The worst violators of religious freedom globally are often the biggest threats to our nation—and that is no coincidence. Authoritarianism is on the rise, with oppressive governments cracking down on religious minorities that are seen as a challenge to power.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has undertaken the most comprehensive attempt to manipulate and control—or destroy—religious communities since Chairman Mao Zedong made the eradication of religion a goal of his disastrous [Cultural Revolution](#) half a century ago.

Now Xi Jinping, apparently fearing the power of independent religious belief as a challenge to the Communist Party’s legitimacy, is trying to radically transform religion into the party’s servant, employing a draconian policy known as [Sinicization](#).

Under sinicization, all religions and believers must comport with and aggressively promote communist ideology—or else.

To drive home the point, religious believers of every persuasion are [harassed, arrested, jailed or tortured](#).

[Bibles are burned](#), [churches destroyed](#), [crosses set ablaze atop church steeples](#) and now, under Xi, religious leaders are required to install [facial-recognition cameras](#) in their places of worship. New regulations have expanded restrictions on religious expression [online](#) and [prohibit those under age 18 from attending services](#).

The Chinese Communist Party is committing horrific crimes against believers, including genocide against Uyghur Muslims, and other religious and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

In Vietnam, the Communist government's crackdown on religion, including the Catholic Church, has worsened in recent years. I was glad to see Vietnam placed on the State Department's Special Watch List in 2022—although, I strongly believe that Vietnam needs to be designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) . In May of this year, I've reintroduced the [Vietnam Human Rights Act](#) to hold Vietnamese officials accountable for gross human rights abuses, and I look forward to continuing to lead bipartisan efforts to promote freedom in that country.

In Afghanistan, religious freedom has severely deteriorated under the Taliban's brutal regime. Christians live in fear of persecution, as Taliban thugs go from door to door trying to discover them. A Taliban spokesman has even claimed "there are no Christians in Afghanistan," which is demonstrably false but points to the Taliban's efforts to erase the faith completely. Other religious minorities, like Sikhs, Hindus, Hazara Shia and other Shia Muslims, are also unable to freely practice their faith in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover. While the State Department designated the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern in 2022, I urge the Department to do more to hold the Taliban accountable for its gross violations of human rights, including religious freedom.

In Nigeria, I have seen firsthand the aftermath of Boko Haram's destruction of churches and mosques. While on paper Nigeria has robust protections for all religions, violations of religious freedom are escalating. Extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa commit indiscriminate violence against those they consider to be infidels. In the Middle Belt, Fulani Muslim extremists target and kill predominantly Christian farmers in brutal raids.

I have been alarmed to see the government's deliberate Fulanization of Nigerian institutions, encouraging ethno-religious supremacism, and I cannot overstate the need to respect ethnic and religious pluralism in the country. I was shocked that the State Department failed to designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern in 2022 and was [shocked](#) when [Secretary of State Blinken removed Nigeria as a CPC country](#) in November of 2021.

I would be remiss not to mention the threats to religious freedom in our own hemisphere, including the Ortega regime's brutal persecution of the church in Nicaragua. In fact, the very first hearing of this Subcommittee was titled "The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in Nicaragua: Bishop Alvarez, Political Prisoners, and Prisoners of Conscience."

I remain deeply concerned for Bishop Alvarez, who was recently released only to be *re-arrested* for bravely refusing to leave his country. The Ortega regime is attempting to silence the Catholic Church as the single most important independent institution remaining in Nicaragua, but it will not succeed. I am committed to doing everything possible to urge the release of all Nicaraguans imprisoned for their faith.

I am convinced that there is more the United States can do to protect and promote the freedom of religion worldwide. That is why I [authored the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#), which was enacted into law in 2016 and strengthened our government's hand against authorities and non-state actors who violate religious freedom. That is why I authored the [Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Act](#), led so effectively by [Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt](#).

Unfortunately, I am concerned that the U.S. State Department is not using all the tools provided to hold guilty parties accountable. Time and time again, violators of religious freedom are given a pass in the Department's Country of Particular Concern designations. Even when the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) makes recommendations with compelling evidence, their advice is not always followed.

I look forward to hearing from Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Chair of USCIRF, about the Commission's most recent recommendations.

And I look forward to the discussion with Ambassador-at-Large for the Office of International Religious Freedom [Rashad Hussain](#) during our second panel, especially as to why Nigeria, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Syria, and India were once again passed over for CPC designation.