



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S.-India Bilateral Relationship

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Frederick A. Davie, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Chair Cooper. I would like to join in welcoming everyone to today's hearing. And thank you very much to our witnesses for taking the time to join us and offer your expertise today. In addition to the concerns raised by Chair Cooper, I wanted to highlight a few other key issues that USCIRF is tracking when it comes to religious freedom in India that we hope to discuss in more depth today.

As Chair Cooper mentioned, policymakers cannot ignore the foreign policy and trade implications of deteriorating religious freedom conditions in India. In

addition to providing an overview of current conditions and policy options, we would also like to address how religious freedom concerns contribute to greater risk for trade and business partnerships. Increased attacks against religious minorities near business hubs like Haryana, for example, create a climate of uncertainty and instability.

In addition, USCIRF's reporting indicates that over the last several years, state governments have implemented a number of legal restrictions on religious conversion, religious dress, educational curriculum, interfaith marriage, and cow slaughter that negatively impact Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and indigenous and scheduled tribal people. Currently, 13 states have laws prohibiting or limiting an individual's ability to convert or change their religion. These laws use vague language, come with hefty fines and punishments, and are often used to target inter-faith couples. Laws prohibiting cow slaughter also disproportionately affect the country's Muslim, Christian, and Dalit populations, and inflame mob violence against individuals accused of eating beef, slaughtering cows, or transporting cattle.

Sources also emphasize the prolonged detention of religious minorities, journalists, and religious freedom advocates. USCIRF maintains a public database of individuals known to have been detained on the basis of the peaceful exercise of

their freedom of religion or belief. This database, now named the Frank. R Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, currently includes 37 individuals across multiple faiths in India. I would like to take a moment to highlight the cases of Meeran Haider and Rupesh Singh, both of whom are detained for protesting religious freedom conditions. In April 2020, Haider was targeted for leading peaceful protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and was charged with offenses under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Singh is a freelance journalist known for his reporting on state violence and discrimination against Adivasis. He has been detained since July 2022, also under the UAPA. We call on the India government to evaluate these cases and to release all prisoners of conscience and those detained for peacefully expressing their religion or belief.

Thank you and I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Cooper.