



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

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

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Chair

Good morning everyone and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on *Advancing Religious Freedom Within the U.S.-India Bilateral Relationship*. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today and for offering their insight on how the United States can better support religious freedom in India. While the focus of this hearing is to discuss policy options available for advancing religious freedom, we are

encouraged and inspired that so many civil society and human rights organizations have submitted additional statements for the record, which will be made available on our website. We appreciate the work of these groups, who continually document and highlight conditions on the ground, which is crucial to informing our research and reporting on India.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

Religious freedom conditions in India have notably declined in recent years. Since 2020, USCIRF has recommended the State Department designate India as a country of particular concern, or CPC, for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, including the Indian government's promotion and enforcement of laws and policies that target religious minorities. Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis are experiencing increased levels of attacks and acts of intimidation. The national government has continued to suppress minority voices and those advocating on their behalf through surveillance, harassment,

demolition of property, and detention under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. These trends, and their implication for U.S. foreign policy, should not be ignored.

It's important to note that this hearing is taking place just months after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's high-profile state visit to Washington D.C. where he met with President Biden and addressed a joint session of Congress. When directly asked about India's treatment of religious minorities during a White House press conference, Prime Minister Modi responded that, "there is no space for discrimination" in India and suggested that steps did not need to be taken to advance religious freedom in the country. Yet for the past several years, religious freedom conditions in India have continued in a downward trend, capturing international attention, and highlighting the need for continued discussions and engagement on policy options for advancing religious freedom in the country.

In the last few months alone, attacks against the country's Muslim and Christian minority communities have been particularly concerning. In July, violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims following a Hindu procession in the Muslim neighborhood of Nuh near New Delhi. During the unrest, a mosque was torched and a deputy imam was killed. Hundreds of Muslims' homes were demolished, and Muslim-owned businesses were targeted with widespread calls for boycotts.

Unfortunately, these kinds of incidents and calls for violence against minority groups are becoming more and more common.

Last month, Prime Minister Modi faced a vote of no confidence for his government's response to the ongoing violence against the minority Christian Kuki community in Manipur that began in May. Waves of violence have targeted religious symbols, and places of worship and refuge, including churches and synagogues. Mobs burned or damaged more than 250 churches of different denominations and 2 synagogues across the state, displacing hundreds of thousands of people. In these and other instances of mass violence, the quick spread of disinformation and hate speech on social media has stoked mob vigilantism and other types of communal violence throughout the country. These are just a few examples that highlight the particularly severe religious freedom violations taking place in India, which our witnesses will discuss in much greater detail.

I will now turn the floor over to Vice Chair Fred Davie for his opening remarks.