

## **JOINT STATEMENT AT USCIRF HEARING**

Read by

**Sunita Viswanath, Executive Director, Hindus for Human Rights**

Dear USCIRF Chair Cooper and Vice Chair Davie,

Thank you for inviting me to testify.

I speak on behalf of Dalit Solidarity Forum, Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations, Hindus for Human Rights, Indian American Muslim Council, India Civil Watch International, and the New York State Council of Churches.

We are disappointed that Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Dalits, who face the brunt of religious freedom and human rights violations under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have not been invited to speak on this panel.

The Biden Administration is in denial of religious persecution in India, failing to call out India's persecution of its 250 million Muslims and 40 million Christians.

In June, President Biden shocked the world by applauding India's "open, tolerant, robust debate" with Modi standing next to him at the White House, just two days after 75 Members of US Congress had written to Biden expressing concern over "the shrinking of political space, the rise of religious intolerance, the targeting of civil society organizations and journalists, and growing restrictions on press freedoms and internet access" in India.

Yesterday, The New York Times wrote: "Mr. Biden has soft-pedaled any criticism of the increasing suppression of minority groups and opposition voices in India and the encouragement of Hindu nationalism under Mr. Modi."

Two days ago, the Canadian prime minister accused India of assassinating a Sikh Canadian citizen. If true, it would be a reminder that the dangerous Hindu nationalist violence has reached our shores. Many Americans have been intimidated and harassed by, and received death threats from, Indian operatives. To them, India's possible complicity in this assassination has an element of plausibility. This is bound to have a chilling effect on civil rights activism in America.

We implore the Biden Administration to urgently acknowledge that India under Modi is on a dangerous and alarming path towards religious authoritarianism, and is undeniably a Country of Particular Concern.

Encouraged by America's silence, the fanatical and murderous ideology of Hindu nationalism in India has now reached a new low, instigating horrific violence against Christians and Muslims, including extrajudicial killings, lynchings, arbitrary arrests, and demolition of their homes and places of worship.

Graphic sexual violence against women has sharply risen, most horrifically demonstrated in a viral video from Manipur state. Of course, such violence against Dalit communities predates the Modi regime, but has significantly become worse since his coming to power.

Since May, more than 180 people have been killed, 400 churches burnt to the ground and 50,000 Christians driven from their homes in Manipur state. This violence has been carried out by militant mobs supported and armed by the state administration run by the BJP, Modi's party, and egged on by the police. In Uttarakhand state, mobs backed by the BJP-ruled administration have forced thousands of Muslims to flee as their homes and businesses were demolished.

We also object to the Modi government's closing of FCRA accounts, which has barred American charities from continuing to serve the needs of marginalized Indian people. We decry the misuse of conversion laws to stop both Indian and American Christians from doing charitable work. And we object to the intimidation, denial of entry, and even detention of American visitors to India who represent religious minority groups.

Sadly, the man at the apex of the escalating violence against religious minorities – Modi – is being feted by government after government, including ours, who are paying lip service to human rights. The rejection by the Biden and Trump Administrations of USCIRF's recommendation to designate India as a CPC for three years in a row is a troubling precedent.

If the Biden Administration continues its uncritical embrace of the Modi government despite mounting violations of religious freedom and human rights in India, America will carry the burden of being on the wrong side of history.

USCIRF's credibility has historically rested on its mandate to remain independent and its attempt to call out religious freedom violations worldwide without political interference. Only USCIRF is in a position to speak truth to power, as it has by insisting

that the US immediately designate India as a CPC and sanction Indian officials engaged in egregious religious persecution.

The first step to advancing religious freedom in India within US-India bilateral relations would be for Secretary Blinken to designate India as CPC in December.

As a Hindu and as the Executive Director of Hindus for Human Rights, I reiterate that we stand unequivocally in solidarity with India's minority communities. Our Hindu faith and Indian democracy have pluralism and religious freedom at their heart. We reject the hateful voice of Hindu nationalism claiming to speak for all Hindus. We invite Hindus across the world to join us in rejecting Hindu nationalism. The alternative will be a catastrophe, which we simply should not want on our collective conscience.

Some of our allied organizations have submitted separate statements, which they would like entered into the record.