



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Michael Cromartie, USCIRF Vice Chair
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First, let me thank the Royal Netherlands Embassy and Ambassador Jones-Bos for convening this event and for including the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Religious freedom is important in the United States, both philosophically and historically. As you know, many of the founders of this nation came here fleeing religious persecution in Europe, and religious freedom is the first freedom in our bill of rights. Our nation understands that freedom of religious belief and practice is a universal human right and fundamental freedom. Over the past sixty years, this has been articulated in numerous international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that we celebrate today, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Helsinki Accords, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and other international agreements.

Religious freedom likewise has a special place in U.S. foreign policy. In 1998, by an almost unanimous vote, the U.S. Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or “IRFA”—the Act which created our Commission. Consistent with the importance of religious freedom in American history, IRFA made the promotion of the

freedom of religion or belief around the world a foreign policy priority of the United States.

IRFA was passed because Congress felt that U.S. foreign policy was not paying enough attention to religious freedom in our human rights promotion. However, IRFA does not seek to enforce an American conception of religious freedom or separation of church and state on the rest of the world. Rather, it seeks to promote the universal standards of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments expressly referenced in IRFA. Article 18 of the UDHR recognizes that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”

Religious freedom is under renewed and, in some cases, increasing assault in many places around the world. IRFA cited in its findings that “more than one-half of the world's population lives under regimes that severely restrict or prohibit the freedom of their citizens to study, believe, observe, and freely practice the religious faith of their choice.” While the Commission hasn’t confirmed that statement, I personally believe it still holds true.

Protecting and promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief therefore has important, real-world effects. Over the ten years of the Commission’s work, we have seen a strong correlation between religious freedom, social stability, security, development, and the consolidation of democracy. Conversely, as we see in many of the countries we monitor, the lack of religious freedom correlates with instability, insecurity, extremism, and a host of other social and political problems.

So what is the US Commission on International Religious Freedom? We are a unique body in the U.S. governmental system, as the Commission is an independent, bipartisan federal agency tasked with monitoring religious freedom worldwide and making policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress. The Commission's work is guided by nine private sector Commissioners, appointed by the White House and Congress. We present our findings and recommendations in an annual report every May 1, and also issue other publications and conduct activities throughout the year. We are not part of the State Department, which has its own international religious freedom office, headed by an Ambassador at Large, and does its own annual religious freedom report, also pursuant to IRFA.

IRFA also mandates that the Secretary of State annually designate those countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, egregious" violations of religious freedom as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, and take action to encourage improvements in those countries. The Commission's mandate includes recommending the countries we think should be CPCs, as well as corresponding policy actions.

In October, the Obama Administration issued its first international religious freedom report, or "IRF report." The Commission welcomed the thorough and comprehensive report, but also urged the Administration to promptly designate CPCs and to implement targeted policies toward those countries. In the Commission's view, President Obama's raising religious freedom in speeches abroad—while important—has not yet translated into concrete policy actions to address religious freedom violations on the ground. We hope that the IRF report will be the Administration's call to action.

In fact, the Commission believes that both Republican and Democratic administrations have underutilized IRFA's CPC mechanism. Although a number of countries have been

designated as CPCs, the U.S. government generally has not implemented new Presidential actions pursuant to such designations. Rather, it has relied on existing actions. Although technically correct under the statute, this provides little incentive for CPC governments to reduce or end egregious religious freedom violations.

In addition, IRFA specifically cites U.S. participation in multilateral organizations as an avenue for advancing the freedom of religion or belief. In this arena, a major concern of the Commission has been an attempt by some UN members to undermine Article 18's religious freedom protections by creating an international legal norm outlawing the so-called "defamation of religions."

Although its sponsors say that this effort is meant to address the very real problems of religious persecution and discrimination around the world, the resolutions on this issue in fact promote intolerance and human rights violations. They not only provide justification for governments to restrict religious freedom and free expression, they also undermine the very foundation of international human rights law by seeking to protect religions, not individuals. They also provide international legitimacy for existing national laws that punish blasphemy or otherwise ban criticism of a religion, which often result in gross human rights abuses, and could help create a new global anti-blasphemy law.

It is on these issues, both religious freedom abuses in particular countries or efforts to weaken international standards, that cooperation with likeminded countries is so important. The Dutch government is to be commended for its steadfast support for robust religious freedom protections. It is through these partnerships that we can together help see greater respect for this fundamental freedom. I hope that other EU nations will follow the lead of the Netherlands in their efforts to promote religious freedom internationally.