

State Department reports Iraqi insurgency hurts religious freedom

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The continuing insurgency in Iraq is significantly harming the freedom of worship in that country, the State Department said in its [2007 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

The recently released report lists Iraq among 22 countries it notes for either particular abuses or positive steps related to religious freedom.

“The ongoing insurgency significantly harmed the ability of all religious believers to practice their faith,” the report’s executive summary states.

It notes that lawlessness by insurgents, terrorists and criminal gangs affected a range of citizens but particularly had an impact on religious groups.

“Many individuals from various religious groups were targeted because of their religious identity or their secular leanings,” the summary said. “Such individuals were victims of harassment, intimidation, kidnapping and

killings. In addition, frequent sectarian violence included attacks on places of worship.”

The report said the deteriorating conditions were “not due to government abuse.”

“For the most part, people are getting caught in the crossfire,” said John Hanford, the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. “In the case of these minorities, though, there have been cases where it’s clear that certain groups have been targeted.”

Last November, the State Department designated Uzbekistan on its list of “countries of particular concern” regarding religious freedom violations and removed Vietnam from that list.

Asked about the most significant development in the new report, Hanford said the Vietnamese government has made progress by granting more religious freedom and permitting places of worship that had been forced to closed to reopen.

“They’ve registered whole new religions that weren’t even legal before,” he said. “Nevertheless, there are still groups which are banned or where there are leaders which are under house arrest.”