

State Department misses deadline to name religious freedom violators

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The U.S. State Department failed to release a list of the world's worst violators of religious freedom by a Nov. 13 deadline, even though Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has said religious freedom is a "human rights priority" for the Trump administration.

In December, lawmakers passed a law mandating the State Department name those "Countries of Particular Concern" within 90 days of releasing its International Religious Freedom report. That report came out Aug. 15.

Delay signal U.S. is 'looking away'

The State Department's delay bothers some religious freedom watchdogs, including members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan body set up by Congress in 1998 to monitor the issue.

"Failing to designate CPCs tells the violators of religious freedom around the world that the United States is looking away," said Daniel Mark, chair of the commission.

The Countries of Particular Concern are a list of nations that violate religious freedom in a "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" way, according to the commission.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom must provide its own list of recommended Countries of Particular Concern to the State

Department by May 1, according to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The department does not always include all of the commission's recommendations on its list—the one to which world leaders pay more careful attention.

In April, the commission recommended 16 countries as Countries of Particular Concern, including North Korea, China and, for the first time in the history of the list, Russia. The commission noted in its report that in 2016, Russia has passed a new law “effectively criminalizing all private religious speech not sanctioned by the state,” all but banned Jehovah’s Witnesses and tried Muslims “on fabricated charges of terrorism and extremism.”

Watchdogs had hoped the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act passed last year would prod the State Department to release its list sooner, “but they did miss the deadline,” Mark said.

List could include terrorist entities

The act, named for the Republican former congressman who made international religious freedom one of his signature issues, also requires the White House, for the first time this year, to name “Entities of Particular Concern,” in addition to Countries of Particular Concern. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that list include the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Taliban and al-Shabab.

That new requirement may be what’s holding up the State Department’s list: The White House has not yet delegated authority to the State Department to name Entities of Particular Concern, as it has with the Countries of Particular Concern. That’s what Ambassador Michael Kozak, senior adviser to the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor,

said during a briefing on religious freedom streamed on the U.S. Helsinki Commission's Facebook page.

"People like to think this is due to some titanic bureaucratic battle going on, but it tends to be more mundane stuff," Kozak said.

A State Department official said in a Nov. 17 email that those designations would be released soon and reiterated religious freedom is a priority to the Trump administration. The official did not comment on why the list was delayed.

There has not been much reaction to the missed deadline, Mark said, as few Americans, even those concerned about religious freedom, are aware of the new law aiming to get the Countries of Particular Concern list released faster.

"I suspect it's also balanced by the fact that the administration has been doing good things (on the issue). There is some leeway and benefit of the doubt being given," said Mark, who was appointed to the commission by Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, R-Wis.

But, the chairman added, "I think if we get to the end of 2017 and this hasn't been done, I think people will be disappointed and frustrated and will begin to worry if there's something problematic going on in the background."