

Commission documents worst violations of religious freedom

April 21, 2021

In its 2021 [annual report](#) released April 21, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom singled out 14 nations as the worst violators of religious liberty.

The commission recommended the U.S. State Department add four nations to its Countries of Particular Concern list—India, Russia, Syria and Vietnam—and renew the CLC designation for Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

It marked the second consecutive year the commission recommended India be designated as a CPC—a recommendation the State Department did not follow last year. The report asserts the Indian government is guilty of “Hindu national policies resulting in systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

Religious freedom conditions “deteriorated” in Russia last year, the report asserted. “The government continued to target ‘nontraditional’ religious minorities with fines, detentions and criminal charges,” the report stated. “Russian legislation criminalizes ‘extremism’ without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity.”

In Syria, religious freedom “remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country’s ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis,” the commission report stated. “The regime of President Bashar al-Assad brutally enforced its authority over populations under its control, including its efforts to solidify an iron grip on religious affairs.”

In Vietnam, authorities “continued to actively persecute independent religious minority communities,” and ethnic minority communities “faced especially egregious persecution for the peaceful practice of their faith,” the report asserted.

Violations against Rohingya Muslims in Burma

With regard to Burma, also known as Myanmar, the report highlighted “widespread and egregious religious freedom violations, particularly against Rohingya Muslims.” The report calls on the U.S. government to “definitively and publicly conclude whether the ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Burmese military meet the legal definitions of crimes against humanity and/or genocide.”

The commission recommended Cuba and Nicaragua remain on the State Department’s Special Watch List and that 10 countries be added to the list—Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

The commission determined “religious freedom concerns remain” in three countries—Bahrain, the Central African Republic and Sudan—but conditions last year “did not meet the high threshold required” to recommend continued SWL status.

The report also urged seven nonstate actors be designated again as Entities of Particular Concern—al-Shabaab, Boko Harm, the Houthis, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin and the Taliban.

Challenges created by COVID-19 pandemic

The commission noted particular challenges to religious freedom caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Some restrictions on in-person gatherings for religious purposes “complied with international human rights standards protecting freedom of religion or belief, but in some cases they did not,” the report noted.

“Such measures must be necessary to protect the legitimate state interest of preventing disease and proportionate to meeting that aim, must not be discriminatory, and must be lifted once the crisis has passed,” the report continued.

Commission monitoring “revealed that in some countries, already marginalized religious minorities faced official and/or societal stigmatization, harassment and discrimination for allegedly causing or spreading the virus,” the report stated.

“This past year was challenging for most nations trying to balance public health concerns alongside the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief. Though some governments took advantage of the restrictions to target specific religious communities, we were encouraged by the positive steps various countries took. For example, as a result of COVID-19 outbreaks, many prisoners of conscience were furloughed or released, such as in Eritrea,” said Gayle Manchin, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The commission will “continue to monitor how countries respond to and recover from COVID-19, and whether the loosening of restrictions is fair to people of all faiths and nonbelievers,” she added.

Need to raise refugee resettlement ceiling

The report recommends the U.S. government increase the refugee resettlement ceiling to the historically typical 95,000 number. The refugee ceiling for the current fiscal year is 15,000, a historic low point.

“The current refugee ceiling level fails to reflect that unprecedented numbers of individuals worldwide are forcibly displaced by conflict or persecution, including based on their religion or belief,” Manchin said. “We hope that the United States will open its doors to more refugees as soon as possible.”

On April 16, President Biden signed an emergency declaration to expedite refugee admissions but [did not raise the ceiling](#), although he had announced in February it would be increased to 62,500 in this fiscal year and to 125,000 in the next fiscal year. Later, a White House spokesperson said Biden is expected to increase the refugee ceiling by mid-May.

As part of the February announcement, the Biden administration suggested the possibility of creating several new priority categories for refugee resettlement, including severely persecuted religious groups.

Commission Vice Chair Tony Perkins urged the administration “to prioritize the most vulnerable refugees, which includes survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution.”

“To stand by our nation’s commitment to religious freedom, the United States should be a safe haven for persecuted religious communities, including those who have fled genocide and crimes against humanity,” Perkins added.

Special concerns about China

Last month, China imposed sanctions on Manchin and Perkins because the commission condemned the genocide of Uyghur Muslims, the destruction of Uyghur religious sites and the government-sponsored detention centers throughout Xinjiang.

“Beijing’s attempts to intimidate and silence those speaking out for human rights and fundamental freedoms only contribute to the growing international scrutiny of the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang,” [Secretary of State Antony Blinken said](#).

The annual report urges the United States to impose targeted financial and visa sanctions on the Chinese government for severe violations of religious freedom and to support legislation such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.