

Report notes ‘downward spiral’ of Afghan religious freedom

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Citing deteriorating religious freedom conditions and an overall increase in human rights violations, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended Afghanistan be designated a “Country of Particular Concern.”

When the United States withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took control last Aug. 15, religious freedom in the country “went into an immediate and disastrous downward spiral,” Nadine Maenza, chair of the commission, said in an April 25 news conference announcing the release of the commission’s [annual report](#).

“Religious minorities faced harassment, detention and even death due to their faith or beliefs. ... The crisis in Afghanistan should serve as a collective call to action to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable religious communities around the globe,” according to the commission’s annual report.

The commission urged the Biden administration to expand its Priority 2 refugee designation to grant access to at-risk religious groups in Afghanistan.

Report recommends 15 CPC designations

In its annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended 15 countries to the U.S. Department of State for the CPC designation—reserved for nations whose governments engage in

or tolerate “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations.”



Burmese military shelled Thantland township in Myanmar’s Chin State. (Facebook Photo / Asia Pacific Baptists)

They included 10 designated as CPCs by the State Department last November: Burma (also known as Myanmar), China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

In addition to Afghanistan, the commission also recommended four other nations be added to the CPC list—India, Nigeria, Syria and Vietnam.

The commission took issue with the State Department’s decision to remove Nigeria as a CPC last year, even though both state and nonstate actors continued to violate religious freedom, and the north part of the country has become “a hotbed of persecution,” Maenza said.

At the same time, the commission commended the State Department’s decision to designate Russia as a CPC and called on the U.S. government to impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

The commission report also called on Congress to “engage with affected religious communities in Russia and occupied Ukraine and raise ongoing

religious freedom issues.”

During the April 25 news conference, Commissioner Tony Perkins noted Russia’s record in Crimea and other occupied areas—as well as its treatment of religious minorities internally—demonstrates “Russia is an enemy to religious freedom.”

The commission also noted its previous recommendations the U.S. government implemented, including genocide determinations for the Chinese government against the Uyghurs and the Burmese military against the Rohingya people.

“Throughout the past year, the U.S. government continued to condemn abuses of religious freedom and hold perpetrators accountable through targeted sanctions and other tools at its disposal. Moving forward, the United States should take additional steps to support freedom of religion or belief around the world,” said Nury Turkel, vice chair of the commission.

Place 12 countries on Special Watch List

In its annual report, the commission further recommended the State Department place 12 countries on its Special Watch List—a second-tier designation below the CPC list.

In addition to three the State Department already placed on the Special Watch List last November—Algeria, Cuba and Nicaragua—the commission report recommended adding nine others: Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

In the previous year’s report, the commission removed Central African Republic from monitoring, based on improvement in religious freedom

conditions.

However, this year's report recommended Central African Republic be reinstated to the Special Watch List, citing increased violations of religious freedom including targeted abductions, torture and the killing of Muslims.

The commission's annual report affirmed the State Department's designation of seven nonstate actors as Entities of Particular Concern: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, Hay'at Tahir al-Sham, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Islamic State in West Africa Province and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin.

In its annual report, the commission urges the Biden administration to appoint a qualified special adviser on international religious freedom to the National Security Council staff; to prioritize freedom of religion as the United States engages with the United Nations Human Rights Council; and "address longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal," which allows Department of Homeland Security officials to deport some noncitizens without granting them immigration court hearings.

Recommendations to Congress include adoption of Senate Resolution 80 to create the Senate Human Rights Commission to monitor and address human rights abuses abroad, including violations of religious freedom or belief. The House already has in place the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.