

State Department reports religious freedom threats

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—U.S. State Department officials continued to point to religious freedom atrocities in Russia, China and Afghanistan as they released their annual report on threats to religious liberties across the globe.

“Far too many governments continue to freely target faith community members within their borders,” said Rashad Hussain, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, at a May 15 event with Secretary of State Antony Blinken marking the release of the 2022 International Religious Freedom Report.

“A second theme and trend the report highlights is the increase of government restrictions on access to holy sites and places of worship.”

Hussain pointed to Russia’s war in Ukraine as one cause of destruction to religious sites and noted the ways Chinese authorities have caused Muslims and Buddhists to lose sacred spaces.

“We have all seen the sad pictures of Ukraine’s civilians sifting through the rubble of their beautiful and most historic churches destroyed by Russia’s brutal war of aggression,” he said.

“Uyghurs have witnessed the PRC (People’s Republic of China) Government destroy or repurpose their mosques or cemeteries. Authorities also destroyed the monasteries of Tibetan Buddhists and expelled monks and nuns.”

Hussain also spoke of how members of Afghan communities who “do not

toe the Taliban’s narrow theological line” need to flee or hide their religious identity.

The report, which assesses conditions in 199 countries, also looks at policies and laws, including those about blasphemy and apostasy, that “criminalize religious expression” and extend discrimination against religious minorities and others who differ from rules of an accepted theology.

“The report describes growing bigotry at the societal level in many places around the world,” said Hussain, who noted “the ongoing and deeply disturbing proliferation of antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred and xenophobia that target religious and nonreligious communities.”

Progress noted in some areas

As they marked the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act—which requires the annual report and established the ambassador position—State Department leaders described how religious freedoms are being truncated and trampled upon, but also noted the progress for religious rights that occurred in some countries.

“Belgium formally recognized its Buddhist minority, which entitles Buddhist religious organizations to teach their faith in state schools and eventually to apply for federal funding to do so,” Blinken said in his remarks.

“Lawmakers in Brazil codified religious freedom guarantees for Afro-Brazilian indigenous communities at the municipal and state levels across the country. They also passed legislation making it a crime to carry out discriminatory acts against any religious practices.”

Organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom praised the State Department's report.

"We welcome this latest report highlighting the deeply concerning persecution and violence targeting Muslims, Christians and other religious minority communities in India and China," said Corey Saylor, CAIR's director of research and advocacy.

Both CAIR and USCIRF have urged the Biden administration to add India to its list of countries of particular concern, and the commission, in [its own recent report](#), recommended four others: Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria and Vietnam.

Already listed as so-called CPCs are: Myanmar (which the department and USCIRF refer to as Burma), China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Blinken is expected to announce the department's determinations of CPCs and its second-tier "special watch list" by year's end.

Officials of USCIRF—which also was authorized a quarter century ago—responded to the report with a reiterated request that those countries known for egregious violations be penalized with "tangible consequences" by the administration and Congress.

"Across the world, millions experience discrimination, harassment, imprisonment, violence and other gross human rights violations for peacefully exercising their freedom of religion or belief," said commission Chair Nury Turkel.

"The International Religious Freedom Report is an invaluable tool in the fight to hold violators accountable and improve global religious freedom conditions."