

Trump praises India amid religious persecution

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NEW DELHI (BP)—As religious liberty advocates point out India's religious persecution, President Trump ended a two-day visit there by praising India and its Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Feb. 25.

"We did talk about religious freedom, and I will say that the prime minister was incredible on what he told me. He wants people to have religious freedom, and very strongly," Trump said while announcing a \$3 billion trade deal with India at a press conference in New Delhi. "And he (Modi) said that in India they have worked very hard to have great and open religious freedom."

India is listed as 10th on persecution watchdog Open Doors 2020 Watch List of the 50 countries where Christians suffer the most severe persecution, having risen from a 2013 ranking of 31 after Modi gained power in 2014 with the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Open Doors CEO David Curry questioned whether the United States could have any reputable trade alliance with India.

'Friends don't let friends commit human rights abuses'

"When you have a country that has significant human rights issues—not allowing their people to worship freely, trying to force people into a Hindu system—I think that's a significant problem and makes me question whether they'll be the partner we hope they'll be," Curry told Baptist Press.

“I think we have to understand that for us to have a friendly relationship, friends don’t let friends commit human rights abuses, and this administration in India has a very serious track record of abuse against Christians.”

India’s new Citizenship Amendment Act has drawn concern from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, according to a February 2020 USCIRF factsheet on India.

The law has sparked violent protests and is widely viewed as a tool to exclude Muslims from citizenship. USCIRF lists India as a Tier 2 country of particular concern in its 2019 annual report.

At the Feb. 25 press conference, Trump declined to discuss the Citizenship Amendment Act, saying it was an item for India to handle. Trump described Modi as a “very religious man” whom he admires tremendously, and described India as “an incredible country with unbelievable energy.”

International Religious Freedom Alliance launched

Trump visited India on the heels of the U.S. State Department’s launch of the first International Religious Freedom Alliance that has attracted at least 27 member countries, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in launching the alliance.

Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, The Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Senegal,

Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom were announced as early members.

Pompeo described the alliance Feb. 5 as “the activist club of nations that are willing to aggressively push globally on religious freedom issues. A number of the human rights have had ... a deterioration, substantially so, over the past several decades, and I think it’s because a lot of countries haven’t been willing to speak out and act more aggressively on it.”

Pompeo expressed hope that the alliance would grow in membership, and said as early as July 2019 that he would form the group, speaking at the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom.

Alliance members are expected to discuss actions they can take to cooperatively promote respect for freedom of religion internationally, Pompeo has said.

Curry said the alliance is an important first step in spreading religious liberty internationally.

“None of these people are getting it right all the time. What I think is important though is that we have some agreement on some core principles, things that can be done,” Curry said. “These are countries that are saying we want to make this a priority; I think that’s a good thing. I applaud them for it.”