



ADF INTERNATIONAL SUMMARY OF THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

General Overview

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is a bipartisan commission that annually reviews the countries in the world that have the worst record on religious freedom. USCIRF uses the information it receives to make recommendations to the U.S. State Department about what countries should be considered “countries of particular concern.” These countries engage in “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” violations of religious freedom. If the State Department agrees with USCIRF, it can then take actions against these countries.

This year, USCIRF identified 14 countries as countries of particular concern, and 15 other countries that needed special monitoring. The worst countries include North Korea, Iran, China, Pakistan, and others – places where it is very difficult to practice one’s faith, especially for religious minority groups, including Christians in many of these countries.

Overall, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam as “countries of particular concern.” USCIRF also recommended that Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Sudan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan be placed on the State Department’s “Special Watch List.”

The situation in many countries has unfortunately remained the same or even worsened, although some countries have seen tentative improvements, and there is a growing global movement in support of international religious freedom. In many places, crackdowns on and especially surveillance of religious believers has gotten worse, as well as violence directed against religious minorities. In some places, blasphemy laws and other restrictive laws are getting worse. Many of the trends from recent years seem to be continuing.

Some Encouraging Developments

USCIRF highlighted some of the countries that are showing tentative steps at improvement. USCIRF described Sudan as a country that looks to be improving after the fall of its former president, Omar al-Bashir. The transitional



government's constitution has moved away from identifying Islam as its primary source of law and includes a section on protecting freedom of belief and worship. Sudan has repealed certain public order laws that were often used against women who did not adhere to a particular version of Sunni Islam. Further, the government has expressed interest in revising or repealing its strict apostasy and blasphemy laws. All of that provides cautious hope, but more could be done.

USCIRF also recognized the steps Uzbekistan has taken to move in a better direction on religious freedom. The Uzbek government halted its longstanding practice of targeting religious communities when they did not register with the government, or when they distributed or were in possession of literature that had not been approved by the government. Uzbekistan also announced that it would close the Jasliq Prison, where religious prisoners of conscience had been tortured.

Places Where Religious Freedom Has Deteriorated

China was one of the countries where USCIRF found a deterioration in religious freedom conditions. USCIRF highlighted how Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China, were being subjected to widespread detention and surveillance, with likely over a million individuals being detained. Currently, it appears that many of these detained individuals are being transitioned to forced labor. Additionally, the Communist Party shut down Christian churches by the hundreds and arrested pastors and congregants. In some instances, the Chinese regime has replaced pictures of Jesus Christ in churches with pictures of the President of China, Xi Jinping.

Another country that USCIRF highlighted as having experienced a worsening of religious freedom conditions is India. In particular, USCIRF expressed concern that the recently passed Citizenship (Amendment) Act, along with a possible National Register of Citizens, would discriminate against the country's large population of Muslims and put many of them at risk of statelessness. USCIRF also described increasing violence against Muslims and Christians, and the shuttering or destruction of churches, along with a culture of impunity for these attacks.

Other Trends

USCIRF also noted broader trends regarding religious freedom throughout the world.

- China's influence on other countries grew, and it has exerted pressure on countries, particularly throughout Asia, to prevent criticism of its practices. Additionally, China has developed sophisticated surveillance technology that it has exported to other countries.
- Anti-Semitism rose throughout the world, including in Europe. This included the desecration of Jewish cemeteries with Nazi symbols, and violence directed against Jews and synagogues.
- Penalties for blasphemy and insults to religion were increased in three nations in Southeast Asia: Bangladesh, Brunei, and Singapore. Further, Indonesia considered expanding its criminalization of blasphemy.
- Many states witnessed a rise in ethnoreligious nationalism, including Burma, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.
- There was a spike in attacks on places of worship and holy sites. The most high-profile of these included the March New Zealand shooting at Masjid Al Noor, and the Sri Lanka bombings on three churches during Easter services.

