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Effective Accountability for Countries of Particular Concern

*Excerpts of Remarks by U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Chairman, House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and Int'l Organizations
Hearing on "Protecting Religious Freedom:
U.S. Efforts to Hold Accountable Countries of Particular Concern"
May 22, 2014*

Good morning, and welcome to this very important and timely hearing on effective accountability for countries that blatantly commit religious freedom violations or that turn a blind eye to such violations within their borders.

The headlines are filled with examples. A 27-year old expectant mother Meriam Yehya Ibrahim is imprisoned and faces a death sentence in Sudan because she refused to renounce her Christian faith. In like manner last year, this case in Sudan mirrors a similar incident 18 months ago in Nigeria in which Boko Haram shot Habila Adamu, who refused to renounce Christianity just like Mrs. Ibrahim. Also in Nigeria, Islamic terrorist organization Boko Haram is holding 276 school girls hostage (most of whom are Christian), after kidnapping them from their school dorms in the middle of the night.

Anti-semitism has resurfaced in Ukraine with a series of violent attacks following the ouster of former Prime Minister Yanukovich.

On Wednesday, we received word that American Pastor Saeed Abedini, who is serving an 8 year sentence in Iran for his faith, was severely beaten and returned to prison. He had been hospitalized due to internal bleeding from beatings previously received in prison. His wife, Nagmeh Abedini, testified before this committee in December and begged that the Administration make securing her husband's release a top priority.

Tragically, many countries of the world are a long way from recognizing the human right of religious freedom set forth by Article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In the United States, we claim religious freedom as the "first freedom" because of its placement at the top of the Bill of Rights enumerated in our Constitution, and because of its foundational role in the life of a free and democratic nation. Religious freedom is a constant reminder to governments that their

power is limited, that governments do not create rights but merely recognize them, and that a man or woman's first duty is to his or her well-formed conscience.

The evidence bears out the importance of protecting and promoting religious freedom. As the Pew Research Center and Berkley Center at Georgetown have shown, governments that protect and promote religious freedom have higher levels of social harmony. Just as importantly for national security, high observance of religious freedom is correlated with lower levels of religious extremism.

In 1998, Congress had the foresight to make the protection and promotion of religious freedom a priority in U.S. foreign policy by creating an Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, the Office of International Religious Freedom at the Department of State, which authors the International Religious Freedom Reports on every country in the world, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, with their watchdog report to Congress.

Importantly, this landmark piece of legislation, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), authored by Chairman Frank Wolf of Virginia, created a system for naming and taking action against Countries of Particular Concern or CPCs.

Sixteen years later, the need for U.S. leadership on religious freedom could not be more critical—but the tools to achieve it are lightly used. The Administration recently announced its intention to appoint two new members to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom—but the post of Ambassador-at-Large is in its seventh month of vacancy. The post has been empty for more than a third of this Administration, and the Ambassador's level of authority within the State Department has been demoted.

Despite the fact that the IRFA called for an annual review of CPC designations, the Administration has not named CPCs since 2011. What few Presidential Actions—like sanctions—have been taken in correlation with the 2011 CPC designation, have now lapsed.

History has shown that when the U.S. makes religious freedom a priority and that priority is conveyed to countries of particular concern, we have seen conditions change with minimal harm to security or economic cooperation. For instance, the CPC designation worked as intended with Vietnam—until it was removed prematurely.

In 2004, the Bush Administration designated Vietnam as a CPC as part of the larger bilateral relationship. Vietnam took positive steps toward reforming its laws and practices related to religious freedom and releasing religious prisoners.

Other parts of the relationship—trade and security cooperation—expanded at the same time. Vietnam saw that it was in its interests to take positive steps on religious freedom because it was a priority of the Administration and a prerequisite of a harmonious bilateral relationship.

In 2006, the CPC designation was removed prematurely. In 2007, shortly after Vietnam gained World Trade Organization status, it launched a crackdown on religious leaders, free speech advocates, labor unions, and others that continues to this day.

USCIRF has made a compelling case for why Vietnam should be designated as a CPC, why that designation would again produce results, and why it is in the U.S. interests to prioritize religious freedom in the bilateral relationship. Seven years later, we are waiting for CPC designation.

Today's hearing will take a close look at the ongoing need for the United States to actively pursue religious freedom as a priority goal of its foreign policy, as intended by Congress in the IRFA, and, specifically, the work of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in reaching this goal.