

Defending Religious Freedom Around the World

**Excerpts of opening remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)
Joint Hearing of Africa and Western Hemisphere Subcommittees
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Congratulations and special thanks to Ambassador Sam Brownback and Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, co-chairs of the International Religious Freedom Summit just concluded here in Washington, for an extraordinarily powerful, comprehensive call to action for global religious liberty.

With incisive commentary and analysis from a broad swath of faith leaders, we have all been challenged to do more to mitigate, and God-willing, end religious persecution.

In the United States, religious freedom is often called America’s “first freedom,” since it is listed first in our Bill of Rights.

There, our Founders wrote: *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”*

The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause protect the right of conscience of every American—that inviolable domain in the heart of every human being.

This, of course, flows directly downstream from Jefferson’s stirring words in the Declaration of Independence: that *“all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”*

Religious freedom is not an “American” right alone, but one that belongs to every human being on earth.

Yet, all around the world today, religious persecution is festering and exploding. What has been unconscionable for decades and centuries has gotten worse.

Billions of human beings, made in the image of God, live in countries where their God-given right to freely exercise their religion is restricted—many to the point of incarceration, torture and execution.

According to Open Doors' 2025 World Watch List, "more than 380 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith."

Anti-Semitism is exploding—not just in the Middle East, but throughout Western democracies—including and especially in the United States.

Brutal dictatorships—like China, Russia, Nicaragua, North Korea, Belarus and Cuba—are terrified of letting their people practice their faith.

In many other parts of the world, authorities heavily restrict independent religious activity that does not accord with strict Islamic law—for example, in Afghanistan, in Iran, in Pakistan, in many parts of Nigeria—which have death penalty blasphemy laws, and unfortunately, increasingly in Syria, where under the new authorities, Christians, Kurds, Yazidis, Druze, and Alawites are facing increasing religious violence.

Anything outside of the ubiquitous state—especially the search for deeper spiritual truths that speak directly to the human soul—is automatically a threat to these regimes.

Let's begin with China, where people of all faiths are subject to deplorable treatment by the Chinese Communist Party.

As we speak, Uyghur Muslims in China are suffering a genocide. Today, they are still brutally repressed: many are shipped off to labor camps while their mosques are destroyed and their children forced to speak Mandarin instead of Uyghur.

When unleashing terror on the Uyghurs, Xi Jinping said to show no mercy—and despite the pervasive use of torture, murder and rape, much of the world looks askance and kowtows to Beijing.

In May of last year, as part of its ongoing Sinicization campaign, China issued a decree, effectively banning foreign missionaries from evangelizing within China. This includes bringing Bibles into the country.

And just months ago, the Chinese Communist Party began a massive new crackdown on Chinese Christians. Today, we have testifying before us, Grace Jin Drexel, the daughter of Pastor Ezra Jin, who is one of dozens of church leaders who were arrested and are now detained.

On a trip to China in 1994, I had the awesome privilege of meeting with Bishop Su Zhimin. Bishop Su was a leader of the underground Catholic Church.

As we spoke and then prayed, the Bishop prayed for his persecutors, he prayed for the misguided leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. Bishop Su's body bore witness to the brutality of China's Communist Party.

He was beaten, starved, and tortured for this faith and spent some 40 years in prison.

Yet, he prayed not just for the persecuted church, but for the conversion of those who hate, torture and kill. His witness and his faith absolutely amazed me. Love those who hate you, as Christ did from the cross.

Unfortunately, only a few years later, Bishop Su was arrested again and disappeared. He has not been heard from since.

Xi Jinping is crushing people of faith with torture, jailing, rape and murder. We must act.

We must also remember the persecuted in North Korea—another of the world's worst violators of religious freedom. There, the constitution states that “religion must not be used as a pretext...for harming the State.” All of life, public and private, is subjugated to North Korean state ideology.

Escapees from the DPRK say unequivocally that religion is simply not tolerated. An estimated 30,000 Christians are held in political prison camps. They

are subject to “the harshest forms of torture and imprisonment,” according to USCIRF reporting. Even possessing a Bible can result in execution.

We must also absolutely be monitoring Sudan. I recently chaired a hearing on Sudan, which exposed the religiously-motivated killings and atrocities facing too many caught in the middle of civil war.

On the topic of Nigeria, President Trump’s Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation in October was necessary, long-overdue, and bold.

In his first administration, with the strong backing of his Ambassador-at-Large San Brownback, who testified at my [2020 hearing](#), President Trump recognized that the mass killings by Boko Haram, ISIS West Africa, and armed Fulani terrorists against Christians in the Middle Belt—which were clearly motivated by ethnic and religious animus—meant Nigeria met the criteria for a CPC designation, and was so designated.

Tragically, and inexplicably, President Biden and Secretary Blinken took Nigeria off the list—effectively giving the Nigerian government a free pass for enabling religious violence.

Genocide Watch has called Nigeria “a killing field of defenseless Christians.”

That wrong in our foreign policy has been righted with the President’s CPC designation. We commend and thank him for that action.

Now, while the iron is hot, we must urge the government of Nigeria to protect the rights of persecuted Christians and non-radical Muslims. The CPC designation is a phenomenal first step, but in statute, it is accompanied by 15 different policy tools—including sanctions and other economic penalties that can and must be employed to improve the situation on the ground.

We cannot take our eye off the ball. Christians in the Middle Belt are still being massacred. The government of Nigeria has taken small steps, but a culture of denial by Nigerian officials persists.

I am deeply concerned that Nigeria has hired the K-Street [lobbying firm DCI to the tune of \\$9 million](#) (that's \$750,000 a month), and a Nigerian billionaire has entered into a \$120,000-a-month contract with [Valcour](#) to influence Congress and the Executive Branch.

Elsewhere in Africa, Tanzania has seen concerning backsliding on religious freedom.

Many Catholic clergy, including Father Charles Kitima, were assaulted or abducted after criticizing injustices committed by President Samia Suluhu's regime. Opposition leader Tundu Lissu remains imprisoned, former Tanzanian ambassador Humphrey Polepole is still missing after a violent abduction, and as many as hundreds, possibly thousands of Tanzanians have vanished without a trace following acts of dissent.

More than 2,000 church branches linked to Bishop Josephat Gwajima's Glory of Christ Church of Tanzania were closed after he spoke against those abductions and extrajudicial killings. Congregants were often beaten, Sunday after Sunday, by authorities for attempting to gather for worship.

If the international community stood in solidarity with these religious leaders sooner, the October 29 massacre might have been prevented. This massacre included the killings of street orphans, pregnant women, infants, as well as violations of religious freedom in Catholic hospitals, where authorities pressured nuns to move wounded protesters into mortuaries. Nuns courageously resisted.

I am very pleased that former Congressman Mark Walker is now Principal Advisor on Global Religious Freedom at the State Department. I wish him all the best as he speedily gets to work on confronting religious persecution, exposing the worst human rights violators, and advocating for people of faith all over the globe. America's leadership is absolutely essential.

Now that Principal Advisor Walker is in the building, I have every confidence the Department will release the 2025 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, as well as the long-awaited CPC designations.

Countries whose governments engage in—or tolerate—severe, systemic, and egregious violations of international religious freedom against their own people merit extra scrutiny and diplomatic pressure from the United States.

Following the President’s CPC designation for Nigeria, it’s time for the Department of State to issue the full list of CPC designations.

As Vice President Vance said last year, “Part of our religious freedom initiatives means recognizing in our foreign policy the difference between regimes that respect religious freedom and those that do not.”

More than ever before, vigorous U.S. leadership and diplomacy are needed to address religious freedom violations globally—and end persecution of Christians and all other vulnerable religious groups.

This committee and I are committed to working with the Administration to make this a reality.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today to share their expertise and to shine a light on the most egregious violations of religious freedom being committed today.