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**Hearing: "Prioritizing International Religious Freedom
in U.S. Foreign Policy"**

Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights Subcommittee
Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith
June 3, 2011

Welcome to our hearing this morning. The Subcommittee will be examining the role of International Religious Freedom in U.S. foreign policy, particularly in light of the International Religious Freedom Act and amendments being proposed to that Act in H.R. 1856, the "International Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 2011."

I had the privilege of chairing the committee hearings that prepared the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The Act provided our Administration with the tools necessary to make international religious freedom an integral component of the highest priority in U.S. foreign policy. Contrary to assertions that singling out religious freedom would somehow make it seem more important or separated from other fundamental human rights – the Clinton Administration asserted that its strong opposition to the Act was based on its belief that the Act would result in a "hierarchy of rights" - those of us who championed the bill argued that it was necessary to ensure that religious freedom is given its rightful place within the framework of human rights promotion.

Unfortunately, the urgent call within the IRF Act to vigorously monitor and defend religious freedom as part of U.S. foreign policy has not been heeded. Religious freedom is threatened around the world, and the situation is getting worse. Two years ago, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that eight countries be designated as Countries of Particular Concern. In the 2011 USCIRF annual report released in April, we are looking at 14 countries: Burma, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The basic human rights of hundreds of millions of people are being violated. Their own governments are either direct perpetrators of religious freedom violations or fail to prosecute violations by other citizens, creating a climate of impunity.

Co-Chairman of: Alzheimer's Caucus • Antisemitism Caucus • Autism Caucus • Lyme Disease Caucus
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Bosnia Caucus • Poland Caucus • Human Trafficking Caucus • Ad Hoc Committee on Irish Affairs

Dr. Brian Grim, one of our witnesses this morning, has done significant research in this area. In a study he conducted in 2009, he found that nearly 70 percent of the world's 6.8 billion people live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion. His study specifically cited Iran, Pakistan, China, and Egypt as among the most repressive of religious expression. This is significant not only because it highlights the number of people denied this most fundamental of human rights, but also because religious freedom is comprised of a "bundle of rights." Religious freedom implies freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of association and assembly, and even freedom of the press. Absent freedom of religion, all these other rights are in jeopardy.

In fact, Dr. Grim's research shows that countries that respect these rights reap a host of socio-economic benefits, including better education, better health care, greater equity of pay between men and women, and higher GDP, and these benefits arguably lead to greater social stability. On the other hand, countries without respect for religious freedom do worse on these socio-economic indicators, have greater societal tension, and are more prone to instability. The importance of promoting all components of religious freedom therefore cannot be overstated. Not only is it a moral imperative, but religious freedom keeps extremism and tyranny at bay.

For these reasons, U.S. leadership on religious freedom is desperately needed in many countries around the world, together with a more vigorous utilization of the means provided in the IRF Act for promoting religious human rights. For example, the Administration urgently needs to reassess its list of Countries of Particular Concern, particularly Egypt. As a result of severe and systematic religious freedom abuses against religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, before and after the removal of President Mubarak, USCIRF is now recommending that Egypt be designated as a CPC.

The Obama Administration has yet to make any CPC designations since coming to office. I strongly encourage the Administration to review carefully the recommendations made by the Commission, call out those countries that are engaging in "particularly severe violations of religious freedom," and apply meaningful sanctions as authorized under the IRF Act.

The CPC designation is just one of many mechanisms in the IRF Act that need to be pulled out of the closet and reinvigorated. We will also look at how to strengthen the State Department's IRF Office, the Commission, the engagement of our diplomatic corps, and the IRF Act itself.

I thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today and look forward to hearing their testimony. But first, I turn to Ranking Member Payne for any comments he may wish to make.