



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Testimony by Abraham Cooper, Chair
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**U.S. House of Representatives – Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, & Intl. Organizations**

“The Dire State of Religious Freedom Around the World”

July 18, 2023 at 10:30 AM
Rayburn Office Building 2200

Good morning, distinguished members of the Committee.

My name is Abraham Cooper. Thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, where I currently serve as chair.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. advisory body that monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad. Under USCIRF’s mandate in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA, the commission issues a report by May 1st each

year, with recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

Those recommendations include our assessment regarding which countries merit the State Department's designation as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, or inclusion on its Special Watch List. The standards for such designations are clear: under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom. The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not all three, of those CPC standards.

USCIRF uses this Annual Report to make a compelling case for each country which we determine as deserving of CPC or Special Watch List status. We supplement it with publications and events throughout the year that provide nuanced analyses of religious freedom conditions and trends.

In this year's 2023 Annual Report, USCIRF recommended 17 countries for CPC status, of which 12 were designated by the State Department in November 2022: Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The five countries we recommended for CPC which were not designated include Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, and Vietnam. We further recommended that the State Department maintain on its Special Watch List Algeria and the Central African Republic, while adding nine other countries: Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

My purpose today is not to reiterate these lists. Instead, I'd like to highlight key areas of both discrepancy and alignment between USCIRF's recommendations and the State Department's designations.

Allow me to first turn to the discrepancies, best represented by two countries on which USCIRF profoundly disagrees with the State Department: Nigeria and India.

In Nigeria, religious freedom conditions have remained abysmal, with state and nonstate actors committing particularly severe violations against both Christians and Muslims. While some officials have worked to address drivers of religious freedom violations, others actively infringe on the religious freedom rights of Nigerians, including by enforcing blasphemy laws. Criminal activity and violent armed group incidents impacting religious freedom have continued to worsen.

Sadly, Nigeria has become a country steeped in religious freedom violations, where people of faith, and those of no faith at all, live increasingly in fear of harassment, imprisonment, and violence. It clearly meets the CPC standard under IRFA—as evident in the State Department’s own IRF report, released in

May. It is also why USCIRF recommended the appointment of a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to maximize U.S. diplomatic efforts to address the atrocity risk and religious freedom violations. Our recommendations are supported by Members of Congress in H.Res.82, introduced by Chairman Chris Smith earlier this year.

Meanwhile, India—ostensibly the world’s largest democracy and long one of its most vibrant—has continued its descent into discriminatory religious nationalism and worsening religious freedom. Government actions, including the passage and enforcement of discriminatory policies such as hijab bans, anti-conversion laws, and anti-cow slaughter laws, have created a culture of impunity for threats and violence by vigilante groups, especially against Muslims and Christians. Meanwhile, the government has increasingly repressed critical voices—especially religious minorities and those advocating for them—through surveillance, harassment, and prosecution.

Like Nigeria, the State Department's own reporting corroborates these worsening conditions, setting in stark relief its failure to name India as a CPC or Special Watch list country.

Despite these obvious oversights, USCIRF appreciates the State Department's naming of two key countries where we've also identified worsening religious freedom conditions: Nicaragua and Vietnam.

In Nicaragua, the State Department's recent reporting has closely followed our own, including its designation as a CPC in 2022. We agree that the government of President Daniel Ortega has escalated its campaign of harassment and severe persecution against the Catholic Church by targeting clergy, eliminating Church-affiliated organizations, placing restrictions on religious observances, and engaging in anti-Catholic hate speech.

And regarding Vietnam, which USCIRF has long recommended for CPC designation, the State Department acknowledged recent backsliding by naming it to the Special Watch List in 2022. While we maintain that Vietnam merits a CPC designation, we appreciate recognition that religious freedom conditions there have been trending in an alarming direction. And our own engagement with Vietnam, including a constructive delegation visit there in May, demonstrates that U.S. IRF policy makes a real impact—and, we hope, leading to positive change—when we present a united front, including Congress where Chairman Smith introduced the Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R. 3001), in calling out bad behavior and urging substantive improvement.

All of these challenges come, of course, in addition the myriad of other vulnerable communities around the world who face religious persecution of the most severe order: Ahmadiyyahs in Pakistan, Uyghurs in China, Rohingyas in Burma, Yazidis in Iraq, Baha'is in Iran, and—sadly— many others. Their plight, too,

remains an important point of agreement in reporting and advocacy between USCIRF and the State Department, and we are grateful for its partnership in working to bring greater religious freedom to those individuals, families, and communities.

Thank you again for this opportunity to appear before the Committee this morning, and I look forward to your questions.