

Opening Statement
HON. FRANK R. WOLF
of Virginia
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Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights

*International Religious Freedom:
Strengthening Its Promotion in United States Foreign Policy*

I'd like to thank my good friend, Chairman Smith, for convening this hearing to focus on the importance of international religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy, and specifically to examine legislation I've introduced, H.R. 1856, to amend the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), including reauthorizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Mr. Smith is a champion of human rights. Making this issue a priority is in keeping with his steadfast commitment to speaking out for those whose voices have been silenced.

Religious freedom, often referred to as the first freedom, is of central import to the American experiment. As such it should feature prominently in U.S. foreign policy. Recognizing that this critical issue and other human rights related issues are often relegated to the sidelines within the State Department, I authored legislation more than 10 years ago, in 1998, to establish the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department, headed by an ambassador at-large, and to create the USCIRF—an independent, bipartisan commission charged with monitoring the status of freedom of religion or belief abroad and providing policy recommendations to the president, secretary of State, and Congress.

While important strides have been made, religious freedom still does not enjoy the preeminence it deserves. And sadly, a strong U.S. voice on this critical issue has arguably never been more needed. The daily headlines paint a grim picture about the repression, imprisonment, harassment and even death facing millions of people of faith around the globe.

The bill I've introduced will make a number of strategic improvements to the Religious Freedom Office at the State Department. To start, it places the ambassador-at-large in the office of the secretary of State as opposed to burying it within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. This change is more in keeping with the original intent of the legislation that Congress passed. Over successive administrations, Republican and Democrat alike, this critical position has not been treated with the seniority it deserves and this new language will help rectify this problem.

The legislation also provides the ambassador with oversight and management authority of the IRF Office and other religiously oriented positions and programs at the State Department and carves out funding in the larger Human Rights and Democracy Fund to enable the IRF office to promote religious freedom through advocacy, reporting and programming.

In addition the legislation requires religious freedom training for every Foreign Service Officer (FSO) and states that USCIRF must be involved in that training. American embassies

abroad must be islands of freedom. Whether in Vietnam, China, Pakistan or Iraq—every FSO should be trained and committed to advocating for those whose voices have been silenced by their own governments. This mandatory training will help ensure that our diplomatic corps is equipped in this regard.

My legislation also strengthens the “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) designation process and effectiveness. CPCs are countries whose governments are found to have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The amended language will require that CPC designations are made 90 days after the issuance of the State Department’s annual religious freedom report. One hundred and twenty days after a country has been designated a CPC, the secretary of State must submit a report to Congress that identifies the action taken, the purpose of the action, and an evaluation of its effectiveness and impact. Also included is language tightening the president’s waiver authority, so that indefinite waivers are not an option.

Very significantly, this legislation will reauthorize the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom until September 30, 2018. USCIRF, unlike the State Department, is unencumbered by the impulse to maintain good bilateral relations above all else--an impulse which sadly can result in critical issues of religious freedom being sidelined in the pursuit of broader foreign policy goals.

USCIRF, as an independent, bipartisan federal government commission, has been a reliable voice for the world’s persecuted people and I am glad that the committee will have the opportunity this morning to hear from USCIRF chair, Leonard Leo, about the commission’s strategic import and notable accomplishments. USCIRF’s bipartisan composition befits the cause it champions—religious freedom ought not be a Democrat or Republican issue.

Just in the last year the commission took a leadership role on a series of key issues. It was quick to recognize the strategic importance and courageous voice of the late Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan’s federal minister of Minorities Affairs, an outspoken critic of his nation’s draconian blasphemy laws. During a critical time for the people of Sudan, it also issued special recommendations on the implementation of the historic Comprehensive Peace Agreement. It has made a series of policy recommendations aimed at preserving and protecting Iraq’s besieged religious minorities. It also has actively worked with dozens of Hill offices on combating the “defamation of religions” resolution before the United Nations.

In short, ensuring that the commission is reauthorized is of paramount importance.

I believe President Ronald Reagan is a compelling model of how to integrate and elevate human rights and religious freedom in our dealings with foreign governments, most notably the Soviet Union.

At the very end of his presidency, Reagan spoke at the newly restored Danilov Monastery in Moscow. He poignantly noted "the deep faith that lives in the hearts of the people of this land. Like the saints and martyrs depicted in these icons, the faith of your people has been tested and tempered in the crucible of hardship ... We in our country share this hope for a new age of

religious freedom in the Soviet Union..." He closed by calling for a "resurgent spring of religious liberty."

Indeed, more than 20 years later we hope for a new birth of religious freedom around the world—for the imprisoned Tibetan Buddhist monk, for the Chaldo-Assyrian family living in fear in Iraq, for the Mennonite pastor on trial in Vietnam. These brave men and women too have been tested in the "crucible of hardship." They persevere in the face of persecution, but they look to America to be their voice.

I believe that passage of this legislation, with strong bipartisan support, will give these individuals great hope and send a desperately needed message that America is unwavering in her commitment to this first freedom.