



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Violations of the International Right to Freedom of Religion: Christians

Thursday, June 26, 2019

10:00 – 11:30 a.m.

2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join my colleague and co-chair Chris Smith in welcoming all of you to this hearing.

Ambassador Brownback, it's a pleasure to see you back on the Hill, and my congratulations on the successful rollout last week of the 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom.

One thing I especially appreciate in the Report is the attention to the status of the right to freedom of belief in China.

Both in my capacity as co-chair of this Commission and as chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, I am continually saddened and appalled by the reports that come my way of the repression of Tibetans and Uyghurs and others in China.

We must find ways to constructively pressure and engage the Chinese government to stop its abuses against people of faith. Shining a light on the situation there, as the Report does, is a good first step that I hope and expect will be followed by further action.

I also want to say how glad I was to see that the Report reprints sections of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and

several other international and regional instruments that make up the international legal framework that protects the right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience.

As Americans, we are used to thinking about religious freedom as something guaranteed by the U.S. constitution. But the reach of our constitution does not extend to other countries.

It is the international human rights framework – which the United States helped create and consolidate in the aftermath of the Holocaust – that allows us to demand that other countries respect religious freedom.

Equally as important, it is this international framework that recognizes the dignity of each individual and all peoples, empowering them with rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to have an opinion and to express it, to associate and assemble peaceably, and to take part in government without fear of persecution, discrimination, imprisonment or death.

When we demand respect for religious freedom, what we are saying is that other countries, whether allies or adversaries, must live up to their obligations under international human rights law.

But international human rights laws and norms are under constant attack these days by authoritarians and tyrants of all stripes, all over the world – and by some leaders in our own country.

So, again, I thank you and the State Department for reprinting the foundational human rights instruments in the Report.

We are here today to talk about the violation of the right to religious freedom of members of Christian communities in far too many countries around the world.

Christians are the largest religious group in the world – 31% of the world's population in 2015, according the Pew Research Center. But in any number of countries, especially outside of Europe and the Americas, Christians find themselves in the minority. In some of those places, Christians face hostility, discrimination, attacks and even violence.

Only two months ago we heard of the terrible Easter Sunday suicide bombings that targeted Christians in churches in Sri Lanka and left more than 250 people dead. The news was even more shocking because such an attack is not the norm for Sri Lanka. Claimed by the Islamic State, these were criminal assaults for which there can be no justification. People around the world strongly and rightly condemned them.

Then came the response: retaliatory mob attacks on Muslim homes and mosques. A *New York Times* piece reported that “gangs of Christian men moved from house to house, smashing windows, breaking down doors, dragging people into the streets, punching them in the face and then threatening to kill them.”

Among the Muslims who felt threatened were Ahmadiyya refugees from Pakistan.

Some actions taken by the government, among them a ban on face covers, led my colleagues Ilhan Omar, Bill Johnson and I to write to you, Ambassador Brownback, out of concern that official overreach could make things even worse.

As a practicing Catholic, I benefit from the protection of the right to freedom of religion and belief here in the United States. But I also know that my right to practice my religion is only as secure as that of my Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist or Hindu neighbor.

So while I always condemn religious persecution, I condemn equally strongly any and all attempts to use religious identity as an excuse to discriminate against, let alone persecute, others. Religion must not be used to justify hate or become an instrument of repression. Recognizing the universal right to freedom of thought, conscience or religion is what allows us to counter the weaponization of religion and embrace our shared humanity.

Because I cannot stay for questions, let me close with a question for Ambassador Brownback that comes from one of my constituents who saw the notice for this hearing. He asks the following:

- Can you assure this Commission that you will look into and report back to us regarding the religious freedom implications of Azerbaijan’s 2005 destruction of the Christian Armenian cemetery in Djulfa?

Thank you.