Worldwide Persecution of Christians: Responding to New Challenges
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This hearing—Worldwide Persecution of Christians: Responding to New Challenges—will come to order.

In February of 1996, I chaired a hearing—the first of many—called the Persecution of Christians Worldwide and our witnesses then as now focused on pervasive discrimination, torture and death to believers.

The cruelty and hate must be rigorously exposed, confronted and combatted.

So I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for their extraordinary commitment to protecting Christians—and other people of faith—from abuse.

We can—and must –do more.

In the United States, religious freedom is often called our first freedom. The First Amendment protects the free exercise of religion, and the Declaration of Independence reminds us that all human beings are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.

Religious freedom is a universal human right. It belongs to every person, everywhere, regardless of faith or belief. But there are good reasons to examine the persecution of Christians separately and in some depth. Last year, we held a hearing examining the "Worldwide Persecution of Jews" – because antisemitism is a unique spiritual disease.

One of the things most immediately striking about the persecution of Christians is the geographical scope and scale of persecution. Christians are among the most widely dispersed religious communities in the world. They are also among the most widely persecuted. They face severe persecution in a very large number of countries, and on every continent. The perpetrators and sources of this persecution are extraordinarily diverse: adherents of other religions, often

mobilized by extremist or majoritarian movements; authoritarian and totalitarian states seeking to subordinate religious institutions and independent belief to political power; hostile societies that marginalize, intimidate, or attack Christian minorities as “outsiders” to a national community which the persecutors demand must be religiously homogeneous; and non-state actors, including terrorist organizations, militias, and criminal networks.

Nor are the threats confined to places traditionally associated with religious extremism or authoritarian rule. Increasingly, Christians also encounter restrictions in ostensibly neutral, liberal states, where laws and regulations ostensibly designed to serve other purposes can be used to restrict religious expression, worship, and the exercise of conscience.

These different forms of persecution should not be trivialized or ignored. The murder of Christians by armed militants, the imprisonment of pastors by an authoritarian government, the forced displacement of ancient Christian communities, and the prosecution or censorship of peaceful religious expression in a liberal democracy are not the same phenomenon. But each presents a serious challenge to the freedom of Christians to live and practice their faith.

The numbers alone convey something of the magnitude. According to Open Doors’2026 World Watch List, more than 388 million Christians worldwide face high levels of persecution and discrimination because of their faith— that’s more than one in seven of the world’s Christians. And this horrific problem is not confined to a handful of countries or a single region. It is a global challenge, and one that demands a response informed by an understanding of its different causes and manifestations.

Last week, on November 12, I chaired a hearing examining Nigeria's egregiously flawed and inadequate efforts to protect Christians and secure the Middle Belt, where Christian communities continue to suffer killings, kidnappings, attacks on churches, and forced displacement.

On September 22, I chaired a hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China examining the Chinese Communist Party's repression of prisoners, families, and religious communities, including Christians.

These hearings addressed particular situations. Today's hearing looks at the situation from a global perspective and asks our witnesses to discern new threats

to Christians – and which responses or tools are working or should be tried to defend Christians.

There are several developments that merit particular attention. In parts of Africa, radical Islamist organizations and armed militias continue to attack Christian communities, while weak governance and the failure of authorities to provide effective protection leave vulnerable populations exposed. In the Middle East, political upheaval and the expansion of regional powers have placed historic Christian communities under renewed pressure. In the Caucasus, the survival and independence of Christian institutions have become entangled in broader geopolitical struggles. And in Europe and elsewhere, new regulatory and censorship regimes raise questions about the future of religious expression and the ability of Christians to live according to their convictions.

These developments also remind us that persecution does not always take the form of overt violence. Sometimes it proceeds through the gradual erosion of a community's ability to sustain its religious institutions, educate its children, worship freely, and maintain its presence in the places where its members have lived for generations.

A community can be driven out not only by bullets and bombs, but also by intimidation, discrimination, coercion, and the cumulative effects of official restrictions.

This is why the focus of today's hearing emphasizes responding to new challenges. We need to understand not only where persecution is occurring, but how it is changing.

Are new actors becoming involved? Are established forms of repression being supplemented by new methods of surveillance, censorship, and social control? How are geopolitical rivalries and regional ambitions affecting the security of Christian communities? And what can churches, humanitarian organizations, civil society, foreign governments, and the United States do to respond effectively?

The United States has a range of tools at its disposal: diplomacy, international religious freedom reporting and designations, humanitarian assistance, support for displaced communities, engagement with governments and religious leaders, and, where appropriate, legislation and other measures. But

these tools must be adapted to the circumstances. What works in one setting may be ineffective in another. We should be prepared to learn from organizations working directly with persecuted communities, from those documenting developments on the ground, and from those examining the legal and political dimensions of these challenges.

Our witnesses are extraordinarily distinguished group who have worked for many years to defend people persecuted for their faith. I have known some of them for decades, and my own legislative work has drawn on their courage and tenacity in visiting the imprisoned and threatened, searching for the missing, and ransoming the enslaved. Their courage is extraordinary, and their determination to preserve their faith and communities deserves our attention and support.

Forty-six years ago, during my first term in the Congress, I read a book entitled "Tortured for Christ" by the Reverend Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian evangelical minister. In it, he detailed the horrific, agonizing 14-year ordeal that he endured for his faith in Christ during Ceausescu's brutal dictatorship in Romania.

He said, and I quote, "the underground church is a poor and a suffering church, but it has no lukewarm members." I have found, and I know members of our panel have found, that throughout the world there are no lukewarm members when it comes to the underground churches. Wurmbrand said, "The message I bring out of the Underground Church is: 'Don't abandon us! Don't forget us! Don't write us off!'"