



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Testimony by Nadine Maenza, Vice Chair
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**Hearing on
“Violations of the International Right to Freedom of Religion: Christians”
Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

June 27, 2019
10:00 am
TBD

Thank you, Co-Chair Smith and Co-Chair McGovern, for holding a hearing on this important topic and for inviting me to testify on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, also known as USCIRF.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body that is dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. USCIRF is led by nine Commissioners who are appointed by the White House and the leadership of both chambers of Congress from both parties, supported by a non-partisan professional staff of 20.

USCIRF seeks to defend international religious freedom for people of all faiths, including Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Baha’is, Falun Gong and many more, including those who hold no faith at all.

Throughout the year, we monitor religious freedom conditions abroad and make policy recommendations to the President, Department of State, and Congress. In order to closely evaluate often fluid religious freedom situations on the ground, USCIRF commissioners and staff frequently travel to meet directly with marginalized religious communities, victims of persecution, and even the governments responsible for perpetrating abuses. In 2018 and 2019, USCIRF traveled to 13 countries to examine religious freedom conditions.

Our research focuses on those governments and nonstate actors who are the worst violators of religious freedom, and it is published each year in our annual report, along with specific and actionable policy recommendations for the U.S. government. Our most recent annual report was released less than two months ago and covers 28 countries. I would like to highlight some key opportunities for policy action in three countries with very pressing situations regarding persecuted Christian populations.

Firstly, Pakistan is a country where both the government and nonstate actors have long committed egregious abuses against Christians. Over the past year, state security forces have disappeared dozens of young Christian men in Karachi. While many have been released, there is widespread fear in the community that the government will escalate these arbitrary arrests. Forced conversion of young Christian and Hindu women into Islam, often through bonded labor, remains a systemic problem. Many are kidnapped, forcibly married, and raped. Religious minorities lack legal protection, and when such cases are investigated the young woman is often publicly questioned in front of the man she was forced to marry, which then puts pressure on her to deny there was any coercion.

In 2018, the country's strict blasphemy laws and increased extremist activity further threatened these already marginalized Christian communities. This past November, the State Department followed USCIRF's longstanding recommendation by designating for the first time Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act, although the Department immediately issued a waiver on imposing any punitive measures.

We recommend that the State Department re-designate Pakistan as a CPC again this year, lift the waiver, and enter into a binding agreement with the government to encourage a road map with clear benchmarks to address the violations. We would also like to see the Department assign a portion of existing State Department programs to help the government protect at-risk religious minority community leaders.

A current trend in religious freedom violations is for governments to suppress and persecute faith communities under the guise of protecting "public order" or "national security," frequently invoking real or perceived threats to the nation. Eritrea has long used the specter of war with Ethiopia and the fear of foreign influence as an explanation for forced conscription into the military and mass persecution. Human rights watchers hoped that last year's peace deal with Ethiopia and the resolution of their border dispute would improve conditions for marginalized populations in Eritrea, but that has not been the case.

All faith communities in Eritrea must register with the government, but only four communities are approved as legal: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, The Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Christian affiliated groups such as the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, other Evangelical denominations, and Jehovah's Witnesses are vigorously and systematically suppressed. They are prohibited from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. Security forces continue to arrest members of these groups. Many Christians have been detained for more than 13 years, denied medical treatment, and, at times, held in crowded metal shipping containers. When Christians are released, they are often forced to sign promises that they will no longer attend the meetings or worship services of their churches. Even those within the four approved faith groups are not safe from persecution. Earlier this month, the Eritrean government seized and shutdown Catholic church-run health facilities across the country in apparent retaliation against Catholic bishops who made a bold call for national reconciliation.

Given the recent political developments in Eritrea, and for the first time in 20 years, Congress has a unique window of opportunity to address these abuses. USCIRF encourages you, as the co-chairs of this commission, to increase your engagement with the Department of State on Eritrea and to tie any further U.S. and international involvement with Eritrea to religious freedom benchmarks. A congressional delegation recently traveled to Eritrea, and with your leadership in Congress, USCIRF believes there is sufficient support to see real change in this country.

Lastly, I would like to close by talking about Burma. I concluded a trip to the country just three weeks ago where I met with multiple individuals and groups suffering under religious persecution. The international community has sought to respond to the horrific abuses leveled against the Rohingya population, but less known is the plight of Christians. Over the last several years, intensified fighting between Burma's military and ethnic armed organizations in parts of Kachin and northern Shan states deeply impacted Christians by displacing thousands, which was in addition to the 100,000 people who have been internally displaced in these regions since 2011.

Within this context, the military often blocks humanitarian assistance and has targeted houses of worship and religious leaders, accusing them of working with ethnic armed organizations. USCIRF has received information that in recent years more than 30 churches were destroyed in Kachin State, pastors and parishioners have been physically assaulted in Rakhine State, and Christians in Chin State remain displaced and face ongoing harassment to convert to Buddhism. The Burmese government has created a culture of fear and violence for Christians that fundamentally undermines their ability to practice their faith.

Many of these abuses have occurred at the hands of Burma's military under the direction of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing [MINH AWNG LYNG]. USCIRF calls on the U.S. government to sanction him for his direct role in perpetrating atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities in Burma, including Christians and Rohingya Muslims.

I realize that I have painted a rather bleak picture for you today, but those of us who are able must be willing to face these ugly situations and stand in solidarity with those who suffer because of their beliefs around the world. Persecuted Christians, and others persecuted on the basis of their faith or beliefs, are ordinary people who are subjected to unthinkable horrors. We must remind the persecuted that the world has not forgotten them and we must create a broad coalition to implement effective policies that work on their behalf and hold accountable those who are responsible.

USCIRF is proud that the U.S. government has long been at the forefront of efforts to counter this scourge, and we commend the Trump Administration for the high priority it has placed on this issue. We look forward to participating this summer in the Second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, and urge the Trump Administration to appoint a Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council staff to further elevate its focus on freedom of religion or belief abroad.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.