



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence**

May 25, 2017

1:30 – 3:00 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on how U.S. international religious freedom policies can help reduce religious violence. I would like to thank our witnesses for coming here today to share their expertise with us.

Freedom of belief is perhaps the most foundational of human rights, because it serves as the basis for every other right that we as human beings claim.

Freedom of speech, the right to public assembly, the right to a fair trial, and every other fundamental human right is meaningless without the freedom to believe and think however one chooses.

Our defense of religious freedom is a springboard to advocating for every other right, because this freedom is an indicator of how well or poorly human rights are flourishing in a specific context.

According to both the Pew Research Center, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, global restrictions on freedom of belief are

increasing dramatically. This includes top-down government repression, and bottom-up social hostility from individuals and groups.

Whether persecution comes from governments, or from individuals, violence towards a religious group provokes a feeling of injustice, and at times even a violent response.

Religious groups around the globe are persecuted for their faith, and this kind of persecution can be a catalyst for igniting greater societal unrest.

Religious violence includes human rights abuses perpetrated against people and communities because of their religious conviction, and it also includes abuses perpetrated in the name of one's religion.

We believe the best way to counter religious violence is by promoting robust religious freedom policies. U.S. policies seek to mitigate the rise of religious extremism and violence by promoting laws and social norms that bolster freedom of belief and release a pressure valve on social grievances.

With this in mind, we recently introduced H. Res. 319, a resolution reaffirming the commitment of the United States to promoting religious freedom globally, in support of persecuted religious minorities around the world.

We also seek to remind and encourage nations around the world of their obligation to defend their citizens' freedom of belief as stated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today we have invited a distinguished company of experts in the field of religious freedom to appear before the Commission.

They will enlighten us about the global situation concerning religious freedoms, how U.S. policy is affecting religious freedom around the world, and what the United States can do to encourage and promote religious freedom.

I look forward to hearing from our panel on how United States policy can best serve those around the world suffering under religious violence and persecution.