

IRAN : Over 130 religious Leaders condemn Iran regime

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Rowan Williams, has led over 50 British bishops and nearly 80 US church leaders to condemn the Iranian Regime for its human rights abuses and mistreatment of religious minorities in a statement released today.

Mohabat News (27.06.2018) – <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4027> – The statement called on the international community to pay more attention to the plight of the Iranian people, particularly religious minorities, who have long suffered at the hands of the dictatorship.

The Rt Rev. John Pritchard, former Bishop of Oxford and one of the signatories of the statement, said: “Today, we announce the initiative by Dr. Rowan Williams and supported by more than 50 bishops in the UK along with 78 US church leaders, which highlights the plight of the Iranian people and the religious minorities in Iran, particularly the Christians, calling on the international community to act to defend their rights in the face of government harassment and persecution.” The Iranian Regime has been condemned a massive 64 times for its human rights record by the United Nations and many more times by various international human rights organizations. While the majority of those targeted by the Regime are Shiite Muslims, who make up the majority of Iran’s population, religious minorities are targets specifically for their faith. Worse still, the situation is not getting better.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the United Nations Human Rights Council in February: “No improvement was observed concerning the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, who remain subject to restrictions. [I] remain concerned by reports of persistent human rights violations of and

discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities.”

While, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom’s 2018 report revealed that religious freedom in Iran has continued to deteriorate, with many Christian converts and house church leaders given least 10 years in prison, and many religious reformers facing “prolonged detention and possible execution”.

This abuse of human rights is justified by the Regime under their warped version of Islam, but is not recognised by any true believer.

Indeed, Maryam Rajavi, who leads the Iranian opposition and will be the keynote speaker at their June 30 gathering in Paris, states that Islam does not approve of any form of compulsion, coercion and forcible prohibition, including the use of flogging and terror, imposing the compulsory veil, and especially imposing the rule of a government under the name of God and Islam.

The statement reported that the nationwide anti-regime uprising in Iran showed that the Iranian people want democracy in their country and the religious leaders agreed that the West should support that.

The statement read: ““We call on all countries to take into consideration the deplorable situation of human rights in Iran, particularly the painful situation of religious minorities, in navigating their relations with Iran. We urge them to base any improvement of relations with Iran on a cessation of oppression of minorities and on a halt to executions in Iran. The time has come for us to listen to the Iranian people’s demand for freedom, including religious freedom.”

This statement is the latest in a series of public condemnations of the Iranian Regime for its human rights abuses and of support for the Iranian opposition and their

Free Iran rally.

RUSSIA: 16 Jehovah's Witnesses behind bars as of 8 June

HRWF (08.06.2018) – The number of Jehovah's Witnesses deprived of their freedom has been dramatically and rapidly increasing in Russia since the ban of their religion in April 2017.

It can unfortunately be expected that the situation will worsen day after day and that young Jehovah's Witnesses will also be targeted for their conscientious objection to military service, as members of a banned extremist religious organization (!).

Here is an updated list of 16 prisoners as of 8 June 2018. Their pre-trial detention is systematically prolonged until their trial starts.

See below the region they are from, followed by the name of the detainee and birthdate, the date of the arrest, the article of the criminal code and the dates of their pre-trial detention.

Charges

Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1: Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity.

Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 2: Participation in the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity.

List of Prisoners

Oryol Region Oryol

Dennis CHRISTENSEN (18-Dec-72)

25-May-17

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 26-May-18 / 1-Aug-18

Republic of Tatarstan Naberezhniye Chelny

Ilkham Shamilevich Karimov (9-Feb-81)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 29-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Vladimir Nikolayevich Myakushin (6-Nov-87)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1), (1.1) and (2)

Pre-trial detention: 29-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Konstantin Matrashov (1983)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1), (1.1) and (2)

Pre-trial detention: 29-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Aydar Maratovich Yulmetyev (Aug-93)

27-Mar-18

Article 282.2(1), (1.1) and (2)

Pre-trial detention: 31-May-18/ 25-Jul-18

Republic of Bashkortostan Ufa

Anatoliy Sergeyevich Vilitovich (15-Sep-86)

10-Apr-18

Article 282.2(2)

Pre-trial detention: 12-Apr-18/ 2-Jul-18

Murmansk Region Polyarny

Roman Nikolayevich Markin (18-Mar-74)

18-Apr-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 23-Apr-18/ 11-Jun-18

Viktor Fedorovich Trofimov (26-Mar-57)

18-Apr-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 23-Apr-18/ 12-Jun-18

Vladivostok Region Vladivostok

Valentin Pavlovich Osadchuk (15-Mar-78)

19-Apr-18

Article 282.2(2)

Pre-trial detention: 23-Apr-18/ 20-Jun-18

Orenburg Region Orenburg

Aleksandr Gennadyevich Suvorov (20-Apr-80)

16-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 19-May-18/ 14-Jul-18

Vladimir Yuryevich Kochnev (15-Oct-79)

16-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 19-May-18/ 14-Jul-18

Magadan Region Magadan

Konstantin Nikolayevich Petrov (9-Aug-86)

30-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18/ 29-Jul-18

Ivan Grigoryevich Puyda (C.O.)(5-Nov-78)

30-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18 30/-Jul-18

Yevgeniy Anatolyevich Zyablov (9-Mar-77)

30-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18/ 29-Jul-18

Sergey Liviyevich Yerkin (23-Jun-53)

30-May-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention: 01-Jun-18/ 29-Jul-18

Tomsk Region Tomsk

Sergey Gennadyevich Klimov (C.O.) (26-Mar-70)

3-Jun-18

Article 282.2(1)

Pre-trial detention 05-Jun-18 04-Aug-18

RUSSIA: African Pentecostal student sentenced for illegal evangelism

Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/180517c.html> – On 16 May 2018, Nosisa Shiba, a student of the final year of the Nizhny Novgorod Medical Academy, a citizen of Swaziland (Africa), was summoned to the Department for Issues of Migration of the Sormovsk district, where law enforcement personnel charged her on the basis of article 18.8 of part 4 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law of the RF, with a sentence of immediate deportation through a special

detention center. The girl, who has been a protestant since childhood, began going to an evangelical church of Nizhny Novgorod, the Embassy of Jesus Bible Center of KhVE, upon her arrival in Russia. According to the press service of the church, she sang a song about God and his love for people in her church one time. The video of Nosisa's performance was found on YouTube by the Federal Security Service (F.S.B.) of the RF. The deputy of the ruling bishop of the ROSKhVE in the Volga federal district, the pastor of the Embassy of Jesus Bible Center of KhVE (city of Nizhny Novgorod), Bishop Pavel Ryndich, commented on the situation in his accounts on social networks.

"Today there was a trial again. This time it was of Nosisa, an African who sang in our praise service while being a student of the medical academy. Our sister was convicted because she sang praises. This was considered to be missionary activity without the documents permitting it. And we were unable to prove to the judge that in evangelical churches, everybody may sing. Once again, somebody with a bias dug up somewhere in the vastness of the internet one of my year-old sermons, where he made out the African woman among the worshipers. He identified her. He wrote up a bunch of materials. And with such enthusiasm and ardor that you are amazed. Lo and behold, such good deeds!"

The court issued a relatively positive decision, with a fine of 7,000 rubles and deportation from the country after the completion of her studies. As the clergyman notes, although the student got off with a slight fright, the trend is unpleasant: at first, a trial on level ground, then joy that she will just be deported and not jailed. Then maybe it will be "be happy that you are just jailed and not shot." The bishop emphasized especially the moment in the trial when the judge asked whether Nosisa had any medical counter-indicators for staying in a special detention center until her deportation—she just about fainted.

Christians throughout Russia demonstrated prayer support for the girl and, the pastor said, there are positive results. Secular news media published actively and described this ambiguous situation. "Today I talked by phone with a Russian scholar of eastern studies, a host on the 'Vesti FM' radio station, Evgeny Satanovsky. It is nice that there still are many literate people in the news media," Bishop Pavel Ryndich shared. (tr. by PDS, posted 17 May 2018)

Press Service of ROSKhVE, 17 May 2018

RUSSIA: A sixth Jehovah's Witness accused of extremism behind bars

Operation "Judgment Day" –

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers –

HRWF (20.05.2018) – On 18 May, one day after the widespread police crackdown against Jehovah's Witnesses called "Judgment Day" in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous oblast), the hearing of Alam Aliev took place and the court ruled that he should be kept in pretrial detention through 14 July 2018 and scheduled his criminal case to begin on 22 May.

Jehovah's Witness in Birobidzhan target of criminal case

TASS/ Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2KHysvh> – According to materials of the criminal case, a resident of the city of Birobidzhan, in the period from February 2017 to May 2018, he is accused of conducting deliberate, vigorous actions of an organizational

character directed at resumption and continuation of the illegal activity of a forbidden religious organization, which had been found in April 2017 to be extremist and its activity banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

The illegal actions of the suspect were expressed in convening meetings, organizing religious performances, collecting financial resources in the form of donations for the expenses of a religious organization that has been prohibited by a court, and also conducting mass events aimed at distributing extremist literature and materials of extremist contents.

The prosecutor's office has taken control of the investigation of the criminal case.

Punishment for commission of the aforesaid serious crime is provided by the Criminal Code of the RF in the form of a fine of from 400,000 to 800,000 rubles or the total of salary or other income of the convict for a period of from two to four years or incarceration for a term of from six to ten years, with deprivation of the right to occupy certain offices or to engage in certain activity for a period of up to ten years and restriction of liberty for a term of from one to two years.

Operation "Judgment Day" against Jehovah's Witnesses

Russia Religion News (18.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Lir3Ue> – At least 9 searches in homes of local residents who are thought to be Jehovah's Witnesses were conducted on 17 May in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous oblast), the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses reports. One of the operatives participating in the searches said that a total of 150 law enforcement officers are participating in this operation, which has the code name "Judgment Day."

In the process of searches, photographs, bank cards, money, and all electronic equipment (even old and broken things) were taken from the citizens.

Thus far there is no information about which criminal case the searches were being conducted about and on the basis of which article it was opened. However, a criminal case has been initiated against one of the Witnesses, Alam Aliev. He is in custody and his trial is expected for tomorrow.

In the morning of 16 May, a series of searches in homes of citizens who are thought to be Jehovah's Witnesses was conducted in the cities of Orenburg and Buzuluk (Orenburg oblast). According to preliminary information, three citizens were arrested and pledges not to depart were taken from another three. It is known that citizens have been held as defendants on the basis of part 2 of article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the RF (participation in an extremist organization).

It is expected that a decision about the measure for insuring appearance for those arrested will be made on 17 May.

On 17 July of last year, the decision of the Russian Supreme Court finding all 396 religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to be extremist and banning their activity took legal effect. (tr. by PDS, posted 17 May 2018)

FRANCE: An Algerian imam faces deportation

HRWF (15.04.2018) – The French government is trying to expel El Hadi Douidi, an imam preaching a fundamentalist form of Islam contrary to human rights. On 8 March, a Commission composed of administrative and judicial magistrates opened the way to the deportation of the controversial imam after it identified cases of hate speech in the numerous sermons of the

imam. Jews are “unclean, the brothers of monkeys and pigs,” he said. Adulterers “must be punished by stoning to death or decapitation,” while women “must not leave the home without authorization.” The apostate “needs to be eliminated by the death penalty, to protect Muslims.” Most damning, the Commission report said, Imam Doudi “explicitly” justified jihad.



El Hadi

Doudi, an imam who preaches a fundamentalist form of Islam, at a courthouse in Marseille, France, in February. The French government is trying to expel him. Credit Anne-Christine Poujoulat/Agence France-Presse – Getty Images

Imam Doudi, 63 was born in Algeria and is not a French citizen. As he is very active on internet, his influence extends not only in France but also throughout Europe. His lawyer said he is the only imam authorized to issue fatwas. Over 37 years, he has often criticized Jews, women and the modern world, yet former governments have long tolerated his hard-line sermons. President Macron is adopting a tougher line, especially about

hate speech.

However, France had never been lax in its fight against extremism and terrorism. From 2012 to 2015, the then Interior Ministry kicked out 40 Muslim clerics, and another 52 people, including clerics, were also deported over the last 28 months.

“It’s not just the terrorist organizations, the armies of Daesh, the imams of hate and death that we are fighting,” Mr. Macron said, referring to the Islamic State, in a speech last week honoring Lt. Col. Arnaud Beltrame, a police officer who died in terrorist attack at a supermarket in southern France after swapping himself with a hostage.

“What we are fighting is also this subterranean Islamism, which advances through social networks, which accomplishes its task invisibly, which works silently on the weak and the unstable, betraying even those it claims to represent, who, on our very soil, indoctrinate through proximity and daily corrupt,” Mr. Macron said.

The expulsion of Imam Doudi was recommended by the Marseille authorities under a French law regarding “deliberate acts tending to provoke discrimination, hatred and violence toward an individual or a group.”

Marseille – France’s second-largest city, one-fifth Muslim – is not especially radicalized. Other cities in the south of France, like Nice, have had higher numbers of young people leave to fight in Syria, and greater proportion of Muslim residents on the government’s terrorism watchlist. However, almost all of the fines in Marseille for wearing a face-covering, head-to-toe veil – which is illegal in France – have been imposed in the vicinity of Imam Doudi’s mosque, the police say. The authorities are growing increasingly concerned about the potential for radicalization – especially since two young women were killed in a knife attack at the city’s main train station in October.

The Sounna mosque where Imam Douidi preached, on the Boulevard National in the Third Arrondissement of Marseille, was closed by officials in December on the grounds that his sermons could “provoke acts of terrorism.” Five members of Imam Douidi’s flock left to fight jihad in Syria, according to the police.

His sermons are “exactly contrary to the values of the Republic,” said Marseille’s prefect of police, Olivier de Mazières, a terrorism specialist who has led the case against the cleric.

BRUNEI: Next phase of Shariah penal code underway

Borneo Bulletin (11.03.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Et5Sdl> -Towards the implementation of the next phase of the Shariah Penal Code 2013, a draft on Criminal Procedures Code on Shariah (CPC Shariah) has been approved by the Brunei Islamic Religious Council and has been consented to by His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu’izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar ‘Ali Saifuddien Sa’adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam for gazetting.

Elaborating on the details on the Shariah Penal Code 2013 at the fifth day of the 14th Legislative Council session yesterday, YB Pehin Udana Khatib Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Haji Awang Badaruddin bin Pengarah Dato Paduka Haji Awang Othman, the Minister of Religious Affairs, shared the first phase has been implemented on May 1, 2014, while the next phase will be carried out according to the right administrative time.

The minister added that the phased implementation of Shariah

Penal Code 2013 aimed to provide or enable strategic planning and early preparation in orderly manner and concrete actions by various relevant agencies including investigations, prosecution and judiciary with the implementation of sentences and penalties.

However, several other procedures need to be looked upon before the implementation of CPC Shariah whereby a grace period will be given especially for law practitioners, justice practitioners and execution of the sentences.

He added that the draft provides all rules (law) and prosecutions that will act as a guide for agencies and parties to implement their roles and responsibilities in upholding justice. Apart from CPC Shariah, provisions towards a number of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) have already been provided by all relevant parties in ensuring investigation procedures, prosecutions, trials and implementation of sentences are in accordance to the prescribed CPC Shariah.

The minister explained that the SOPs involved coordination of religious enforcement division and the Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) that relate with investigations and enforcement; for prosecution and collaborative coordination with the Shariah prosecutor division and the attorney generals; for Hudud and Qisas that relate with trial at Shariah court; for executions of sentences under the Syariah Penal Code 2013 (involving whipping, death sentences, imprisonment, cutting of hands and feet as penalties, stoning and Qisas).

There is also an SOP for medical officers at the Ministry of Health that acts as the Manual Working Procedure and Reference Term for the ministry in implementing Shariah Law.

Other sources

<https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/brunei-government-signs-off-on-next-stage-of-sharia>

70,000 law enforcement forces for the protection of places of worship at Easter

HRWF (02.04.2018) – 41,000 policemen and 29,000 gendarmes were mobilized by the Ministry of the Interior to protect Christian and Jewish places of worship during the religious celebrations of Easter and until 7 April, according to a press release published by the Ministry on 30 March (<https://bit.ly/2pVGGHY>).

State of emergency

In 2017, 20 terrorist attempts were foiled, according to Gérard Collomb, Minister of the Interior. During the state of emergency from November 2015 to 1 November 2017, 32 attempts were foiled, 4457 administrative searches were carried out at the address of individuals having relations with jihadist movements, 625 weapons were discovered (including 78 war weapons: Kalashnikovs, assault rifles and rocket launchers). This led to 998 criminal investigations, 646 custody cases. 752 individuals were put under house arrest and 41 still are. When suspects were under house arrest, they had to stay at home from 8pm to 6am, report to the police or the gendarmerie two or three times per day, and were not allowed to leave their city without the authorization of the mayor or the prefect. During the state of emergency, 19 Muslim places of worship suspected of hosting preachers spreading hate speeches

were closed and as of 1 April 11 were still closed. Their situation is still under investigation, minister Collomb said.

Anti-terrorism law

After 1 November 2017, the lawmakers passed an anti-terrorist law meant to replace the legislation in force during the state of emergency. Under the new law, the prefect is still allowed to order administrative searches but only after consulting a prosecutor and after the decision has been validated by a judge.

The prefect is still authorized to close places of worship if they propagate ideas, theories, oral statements and printed material inciting to violence, hatred, discrimination, terrorism or apology of terrorism. However, France has decided that the closure of places of worship was not a priority in its fight against Islamist terrorism because what was pointed at was the lack of a global strategy of prevention involving local actors – associative, social, educational, cultural and police – to put on the radar all weak signals of radicalization.

House arrests are replaced by “individual measures of surveillance”. Freedom of movement is extended from the place of residence to the commune and it can be extended to the département if the suspect accepts to wear an electronic bracelet.

Controls of personal identification documents are possible without prior authorization of a judicial authority at the border, near and in train stations, within a 20-km radius from international ports and airports.

Deportation of foreign dangerous Islamists remains possible. According to governmental sources, more than 60 people have been deported since 2012.

Protection of places of worship during the state of emergency

According to statistics from the Interior Ministry, published on 1February 2017, 4,320 places of worship and religious community buildings were under surveillance and protection of mobile (non-static) patrols by law enforcement and military forces in 2016:

- 2,400 out of 45,000 Christian sites (5%)
- 1,100 out of 2500 Muslim sites (44%)
- 820 Jewishsynagogues, schools and community centers (100%)

Moreover, in the last two years, a budget of 12.5 million EUR was approved to purchase security and video-protection material for the most sensitive religious sites.

Noteworthy is the fact that soldiers who were protecting religious buildings were targets of physical attacks. On 3rd February 2015, three soldiers guarding a Jewish community center were targeted in a knife attack in Nice, and on 1st January 2016, a man tried to run down troops guarding a mosque in Valence.

In 2016, incidents targeting Jewish and Muslim community buildings respectively decreased by 54% and 37.5% in comparison with 2015 while there was an increase of 17.4% concerning Christian (Catholic) places of worship[1]: 949 according to the Ministry of the Interior, including 399 acts of vandalism and 191 cases of theft of worship items.[2]

The Ministry of the Interior also notes that 14 incidents were satanist motivated, and in 25 cases there was an anarchist connotation, but most of the time the perpetrators and their motivations are unknown.

These statistical ups and downs follow the same trend as the global statistics about anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Christian incidents.

Decrease of racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents in 2016 and 2017

After a continuous increase from 2008 to 2015, the number of

vandalism incidents targeting Christian and Muslim graves and places of worship decreased in 2016 and in 2017 but violent acts against Jews were on the rise and vandalism cases against Jewish sites increased by 22% in comparison with 2016, according to the Ministry of the Interior.

The global statistics in 2017 are clear: 950 racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents in 2017 v. 1128 in 2016 (-16%).

The number of anti-Muslim incidents (121) dramatically decreased by 34.5%.

The number of racist incidents (518) dropped by 14.8%.

The number of anti-Semitic incidents (311) diminished by 7.2%.

However, the number of acts of violence against Jews has dramatically increased: 97 in 2017 v. 77 in 2016.

Concerning acts of vandalism against religious sites and graves, Christian sites were less targeted: 878 in 2017 v. 949 in 2016, and Muslim sites were also less targeted: 72 in 2017 v. 85 in 2016.

U.S. efforts to protect religious minorities (Knox Thames)

PROTECT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: We will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and threatened minorities. Religious minorities continue to be victims of violence. We will place a priority on protecting these groups

and will continue working with regional partners to protect minority communities from attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage.

– National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017

US Department of State Official Blog (22.02.2018) – <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2018/02/22/en/us-efforts-protect-religious-minorities> – Persecution, repression, and discrimination are a daily reality for members of religious minority communities in too many countries around the world. Believers and non-believers alike are targeted for violence; their human rights are limited or sometimes entirely restricted. In response, the United States is advocating for the rights of members of religious minority communities, so that they may fully enjoy religious freedom and other related human rights.

The National Security Strategy, released in December 2017, emphasized the importance of this effort. The U.S. government is working bilaterally, and in concert with our friends and allies, to push back against persecution targeting religious minorities, to fight against discrimination, and to promote religious freedom for all. The State Department has undertaken numerous efforts to prevent persecution and to foster space for diversity of thought and belief. Recently, Secretary Tillerson demonstrated U.S. concern about global persecution by re-designating 10 countries as “countries of particular concern” for their particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and for the first time the Secretary named Pakistan to a Special Watch List. Specific to my area of focus in the Middle East, we achieved bipartisan agreement that ISIS atrocities against Yazidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims constitute genocide. The United States is bringing new resources online to assist religious minorities in Iraq, to help preserve their presence in their ancestral homelands.

Since I began this work in 2015 as the first Special Advisor for Religious Minorities at the State Department, we have provided strategic guidance to our embassies and consulates about how to consistently advocate for rights of members of minorities and promote their equal treatment in society. Recognizing the importance of preserving cultural heritage, we have developed a partnership with the Smithsonian Institution to train church and other leaders of minority faith communities on how to protect ancient places of cultural significance. We have strengthened international efforts to advance religious freedom by partnering with Canada to lead the International Contact Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief, a network of likeminded countries committed to advocate for this right, as well as supported efforts to build similar parliamentary networks. We have worked with the Organization of American States to recruit countries in our hemisphere to join these efforts to combat persecution in other regions. And I have personally traveled to more than 25 countries, including Iraq four times and Pakistan twice, to raise concerns directly and to meet with allies on how to coordinate efforts.

And yet challenges continue to emerge against religious diversity. Groups like ISIS and al-Qa'ida continue to commit targeted acts of violence around the world, while authoritarian regimes like North Korea continue their daily practices of egregious repression. In response, we must stay committed to emphasizing the universal importance of this fundamental freedom. Based on my almost 20 years of experience in this field, we can achieve lasting results by building and protecting environments where everyone can enjoy freedom of religion or belief. We will continue to raise concerns when communities are targeted, while protecting this human right for all. Our efforts will be specific in advocacy and holistic in approach.

The specific/holistic approach of U.S. diplomacy is based upon

the International Religious Freedom Act. A groundbreaking piece of bipartisan legislation passed 20 years ago, the Act made the promotion and protection of religious freedom a foreign policy priority for the United States. The Act created the position of Ambassador-at-Large and required the Department of State to annually report on religious freedom globally.

In the context of advocating for religious freedom around the world, these reports highlight specific situations concerning members of religious minorities: the jailing of Christian pastors and Baha'is in Iran; the targeting of Baha'is for mistreatment in Yemen by Houthi authorities; the imprisonment of non-Muslims and Muslims alike on charges of "denigrating religion" in Egypt; the prosecution of members of minority groups and the Ahmadis for blasphemy in Pakistan; limitations on the right to freedom of religion or belief in Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Eritrea; anti-Semitic incidents continuing to arise globally; Turkmenistan and Tajikistan maintaining incredibly tight controls on the free practice of religion; the Chinese government's ongoing campaign to control religious beliefs and activities, in part, by torturing, detaining, and imprisoning thousands religious practitioners; and Muslim communities, including the Rohingya, in Burma facing violence, discrimination, and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The reports have also highlighted a growing trend of terrorists persistently attacking members of religious minority groups. For instance, ISIS affiliates in Pakistan have attacked churches and Christian gatherings, and extremists there have targeted Hindus for forced conversion. In Iraq, ISIS has launched attacks on Yezidis, Christians, Turkmen, Shabak and Kakai, and sexually enslaved and abused Yezidis in particular. ISIS has targeted Shia Muslims in both Syria and Iraq. Elsewhere, ISIS recently claimed responsibility for attacking a Shia cultural center in Kabul. ISIS strikes out at Sunnis brave enough to denounce its

violent and intolerant ideology – including religious leaders. In addition, terrorists have repeatedly attacked members of two seemingly unrelated minority groups- converts and atheists – for their personal decision to choose a different belief system.

There is much work to do. Protecting religious freedom and religious minorities is an American ideal. As we celebrated President's Day this week, we are challenged by the example set by our founders. President George Washington wrote in August 1790 to the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island to emphasize that they should not fear persecution as a religious minority in the new United States of America. He declared that, "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship...for, happily, the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." President Washington set a high bar, and so inspired by his example and these ideals, our foreign policy will continue to endeavor to protect religious freedom and religious minorities.

About the Author: Knox Thames serves as the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South / Central Asia in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the U.S. Department of State.

Iceland; 500 Icelandic physicians back bill to outlaw circumcision

JTA(23.02.2018) – <http://bit.ly/2CGWSQP> – Hundreds of physicians in Iceland and some of Belgium's top doctors came

out in support of a bill proposing to criminalize nonmedical circumcision of boys in the Scandinavian island nation.

The approximately 500 Icelandic physicians who backed the bill that was submitted last month to the parliament cited the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki on ethical principles.

"Potential complications should offset the benefits" of male circumcision, "which are few," the Icelandic physicians wrote in a joint statement published Wednesday.

Advocates of male circumcision include many physicians who believe it reduces the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and genital infections.

In Belgium, several prominent physicians, including Guy T'Sjoen of Ghent University Hospital, told the De Morgen daily they also support a ban.

"As a physician, I find it very regrettable that we have thousands of unnecessary circumcisions annually of boys who can't have their say about it," he said in an interview published Tuesday.

In Denmark, a petition featured on the parliament's website proposing to ban nonmedical circumcision of boys has received 20,000 signatures out of the 50,000 needed to come up for a parliamentary vote as draft resolution. As per a new law, the petition, which was posted on Feb. 1, will remain active for 180 days.

Throughout Scandinavia, the nonmedical circumcision of boys under 18 is the subject of a debate on children's rights and religious freedoms. The children's ombudsmen of all Nordic countries – Finland, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway – released a joint declaration in 2013 proposing a ban, though none of these countries has enacted one.

In the debate, circumcision is under attack from right-wing politicians who view it as a foreign import whose proliferation is often associated mostly with Muslim immigration. And it is also opposed by left-wing liberals and atheists who denounce it as a primitive form of child abuse.

HRWF Comment

It is to be feared that this anti-circumcision campaign will be exploited by anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim actors in a number of other countries.

China bans Muslim children from Quran classes

Aljazeera (17.01..2017) – <http://bit.ly/2FMGDEI> – Chinese government authorities have banned Muslim children from attending religious events during winter break, in a county in western China that is mostly populated by Muslims.

The notification for the ban has been posted online by the education bureau, as authorities step up their suppression of religious freedoms.

School students in Linxia county in Gansu province, home to many members of the Muslim Hui ethnic minority, are prohibited from entering religious buildings over their break, a district education bureau said, according to the notification.

Students must also not read scriptures in classes or in religious buildings, the bureau said, adding that all students and teachers should heed the notice and work to strengthen political ideology and propaganda. China is an atheist, communist state.

Reuters was unable to independently verify the authenticity of the notice.

The Linxia education bureau has declined to comment on the document's validity.

Xi Wuyi, a Marxist scholar at the state-backed Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and an outspoken critic of rising Islamic influence in China, shared the picture and welcomed the apparent move by the authorities.

With the notice, the county was taking concrete action to keep religion and education separate, and sticking strictly to education law, she said on the Weibo social media platform.

New regulations on religious affairs released in October last year, and due to take effect in February, aim to increase oversight of religious education and limit religious activities.

Last summer, a Sunday School ban was introduced in the southeastern city of Wenzhou, sometimes known as "China's Jerusalem" due to its large Christian population, but Christian parents found ways to teach their children about their religion, regardless.

Chinese law formally grants religious freedom for all, but regulations on education and protection of minors also say religion cannot be used to hinder state education, or children taught to believe in a religion, rather than communism.

Authorities in troubled parts of China, such as the far western region of Xinjiang, home to the Turkic-speaking Uighur Muslim minority, ban children from attending religious events.

But religious communities elsewhere rarely face blanket restrictions.

Fear of Muslim influence has grown in China in recent years, sparked in part by violence in Xinjiang.

The Chinese-speaking Hui, who are culturally more similar to the Han Chinese majority than to Uighurs, have also come under scrutiny from some intellectuals, who fear creeping Islamic influence on society.