

TAJIKISTAN: Two years in prison for a conscientious objector

– HRWF (04.04.2020) – On 1 April, a Tajik military court sentenced 20-year old Jovidon Bobojonov, a Jehovah's Witness objecting to military service. He had been in pretrial detention for six months. During his detention, military unit personnel had beaten him multiple times to intimidate him into serving in the military.

The UN Human Rights Committee has addressed the matter of conscientious objection to military service in Tajikistan on three occasions. In 2005, 2013, and 2019, the Committee strongly recommended that Tajikistan recognize the right to conscientious objection.

Most recently, on 22 August 2019, the Committee released its Concluding Observations on Tajikistan and strengthened its earlier findings by stating:

§46. "The State party should step up its efforts to adopt the legislation necessary to recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service without discrimination as to the nature of the beliefs (religious or non-religious beliefs grounded in conscience) justifying the objection, and to ensure that alternative service is not punitive or discriminatory in nature or duration by comparison with military service." (link to original CCPR report)

The ICCPR protects the right of conscientious objectors to refuse to perform military service.

Additional Background

On 4 October 2019, military officers in the city of Khujand abducted Jovidon Bobojonov from his home and took him to an enlistment office, where he was placed into custody.

He was subsequently transferred to military unit No. 45075, where he was pressured to take the military oath of allegiance. On one occasion, when he refused to put on the military uniform, six military unit members assaulted him. They twisted his arms behind his back and forced him to the ground. Jovidon's head was pressed with an army boot to the

floor, his neck was clamped with their knees. When he tried to resist, they beat him in the kidneys. The men tried to take off his pants and put on the military uniform pants. The more he resisted, the more they pressed on his neck with his knee. Then he passed out. When he woke up, he was bound. He was seated on a chair but could not keep his balance, so someone held him in the chair so that he would not fall off.

As of March, he had been in custody at the KGB temporary detention facility in Dushanbe.

Jovidon's parents, who are also Jehovah's Witnesses, have filed complaints with numerous Tajik officials, including the Presidential Administration and the Ombudsman Office. The Tajik authorities claim that since a law on alternative service has not been adopted, Bobojonov's actions constitute a crime and therefore his abduction was lawful.

Address of hearing: Military Court of Military Post of Dushanbe, 1 Negmat Karabayev av. (Таджикистан, Душанбе, просп. Негмата Карабаева 1, Военный суд Душанбинского гарнизона)

Source: Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses

TAJIKISTAN: Jehovah's Witness jailed for four months for reading banned Bible

Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov is a 68-year-old pensioner. He was arrested in February and was interrogated in the absence of a lawyer. The ban on the sacred text of his religion violates international norms on the treatment of prisoners.

AsiaNews.it (08.06.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2IblK9o> – A 68-year-old pensioner, Jehovah's Witness (JW), will have to remain in

prison for another month, having already spent three behind bars, and will not be able to have the Bible to pray.

This was established by the court of Khujand, in Tajikistan, extending the pre-trial detention regime until 26 June. The man was arrested in February on charges of “incitement to religious hatred”, for which he risks going to jail for five to 10 years. However Forum 18 activists follow the case believe that he is a prisoner of conscience and is punished because he is considered the head of the local JW community.

The pensioner is called Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov and is a widower. The man is not the first JW to be targeted by the authorities of the Sogd region, who are carrying out a crackdown also against the Muslim community. The inmate has health problems: he suffers from high blood pressure and underwent a delicate leg surgery just before the arrest. Judge Abruniso Mirasilzoda, who ordered the first incarceration, did not want to explain the reasons for the extension of the prison regime.

Khakimov was stopped because his cell phone number appeared in the phone book of two JW women arrested while proselytizing on the street. Activists complain that his detention is illegal because the interrogation to validate the detention in February took place in the absence of the lawyer. Furthermore, the subsequent sentence of extension of the arrest, in April, was pronounced without warning to the lawyer.

The lawyer was able to meet the pensioner in prison and reports: “His health is quite good and he is given medicine.

He can pray but he is not allowed to have the Bible. ” According to the group this violates the United Nations Rules on the minimum standard for the treatment of prisoners (known as “Mandela Rules”). The rule n. 66 in fact states that “so far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his or her religious life by attending the services provided in the prison and having in his or her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his or her denomination”.

TAJIKISTAN: Children barred from attending church

World Watch Monitor (25.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2F047tV>– Tajik authorities implementing a new religion law are barring children from attending religious services and have burned thousands of calendars with Bible verses.

Amendments to Tajikistan’s Religion Law came into force in January last year, giving the state greater control over religious education, and increase the amount of information religious organisations must pass on to the state.

The State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) now demands “all kinds of information on the number of members, finances and activities”, a member of a religious community told Oslo-based news agency Forum 18 anonymously, fearing reprisals.

They also gather information about the number of children under the age of 10 attending religious meetings, using the Religion Law and the Parental Responsibility Law to put pressure on parents and religious communities.

In December, Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojaye, the SCRA official responsible for non-Muslim communities, made an unannounced visit to a religious community to obtain information. Forum 18 did not reveal the name of the community, to prevent reprisals.

“While Tukhtakhojaye was present, a few children under the age of 10 came in to the meeting to see their parents briefly,” a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous, told Forum 18.

“Tukhtakhojaye did not say anything during the meeting, but a few days later summoned the leaders of the religious community for questioning. He then forced them to write a statement explaining the reasons why the children were present in the meeting.”

A few days later, the community was fined the equivalent to almost eight months’ average wage for violating the Religion Law.

‘Religious propaganda’

In the same month, 5,000 calendars with Bible verses, which were imported by the Baptist Church, were confiscated by custom officials and destroyed. The Church also received a fine of about four months' average wage for "producing, distributing, importing, or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed through the compulsory prior state religious censorship".

A customs official told Radio Free Europe that inspection had shown the calendars had "elements of propaganda of an alien faith", Forum 18 reported.

SCRA spokesperson Afshin Mukim told the radio broadcaster that "propaganda of a religion must be done only within the Baptist Church, and the calendars had religious propaganda in them", and said the number of calendars was greater than the number of Baptists in the country, according to the news agency.

Tajikistan is a Central Asian country with the highest percentage of Muslims, approximately 97%, but the former Soviet republic is determined to be secular and to keep Islam under control.

Target of persecution

Of the eight "Persecution Engines" the international religious-freedom watchdog Open Doors measures, 'Islamic oppression' and 'dictatorial paranoia' has made Tajik Christians a target of persecution.

Christian converts from a Muslim background are most vulnerable to persecution in Tajikistan, in particular from family, friends and the community, Open Doors says. Non-traditional Christian communities, like the Baptist Church, also suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines by authorities.

The Central Asian country is 29th on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

HRWF Comment

See our FORB and Blasphemy Prisoners Database: 23 FORB Prisoners (22 Muslims, 1 Protestant)

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

TAJIKISTAN: Raid, torture, interrogations, fines, calendars destroyed

Religious communities including Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for worship continue to be raided, with interrogations lasting between 20 minutes and 14 hours and in some cases involving torture. Other religious communities also face renewed questioning, especially on finances, and whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings.

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (22.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2HklqoS> – Police in Tajikistan continue to raid groups of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting together for worship, with interrogations being carried out for between 20 minutes and 14 hours. During the interrogations police have forced people to sign statements that they were not tortured, yet some detainees have been tortured. Contrary to the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Tajikistan has neither arrested officials suspected of torture, nor put them on criminal trial.

From January 2019, State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) officials have renewed demands to religious communities of all beliefs to give the SCRA "all kinds of information on the number of their members, finances and activities", a member of

one religious community who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Officials have been particularly interested in community finances, as well as whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings (see below).

The demands follow January 2018 Religion Law changes, but officials act as if there are no legal controls on their actions. One religious community in early 2019 asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev, who is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslim communities, for a formal written request for the information he wanted. He replied that he will not put anything in writing, claiming that “you need to obey my verbal commands”. He also claimed: “My verbal commands are the law as I represent the law. If you don’t obey my verbal commands you will be in trouble. We [the SCRA] will come and take any documents we want” (see below).

After Tukhtakhojayev visited a community to demand information and saw children under the age of 10 present with their parents, a fine equivalent to almost eight months’ average wage was imposed (see below).

“Mosques have stopped being a social institution, and have become some kind of state agency,” a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. “Imams are known to share all information on mosque community members with state agencies” (see below).

In December 2018 customs officers at Dushanbe Airport confiscated 5,000 calendars with New Testament verses that

Baptists were importing. The calendars were later destroyed and a fine equivalent to about four months average wage imposed. One Customs official told Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) that "after linguistic experts in the Culture Ministry .. found elements of propaganda of an alien faith, the calendars were confiscated". Officials have refused to explain to Forum 18 why the state might regard some faiths as "alien", or whether followers of "alien" faiths have greater or less freedom of religion and belief than followers of "non-alien" faiths. They have also refused to explain why the calendars were confiscated and destroyed instead of being returned to sender (see below).

Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Daniil Islamov, who was jailed for refusing to do military service, has filed a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee (see below).

Raids, interrogations for up to 14 hours

Police have continued to raid groups of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting together for worship. The regime banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 2007.

Across the northern Sogd Region, including in Khujand and Konibodom, the police Organised Crime Department has been raiding homes of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout January and February. Police are known to have interrogated about 17 people for periods of between 20 minutes and 14 hours, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 15 February. Police also confiscated some mobile phones, personal computers or tablets,

and internal passports from those they interrogated.

Asked on 21 February why police are raiding Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for worship in their homes, and why Tajikistan has banned the community, Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in the capital Dushanbe replied: "I am not competent to answer you on this question." He refused to put Forum 18 through to any official who could answer this.

Torture

During the interrogations, police in Sogd Region compelled those detained to complete a questionnaire about Jehovah's Witness beliefs, as well as to state in writing that they were not tortured by police during the interrogations.

Under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Tajikistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture, and to try them under criminal law.

One female Jehovah's Witness was interrogated two days running for 14 hours. As a result of the extreme stress imposed on her she suffered a stroke, leaving her unable to walk or speak. She was then taken to hospital.

Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a formal complaint about the interrogation and torture to the Regional Public Prosecutor, but it has taken no action and has made no response.

The duty officer of Sogd Regional Police (who refused to give his name) told Forum 18 from Khujand on 21 February that freedom of religion and belief cases were dealt with by the Organised Crime Department. Khurshed Raupov, Deputy Head of the Organised Crime Department, told Forum 18 that "I understand you very well but cannot answer" when questioned about the raids and torture. He then put the phone down and did not answer subsequent phone calls.

Earlier police torture unpunished

In an earlier case of torture, on 21 January 2018 in Khujand a Jehovah's Witness was summoned to a police station where during a four-hour interrogation, police officer Husrav Usupov beat him until he suffered concussion. Police then released him and he went to a hospital for treatment. Police forced the hospital not to provide medical test results, and forced a doctor to write a false statement denying the injuries. The victim's wife complained to the Prosecutor's Office about her husband's torture.

However, on 1 February 2018 the chief of Khujand Police and the head of the police Criminal Investigation Department summoned the victim and his wife for interrogation. Police ordered the couple to write a statement that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, so fearing for their safety they moved elsewhere, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Large scale secret police raid

In the capital Dushanbe on 5 October 2018, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police detained a group of 18 Jehovah's Witnesses, including some children, leaving a home after they met for worship. The NSS detained most of the men, women and children for questioning, apart from eight women. One of those detained was Russian, and the NSS threatened to deport him and suggest that Russia prosecute him for "extremism". (Jehovah's Witnesses are also banned in Russia.)

The 10 detainees were eventually released after many hours of questioning, and have been threatened with prosecution for their exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

Fined for parents bringing children to meeting

In December 2018, Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev of the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) visited one religious community without any warning or invitation to demand information, a human rights defender who knows the community but is not part of it told Forum 18. Tukhtakhojayev is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslim communities.

"While Tukhtakhojayev was present, a few children under the age of 10 came in to the meeting to see their parents briefly," the human rights defender who wishes to remain

anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated. "Tukhtakhojayevev did not say anything during the meeting, but a few days later summoned the leaders of the religious community for questioning. He then forced them to write a statement explaining the reasons why the children were present in the meeting."

The community was then under Administrative Code Article 474 ("Violation of the Religion Law") fined 7,700 Somonis, which is equivalent to almost eight months' average wage. The religious community itself also does not want to be named for fear of state reprisals.

The regime through the Religion law and the Parental Responsibility Law imposes severe restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and related rights, such as the rights of the child and the freedoms of expression and association. This includes warning religious communities not to allow children to be at meetings for worship.

5,000 Baptist calendars destroyed

On 18 December 2018, customs officers at Dushanbe Airport confiscated 5,000 religious calendars that Baptists were importing, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 February. The calendars had photos for each of the 12 months of 2019, and had one quotation from the New Testament for each month.

The calendars were being imported by Dushanbe's state-registered Baptist Church. However Rahmonali Rahimzoda of the Customs Service told Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) on 14 February that "following the conclusion of linguistic experts in the Culture Ministry that found elements of propaganda of an alien faith, the calendars were confiscated".

"The Baptist calendars only had Bible verses on them," a local Protestant who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 21 February. "Unfortunately, this means that our authorities consider that the Bible is an alien book in Tajikistan."

Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA did not answer when asked by Forum 18 on 21 February why the state might regard some faiths as "alien", or whether followers of "alien" faiths have greater or less freedom of religion and belief than followers of "non-alien" faiths.

The Church was fined 4,000 Somonis, which is about four months' average wage, under Administrative Code Article 474-1. This punishes producing, distributing, importing, or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed through the compulsory prior state religious censorship.

SCRA spokesperson Afshin Mukim told RFE/RL that the calendars were confiscated "because propaganda of a religion must be done only within the Baptist Church, and the calendars had religious propaganda in them". He also claimed that the numbers of calendars exceeded the number of Baptists in the

country.

The authorities destroyed the calendars in January 2019, “as they were imported without prior censorship and the permission of the SCRA,” Customs spokesperson Boymurod Faizulloyev told Forum 18 on 15 February. He would not explain why the calendars were destroyed, or why the Baptist Church was fined. Faizulloyev also refused to explain why the calendars were not sent back to the sender instead of being destroyed.

Sukhrob Odinayev, an “expert” of the Religious “Expert Analysis” Section of the Culture Ministry, adamantly denied that the Ministry gave an “expert opinion” on the calendars. “I don’t know why Mavlonov and the Customs Service told you and the press that we gave such an expert opinion, but it is not true,” he told Forum 18 on 22 February. He further declined to discuss the issue with Forum 18 or answer other questions.

Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA also refused to explain why the calendars were destroyed and Baptists fined. “We have nothing to do with that,” he claimed to Forum 18 on 21 February.

Mavlanov did not answer when asked why the SCRA did not raise with the Customs Service or other authorities whether the destruction of calendars with Bible verses on them was a legal and appropriate action.

“My verbal commands are the law..”

In January 2019 State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) officials renewed demands to religious communities of all beliefs to give the SCRA “all kinds of information on the number of their members, finances and activities”, a member of one religious community who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in mid-January.

Officials have been particularly interested in community finances, as well as whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings.

The SCRA questions follow January 2018 changes to the Religion Law. An amendment to Article 19 requires all religious communities to provide the SCRA “on request with information on the sources of income, inventory of its property, expenditure of its resources, number of its employees, salaries paid, the sums of taxes paid and other necessary information”.

The amendment to Article 19 also requires religious communities to help SCRA officials to “familiarise themselves with their religious activity in connection with their carrying out of the goals in their statute and the observance of laws”.

But even before these changes, the SCRA illegally demanded that religious communities had to complete a detailed SCRA questionnaire every year. The regime imposed the January 2018 changes without consultation, and break Tajikistan’s legally-

binding international human rights obligations.

Even after the changes, officials act as if there are no legal controls on their actions. One religious community in early 2019 asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev of the SCRA for a formal written request for the information he wanted, as he is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslims communities. He replied that he will not put anything in writing, and claimed that “you need to obey my verbal commands”.

Tukhtakhojayev then claimed: “My verbal commands are the law as I represent the law. If you don’t obey my verbal commands you will be in trouble. We [the SCRA] will come and take any documents we want.”

Tukhtakhojayev on 14 February refused to answer Forum 18’s questions, claiming: “I cannot talk to you over the phone.” Contradicting his behaviour towards various religious communities, he then demanded “please send your questions in writing” before putting the phone down.

“Give us any information whenever we ask for it”

A member of another religious community, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in February 2019 that some religious communities in December 2018 asked the SCRA to hold a round table explaining the January 2018 legal changes. After frequent raids in 2018, “religious communities wanted the SCRA to explain how they can carry out their normal exercise freedom of religion and belief without

SCRA interference, and without the fear of being punished”, the community member told Forum 18.

The SCRA refused to hold a round table, and replied that “religious communities must obey the law and give us any information whenever we ask for it”.

Mosques “have become some kind of state agency”

Mosques and Muslims exercising freedom of religion and belief are targeted for particularly severe state restrictions, imposed through the state-controlled Council of Ulems [Islamic scholars] and other state agencies. These include restrictions introduced in 2017 on how Islamic festivals and the haj pilgrimage are marked. Beard and hijab-wearing bans continue to be enforced, forcing one couple to divorce. Police have set up roadblocks to enforce the bans, which are also been enforced in schools and universities.

The January 2018 amendments to the Religion Law also imposed tighter SCRA controls over building and opening new mosques. According to the amended Article 8, mosque communities require SCRA permission to use specific buildings for worship, while the SCRA also needs to approve the local authorities’ plans to allocate land to build a mosque. SCRA permission is required for the appointment of ordinary imams, imam-hatyps (who give sermons) and sar-hatyps (the head of a mosque).

“Mosques have stopped being a social institution, and have become some kind of state agency,” a human rights defender who

wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 February 2019. "Imams are known to share all information on mosque community members with state agencies."

The human rights defender also pointed out that another sign of mosques becoming a state agency was that they now handed over "a big portion of their income to the SCRA". Corruption is widespread in Tajikistan, and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2018 ranks the country close to the bottom, in 152nd place out of 180 countries worldwide.

SCRA and Council of Ulems officials refused to discuss their control of mosques and restrictions on everyone's freedom of religion and belief with Forum 18, or put Forum 18 through to anyone who would discuss these issues.

Asked on 21 February why the SCRA collects money from mosques, Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA in Dushanbe did not answer and put the phone down.

Haji Nigmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chair of the Council of Ulems, refused to say whether and how much money the Council collected from individual mosques. On 15 February he first asked to speak "after lunch", but then did not answer his phone that afternoon. On 21 February he claimed that "I cannot hear you well", although Forum 18 could hear him clearly. He then put the phone down and did not answer his phone again.

Conscientious objector's complaint to UN Human Rights Committee

Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Daniil Islamov was jailed for six months from April to October 2018 for refusing military service although he was willing to do a civilian alternative service. By the time of his release, Islamov had been held for nearly a year after being detained in a military unit in April 2017. The Tajik authorities ignored a call by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention just a week before he was jailed that he should be freed "immediately".

On 24 January 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee on behalf of former prisoner of conscience Islamov, they told Forum 18 on 15 February.

.....
If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

WORLD: US condemns 10 countries for severe religious freedom violations

By Jennifer Hansler

CNN (11.12.2018) – <https://cnn.it/2Erh0kr> – Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday announced the US has deemed 10 countries guilty of severe religious freedom violations.

The nations – China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar (also known as Burma), North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – were categorized “Countries of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. They were found to have engaged or tolerated “systematic, ongoing, (and) egregious violations of religious freedom.”

“In far too many places across the globe, individuals continue to face harassment, arrests, or even death for simply living their lives in accordance with their beliefs. The United States will not stand by as spectators in the face of such oppression,” Pompeo said in a statement. “Protecting and promoting international religious freedom is a top foreign policy priority of the Trump Administration.”

“These designations are aimed at improving the lives of individuals and the broader success of their societies. I recognize that several designated countries are working to

improve their respect for religious freedom; I welcome such initiatives and look forward to continuing the dialogue," he added.

Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, in a call with reporters on Tuesday, cited a catalog of religious freedom violations perpetrated by some of these nations. They included Pakistan's blasphemy laws, specifically the case of Asia Bibi, Myanmar's mass violence against the Rohingya population and China's imprisonment of the Uyghurs and its treatment of Christians and Buddhists.

"China isn't backing away from the religious persecution, it seems to be expanding," he said. "This is obviously very troubling to the administration."

According to the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, such "egregious violations" include "torture, degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons."

Congress is notified of the designations annually, and sanctions to pressure the country to change its behavior may be imposed if all non-economic means have been used.

According to Brownback, such sanctions are "double-hatted" – meaning the countries are sanctioned in other areas but also considered sanctioned as Countries of Particular Concern.

China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea and Sudan are all being sanctioned as such, but Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have had their sanctions waived due to "national interest," Brownback said.

In addition to the Countries of Particular Concern designation, Pompeo "placed Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerated 'severe violations of religious freedom,' " and designated al Nusra Front, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan and the Taliban as "Entities of Particular Concern," according to the statement.

Pompeo made the designations in late November.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal government commission established by the 1998 law, said the designation "demonstrates America's strong and active support for freedom of religion and belief worldwide."

"We are particularly gratified that, after years of documenting systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom in Pakistan, the State Department has finally added that country to the list of the world's worst violators for the first time," Chairman Tenzin Dorjee said in a statement to CNN. "We also welcome the new addition of Russia as a severe violator on the Special Watch List, but question whether Uzbekistan has sufficiently improved to be moved from the CPC list to the Special Watch List. In April

2018 USCIRF recommended that both of those countries should be designated as CPCs.”

Brownback said Uzbekistan had made “substantial changes.”

In December 2017, Pompeo designated China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as Countries of Particular Concern and placed Pakistan on the Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>