

WORLD: Global Gathering Presses for Greater Religious Freedoms

By Knox Thames

DipNote (12.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/20sm5Fq> – In the early hours before the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, I joined a group of survivors of 21st century religious persecution to tour the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Museum is a stark reminder of the failure of the international community to protect Jews from the horrors of genocide and the millions murdered for their faith and religious identity. But tragically persecution based on religion or belief continues today. Irene Weiss, a Holocaust survivor whose picture at Auschwitz hangs in the Museum, keynoted the Ministerial's opening ceremony in the powerful Hall of Remembrance. Behind her stood survivors of religious persecution from Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, and Vietnam, representing multiple faith communities including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Yezidi, Baha'i, Ahmadi, and Buddhist. We each lit candles to remember those who perished in the Holocaust and individuals suffering today.

The presence of these brave survivors made clear the need for the first-ever Ministerial. Persecution continues in too many places: ongoing repression of and atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in Burma, the brutal Chinese crackdown on Uighurs and other Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians, attacks by terrorists on Christians and other minorities in Iraq and Pakistan, authoritarian repression of Baha'is in Iran and now Yemen, and all faiths in North Korea. Studies show limits on

religious freedom by state and non-state actors at all-time highs, impacting 83 percent of the global population.

In response, the United States convened a broad swath of governments, religious groups, and civil society to discuss how to push back against these trends and ensure everyone can enjoy freedom of conscience, the freedom to believe or not believe as one feels led. Our government spoke to the assembly of nations at the highest levels: Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Pompeo, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Haley, USAID Administrator Green, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Brownback, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Callista Gingrich, and other leading officials. More than 80 different governments from every region of the world – Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America – joined with more than 400 members of civil society organizations and religious communities. It was unprecedented.

The Ministerial was results oriented, intended to be more than just a “talk shop” of handwringing or self-congratulations. The two first days of the three-day event were specifically for civil society – to equip NGOs with information about obtaining resources for their important work, and for us to learn from them about the challenges they face and their ideas for solutions. To dive deeper, we convened breakout sessions focusing on topics like legal limitations, cultural heritage, atrocity prevention, women’s rights and religious freedom, and rights of minorities. The IRF Roundtable also coordinated more than 30 side events around Washington on the margins of the Ministerial. In Congress, a special event was held with a network of parliamentarians from other countries with the aim of fostering greater collaboration on religious freedom.

To keep the discussions at the Ministerial grounded on the real impacts of this persecution, we spread survivor testimonies throughout all three days, so as to remind everyone of the challenges real people face daily. I had the honor of introducing Peter Bhatti, brother of slain Pakistani activist Shahbaz Bhatti, and Razia Sultana, an advocate for Rohingya rights working in the Bangladesh refugee camps. In addition, we convened a special training for interested groups at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) about how to apply for grants from the State Department's human rights and refugee bureaus, as well as USAID (links to PowerPoint presentations here). More than 200 hundred members of civil society attended, from a variety of organizations, faith advocacy groups, and countries.

We also challenged likeminded governments that support religious freedom, as set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to take new actions. Here, the United States led by example. We launched two new initiatives: the International Religious Freedom Fund (I-ReFF) and the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program, both aimed at bringing new resources to assist persecuted individuals or their advocates. In addition, to equip NGOs for greater impact, we launched a special accelerator workshop called Boldline to support and scale innovative public-private partnerships to promote religious freedom.

At the conclusion of the Ministerial, the Secretary released the groundbreaking Potomac Declaration and Plan of Action. The Potomac Declaration reflects the importance of promoting religious freedom as a universal human right to help ensure greater peace and stability within and among nations. The

Potomac Plan of Action provides the roadmap for meeting that goal, outlining a comprehensive framework of activities to promote religious freedom and to respond to persecution on account of religion, belief, or non-belief. The Plan of Action has six chapters: Defending the Human Right of Freedom of Religion or Belief; Confronting Legal Limitations; Advocating for Equal Rights and Protections for All, Including Members of Religious Minorities; Responding to Genocide and other Mass Atrocities; Preserving Cultural Heritage; and Strengthening the Response.

Finally, we wanted to directly address particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In response to several of the most severe instances of persecution, participating delegations endorsed three country statements on Burma, China, and Iran. In addition, we issued three thematic statements on global trends undermining religious freedom: blasphemy and apostasy laws, violations by non-state actors, and counterterrorism as a false pretext for religious freedom repression.

Never before had ministers convened to focus on advancing religious freedom for all. The event was well received and positive momentum was generated, with several countries offering to host follow up conferences. Immediately before and after, several governments launched new special ambassadorships for religious freedom: the United Kingdom, Germany, Mongolia, Bahrain, and Taiwan, joining others from Norway, Denmark, the EU, and a special office in Canada. Other governments are now considering doing this or undertaking similar initiatives. Both Vice President Pence and Secretary Pompeo pledged the Ministerial would be an annual event here in Washington.

While a successful opening salvo, our work has only just begun. Persecution on account of religion or belief remains a daily reality for millions around the world. However, the Ministerial has better positioned committed governments and civil society to unite and meet this challenge. From these efforts, hopefully individuals targeted for their beliefs – men and women of any faith or none, their advocates, and those holding the “wrong” beliefs – will know that the international community is working together like never before to assist them. Vice President Pence said it well: “As we labor, we can take confidence from the determination of the nations gathered here to advance a cause of religious liberty. Our cause is just. We’re advancing the first freedom that is essential to the people of all of our nations and to the world.”

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