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## **USCIRF releases 2019 Annual Report and Recommendations for World's Most Egregious Violators of Religious Freedom**

### ***Victims Database also announced***

USCIRF Press Release (29.04.2019) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released its 20th Annual Report documenting country conditions in, and analyzing and recommending U. S. policy initiatives toward, the world's worst violators of religious freedom.

USCIRF, as an independent, bi-partisan commission, advises the President, Congress and the Secretary of State on international religious freedom issues. In its Annual Report, USCIRF unflinchingly describes threats to religious freedom around the world and recommends to the State Department countries for designation as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations." USCIRF also recommends to the State Department that non-state actors cited for similarly severe violations be designated as "entities of particular concern" (EPCs). This year, USCIRF has recommended 16 countries for CPC designation and five entities for EPC designation. Also, USCIRF placed 12 countries on its Tier 2 list, meaning the violations meet one or two, but not all three, of the elements of the systematic, ongoing, egregious test for CPC status.

"In addition to insights on religious freedom conditions in these 28 countries, the Annual Report provides actionable policy recommendations for Congress and the Administration to help improve conditions abroad where people are being persecuted for their religion or belief," said USCIRF Chair Tenzin Dorjee. "Our goal is not only to call out the offenders, but to provide concrete actions for the U.S. government to take in working with these countries to get off our lists."

The 16 countries USCIRF recommended for CPC designation include 10 that the State Department so designated in November 2018 – Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan – as well as six others that the State Department has not designated – Central African Republic (CAR), Nigeria, Russia, Syria, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The 12 countries on USCIRF's Tier 2 list are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey.

The five entities recommended for EPC designation include the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Shabab in Somalia, and new to the list this year, the Houthis in Yemen and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria.

"The freedom to believe as one's conscience dictates is a fundamental human right and vital to the security, stability and economic vitality of any state or region," said Dorjee.

"In the past year, we have seen severe violations of religious freedom mount around the globe, from the imprisonment of individuals charged with blasphemy in several countries to the internment of over one million Uighur Muslims in China. We and others laboring in the realm of religious freedom must persevere in our efforts to make this right a reality for everyone, everywhere."

USCIRF also announced the imminent launch of its Victims Database, which will enable users to learn more about religious prisoners of conscience in countries USCIRF recommends as CPCs. USCIRF is establishing a mechanism for collecting data on victims to begin populating the database later this year.

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## **Investigators believe fires at 3 black churches in Louisiana were intentionally set, official says**

By Christina Maxouris, Josh Campbell and Samira Said

CNN (10.04.2019) - <https://cnn.it/2KtxYgY> - Fires that consumed three historically black Louisiana churches in 10 days are believed to have been intentionally set, a local elected official said Tuesday.

The official did not provide specifics about the ongoing investigation but told CNN some pastors in the heart of south-central Louisiana's Cajun and Creole country are sleeping in their churches as a precaution against additional fires.

It is still unclear who is responsible for the fires and will likely take investigators time to sift through what evidence remains to determine if the blazes are connected.

As they do, residents and worshippers in St. Landry Parish, where all three fires occurred, are withholding judgment about what may have caused them, even as officials say they contained "suspicious elements" and the episodes evoke recollections of past acts of hate against black churches.

"I feel our district was being targeted because all three of the churches were in our district," Pastor Freddie Jack, the Seventh District Missionary Baptist Association president, told CNN's Don Lemon on Monday.

"At first we thought it might have been an electrical problem, but then when the second church ... burning occurred I realized it was our sister church. ... Then two days later the third occurred so at least (to) me, (it) made me think that we're being targeted."

St. Mary Baptist Church in Port Barre burned on March 26, followed by Greater Union Baptist Church in Opelousas on April 2 and two days later, Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in the same town.

Officials are also investigating a fourth, smaller fire on March 31 at the predominantly white Vivian United Pentecostal Church in Caddo Parish, more than 200 miles north of St. Landry. The blaze was intentionally set.

St. Landry Parish is nearly 42% black. Opelousas is 75% black.

The city's mayor, Julius Alsandor, called the church burnings "hideous."

"The relevance and the impact on the people in the surrounding communities and especially the congregation of each of these churches, it's hurtful and there may be some fear that is being exhibited by those who are a part of the three churches," he said.

Hurt, fear and confusion -- that's all the congregants are left with for now.

"We don't know why, we don't know when, we don't know who," the Rev. Gerald Toussaint of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church told CNN affiliate KATC. "We will let the authorities handle that, but we just know a higher power and a higher authority who can bring this thing to fruition."

### ***'More questions than answers'***

In an appeal for the public's help, Gov. John Bel Edwards said he has directed the state fire marshal as well as local and federal authorities to "aggressively investigate" the fires.

"Churches are sacred places, and no one should fear for their safety in their house of worship," he said. "And no one should be concerned that their house of worship would be destroyed."

"Right now, there are more questions than answers, but hopefully the investigation will yield information we can share with the public in short order," the governor said in his State of the State address, according to CNN affiliate KTBS.

The FBI and federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are assisting in the investigations. And as they look for answers, congregants wait.

"Something is not right, something isn't right, but God has the last word," Ethel Thomas, a member of Mount Pleasant, told KATC. "We're going to keep on keeping on."

Thomas told the news station, "It was heartbreaking, I wanted to cry, but I say I'll hold it in."

"I had cried so much already when they called to let me know that our church was burned. I didn't know what else to do, I just said, 'Lord you're in control.' "

### ***'NAACP labels the fires "domestic terrorism'***

State Fire Marshal H. "Butch" Browning said in a statement there is "clearly something happening" in the community.

"We believe these three fires are suspicious," Browning said. "We are falling short of talking about what caused the fires, falling short of saying they are related, however cognizant that there is a problem and no coincidence that there are three fires."

The NAACP labeled the fires "domestic terrorism," adding the "spike in church burnings in Southern states is a reflection of the emboldened racial rhetoric and tension spreading across the country."

The American Civil Liberties Union called the events "deeply disturbing."

But Jack said it's just too early for conclusions.

"I can't say for one reason or another that the actual burning was a racist act or a hate crime until we can determine who caused them, who's behind them. I don't think that we

can rightfully or truthfully say it was either or," he told Lemon. "We need the facts before we can generate thought that's concerning what it was."

And the facts may take a while, because most of the evidence is likely gone.

"Investigating a fire is a very lengthy process," Browning said. "It's one of the most complicated and unconventional crime scenes you'll ever enter because most of the evidence is burned away."

"The problem with arson investigations is the same as bomb investigations: The evidence gets destroyed." CNN law enforcement analyst James Gagliano said. "That's going to be the issue. You've got to go back and piece this together when a lot of the evidence would have been burned up in the fire."

Authorities are reviewing a long list of clues.

"Similar type of accelerant, any type of incendiary device that could have possibly been planted there, and then link in the houses, what things could be found at what crime scene that could be linked to another, find out if there's a pattern and if there's somebody here who's a serial arsonist," Gagliano said.

About 100 federal, state and local investigators are on the case, Louisiana Fire Marshal's Office spokeswoman Ashley Rodrigue said.

Florida has sent seven people to help out the fire marshal's office.

### ***'These houses of faith have historically been the targets of violence'***

Church burnings were a common occurrence in the Jim Crow era. And fires at black churches -- especially those in the South -- immediately bring to mind such racist attacks.

"For decades, African-American churches have served as the epicenter of survival and a symbol of hope for many in the African-American community," NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson said. "As a consequence, these houses of faith have historically been the targets of violence."

Several black churches in the South were burned in 2015 shortly after the mass murder of nine people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, though it is unclear if those fires were racially motivated.

According to the latest data from the National Fire Protection Association, fires within religious and funeral properties have been on the decline for decades. Between 2007 and 2011, 16% were ruled intentional, according to the association.

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## **Alabama executes Muslim man who wanted an imam by his side**

***The US Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to allow an Alabama Muslim inmate to be executed without an imam present in the room.***

Al Jazeera (08.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DEaoY2> - A Muslim man was executed in Alabama on Thursday, as originally scheduled, after the US Supreme Court voted five-to-four to allow the execution, denying his request for an imam's presence in the execution chamber.

Attorneys for Domineque "Hakim" Ray, 42, had argued that Alabama's execution policy favoured Christian inmates because a chaplain is allowed in the room, often kneeling next to the death row prisoner, and praying with the inmate if requested.

Ali Massoud, government affairs coordinator for the Alabama chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations, says that "there were other avenues to pursue".

"We maintain that this was religious discrimination because the bottom line is that Christian [death row] inmates are provided with spiritual advisers until the very last moment, and the Muslim inmates are not," he told Al Jazeera by telephone.

Ray was executed by lethal injection at 10:12pm local time, a spokesman of the Department of Corrections told the Reuters news agency in an email. No other information was immediately available.

Ray's imam, Yusef Maisonet, watched the execution from an adjoining witness room, multiple media reports said, including the Birmingham News.

Lawyers for the state said only prison employees are allowed in the chamber for security reasons.

On Wednesday, the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals agreed to stay the planned execution to weigh Ray's arguments, but the state of Alabama quickly appealed that decision to the Supreme Court, which overturned the Circuit Court.

### ***'He wanted equal treatment'***

Ray was sentenced to death in 1999 for the killing of Tiffany Harville, 15, who disappeared from her Selma, Alabama, home in July 1995.

Spencer Hahn, one of Ray's lawyers, said he was appalled that Ray received unequal treatment at his death because he was a member of a religious minority.

"Domineque was a devout Muslim and a human being. He was a son, a father, a brother. He wanted equal treatment in his last moments," Hahn wrote in a statement.

Ray's legal team said his first name was Domineque. The prison system used a different spelling, citing court records.

Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall issued a statement saying he was pleased the court let the execution proceed.

"For 20 years, Domineque Ray has successfully eluded execution for the barbaric murder of a 15-year-old Selma girl," Marshall said.

He added, "Tonight, Ray's long-delayed appointment with justice is finally met."