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USCIRF releases groundbreaking report on the enforcement of blasphemy laws globally

USCIRF (09.12.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3a0cqUf> - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) today released a new report entitled **Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws**. Eighty-four countries around the globe maintain laws that criminalize expression which insults or offends religious doctrines. This report examines and compares the implementation of blasphemy laws between 2014 and 2018, identifying 732 total cases in 41 countries.

"This report provides extensive data and illustrative examples to demonstrate the plethora of ways that governments' enforcement of blasphemy laws undermines human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression," said USCIRF Chair **Gayle Manchin**. *"It is no coincidence that the top six countries with the highest number of blasphemy cases—Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, Egypt, and Indonesia—are all countries that USCIRF identifies as among the world's worst violators of religious freedom."*

The report also examines how blasphemy laws can mobilize non-state violence. Of the 732 cases found, 674 of those cases involved state enforcement of criminal blasphemy laws. Seventy-eight of the 674 cases with state enforcement included mob activity, threats, and/or violence around blasphemy. There were 58 additional incidents where mob activity, threats, and/or violence occurred around rumors or allegations of blasphemy without state enforcement of the criminal blasphemy law.

"USCIRF has consistently called on countries to abolish blasphemy laws, and this report provides further evidence of why global repeal is urgently needed," said USCIRF Vice Chair **Tony Perkins**. *"The existence of blasphemy laws empowers extremists to take the law in their own hands and employ violence extrajudicially. In just one example, we have recently seen a devastating **uptick in mob violence** related to blasphemy allegations in Pakistan."*

This report is a follow up to USCIRF's 2017 report **Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws**, which compiled many of the world's blasphemy laws and

analyzed the laws' texts against international human rights principles. In its **2020 Annual Report**, USCIRF noted its concern that several countries implemented new or increased penalties for blasphemy in 2019. USCIRF also has issued reports on the enforcement of blasphemy laws in **Indonesia** and **Pakistan**, along with a report on **apostasy, blasphemy and hate speech laws in Africa**.

USCIRF will be holding a hearing on Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom this morning at 10:30 AM EST. Please register for this event [here](#).

State Department adds Nigeria, 9 other countries to list of worst religious freedom violators

By [Ryan Foley](#)



The U.S. Department of State is seen on January 6, 2020, in Washington, D.C. | Mark Wilson/Getty

Christian Post Reporter (08.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Khws84> - The U.S. State Department has added Nigeria to its list of "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act, making it the first secular democracy to appear on the list.

In a [press statement](#) Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the State Department's updates to the annual list of state actors that have "engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom."

"The United States is designating Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, the DPRK, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as Countries of Particular Concern

under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for engaging in or tolerating 'systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom,'" he said.

Gayle Manchin, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, [praised](#) Pompeo's decision to add Nigeria to the list: "We are gratified that the State Department has named 10 countries as CPCs. We particularly welcome Nigeria's designation for the first time as a CPC for tolerating egregious violations of religious freedom, which USCIRF had been recommending since 2009."

"Nigeria is the first secular democracy that has been named a CPC, which demonstrates that we must be vigilant that all forms of governments respect religious freedom," she added.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom [describes](#) itself as "an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) that monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad."

The Rev. Johnnie Moore, an international religious freedom advocate who serves on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, recently [told](#) Fox News that the situation in Nigeria has deteriorated to the point where "thousands of churches have been torched, children massacred, pastors beheaded, and homes and fields set ablaze by the tens of thousands, with people being targeted for their Christian faith alone."

According to Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who co-wrote a book with Moore about the [persecution of Christians](#) in Nigeria, titled, *The Next Jihad: Stop the Christian Genocide in Africa*, "there is little to no price to pay for the kidnapping, extortion, burning of churches, or for mayhem and murder of Christians. Even when police or military actually captures the perpetrators, the judiciary won't hold deal seriously with the criminal/terrorists."

Cooper and Moore wrote their book after [traveling to Nigeria](#) earlier this year. After meeting with dozens of victims of terrorism, they concluded that "the terrorists' aim is to ethnically cleanse northern Nigeria of its Christians and to kill every Muslim who stands in their way."

"It seems very, very clear to us that for various reasons, the government is failing at its fundamental responsibility to protect its citizens," Moore said in a [previous interview](#) with The Christian Post.

"Across every facet of Nigerian society, whether the religious leader was Muslim or Christian or whether the victim was describing something that happened to them in the center of the country or at the hands of ISIS or Boko Haram in the northeast, it was really clear that everyone felt like the government wasn't doing enough or wasn't able to do enough."

In addition to labeling Nigeria and nine other sovereign states as CPCs under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the State Department announced that it's also "placing the Comoros, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerated 'severe violations of religious freedom.'"

A country on the special watch list does not meet all the criteria for presence on the list of CPCs but still "engages in or tolerates severe violations of religious freedom."

While all 10 of the nations singled out as CPCs by the State Department were recommended for placement on the list by USCIRF, the organization's 2020 annual report also recommended the designation of India, Russia, Syria and Vietnam as CPCs.

The Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America [expressed](#) "deep disappointment" about the decision not to designate India as a CPC.

The addition of Nigeria was not the only change made to the State Department's list of CPCs and special watch list. Sudan and Uzbekistan were removed from the special watch list "based on significant, concrete progress undertaken by their respective governments over the past year."

[In Defense of Christians](#), an advocacy organization for Christians and religious minorities in Africa and the Middle East, commended Pompeo for the CPC designations and noted that the secretary also designated the following groups as Entities-of-Particular Concern: **al-Shabaab, al-Qa'ida, Boko Haram, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Greater Sahara, ISIS-West Africa, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban.**

"We want to commend Secretary Pompeo for his leadership in advancing international religious freedom," said IDC President Toufic Baaklini. "The designation of Nigeria as a CPC is a much needed first step in responding to the Christian genocide there. Saudi Arabia once again is deserving of its CPC designation and we encourage the Secretary to refrain from issuing the kingdom the sanctions waiver it has been receiving annually since 2006," he added.

Disney and A&E History Channel asked not to spread weird conspiracy theories

CESNUR (28.10.2020) - [Eleven](#) NGOs and academic research centers specialized in human rights and religious liberty, two of them with special consultative status at the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) wrote on October 28, 2020 to Disney CEO Bob Chapek, protesting an episode on A&E's History Channel, part of its program "America's Book of Secrets," entitled "Cults, Hate Groups, and Secret Societies." Disney is the co-owner of the A&E Networks, which in turn owns the History Channel.

The episode, now being aired in different countries, supports weird conspiracy theories, suggesting that Freemasons may operate a secret base hidden under Denver International Airport, where babies may be killed; that the Illuminati try to dictate how many children each family may have and conspire with the likes of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett; and that "cults" are proliferating like never before and are guilty of all conceivable wrongdoings.

One special target of the episode is the Church of Scientology, which is attacked by lumping it together with the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazis, and religious movements that committed mass homicides and suicides. While Scientology is discussed, images not related to this religion are shown.

The show promotes conspiracy theories and anti-cult stereotypes and is not, the eleven NGOs said, inoffensive. When hate speech is promoted against minority groups, be they the Freemasons or the Scientologist, violence is never far off.

The eleven NGOs called on Disney and the A&E Network to avoid spreading fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech, which, they argued, in times of world pandemic are more dangerous than ever.

Read the letter addressed to the CEO of The Walt Disney Company, co-owner of the A&E Networks on Cesnur's website: <https://www.cesnur.org/2020/disney-and-a&e-history-channel.htm>.

Sikhs and Covid-19

A solution for Sikh medical students, physicians caught between their religion and their profession.

By Paul M. Sherer

Direct Relief (28.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cKQdc2> - He was a third-year medical student, training to become an emergency medicine doctor. By May, more than two months into the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation had stabilized enough for the hospital to allow medical students to resume a vital part of their education: following attending physicians and residents during their morning rounds of patient visits, learning by observing.

But the student, who asked to be identified only as Mr. Singh, found himself facing a dilemma that cut to the core of his identity.

Before allowing students to resume their rounds, the hospital required them to pass a fit test for N95 respirators, the heavy-duty face masks that block most very small particles. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations state that N95 respirators can only be worn over a clean-shaven face to ensure a tight seal.

As a practicing member of the Sikh religion, Mr. Singh wears an unshorn beard, one of the five "articles of faith" of the religion that "serve as an external uniform that unifies Sikhs and binds them to the beliefs of the religion." Requiring a Sikh to shave is asking him to violate a central practice of his faith.

Mr. Singh approached his superiors to discuss his concern. "As per my faith I can't shave," he told them, asking if there were any other alternatives. He was sent to speak to a hospital administrator, who he expected would help him find a solution.

Instead, "she told me I needed to reevaluate my priorities, in terms of practicing medicine or practicing my faith," Mr. Singh recounts.

The ultimatum threatened to knock Mr. Singh off his life's path. "I need to finish these core rotations before I can go on to take licensing exams," Mr. Singh said. "I was really worried I wouldn't be able to rotate, and that would set off a cascade of consequences."

This past spring, Sikh doctors and medical students across the U.S. and Canada found themselves in the same bind. In one widely publicized case in Montreal, a pair of physician brothers made the agonizing decision to shave their beards. "In this time of pandemic, I am faced with an existential crisis," one of the brothers said in a widely viewed video. "This is a decision that has left me with great sadness, and I truly mourn the loss of something that has been a major part of my identity."

"Sadly, that video worked against a lot of our clients," said Amrith Kaur Aakre, legal director of the Sikh Coalition, a civil rights group that has been helping Sikh medical workers pressured to shave their beards. "A lot of the hospitals then started to think that shaving one of your religious articles of faith was a choice that you can get a dispensation for."

Tightening the personal bind, many Sikh medical workers have described their feeling that continuing to treat patients amid the crisis was a way of honoring one of the three daily principles of Sikhi, "service to humanity." They joined other medical professionals across the United States who showed great bravery and sacrifice, caring for gravely ill patients at a time when health workers faced severe shortages of personal protective equipment in the early months of the pandemic.

Mr. Singh sat down with his parents for a very difficult conversation. Should he compromise his religious beliefs, or give up his dream of becoming a doctor? "They've been here since the 1970s, and said that dealing with institutional discrimination isn't new to them, but they never expected their kids would face something like this," he said.

"We eventually agreed that ultimately if this was going to get in the way of rotating, I would have no choice about complying," Mr. Singh said. "But I didn't want to do that before using all the resources we had."

Mr. Singh asked his medical school to back him up. The school reached out to the hospital but was rebuffed, and declined to push the issue, reluctant to risk its relationship with the hospital.

Mr. Singh then approached the Sikh Coalition. The Coalition went to the hospital's parent organization (a large health network in the Northeastern United States), where it found officials who were more sensitive to the situation and were willing to seek a solution.

The hospital arranged for Mr. Singh to have access to a then-scarce powered air-purifying device (PAPR). Unlike tight fitting respirators like the N95, PAPRs cover the user's full face, head and shoulders under a hood with a clear visor. PAPRs don't require that the wearer be clean shaven.

Just as with N95 respirators, PAPRs became very difficult to obtain as the pandemic spread and the need far outstripped supply. Hospitals that tried to secure PAPRs faced months-long waits for delivery.

The Sikh Coalition, together with its partner the North American Sikh Medical and Dental Association, began working to obtain a supply of controlled air purifying respirators (CAPRs) — another type of loose-fitting respirator that does not require the wearer to be clean shaven — that could be loaned to Sikh medical workers.

Direct Relief Executive Vice President and Senior Advisor Bhupi Singh, who sits on the Sikh Coalition's strategic advisory board, heard about the effort.

Direct Relief was able to secure 24 PAPRs for the Sikh Coalition, drawing from a donation of 6,000 PAPRs from 3M that Direct Relief was distributing to hospitals and health clinics across the United States.

Reasonable accommodation

Beyond the challenge of building awareness and support among medical leaders, Sikhs and others who need some accommodation for their religious practices face a legal hurdle.

Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended in 1972, employers must provide “reasonable” accommodations for their employees’ religious beliefs and practices, unless those accommodations would impose an “undue hardship” on them. However, in 1977’s *Trans World Airlines, Inc. v. Hardison*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that an “undue hardship” exists whenever an accommodation would require “more than a de minimis cost” to the employer.

The Sikh Coalition in July filed an amicus brief in a case currently pending before the Supreme Court that would overturn *Hardison*, arguing that “since *Hardison*, case after case has denied Muslim and Sikh workers’ requests for reasonable accommodations under the current de minimis rule—often because of a speculative harm or small financial cost.”

Moreover, the Sikh Coalition has found that many Sikh medical professionals and students are reluctant to publicly voice their concern about the issue.

“A lot of doctors, residents and medical students who reached out to us are really concerned about retaliation and workplace hostility if they make a stink, or publicize the fact they had to go through this process and reach out to a civil rights organization in order to make the accommodations happen,” said the Sikh Coalition’s Aakre.

“We don’t want there to be this misrepresentation of how difficult or challenging it is to accommodate Sikhs,” she said, expressing concern that “all of a sudden medical schools will start pretextually not allowing Sikhs in.”

Back to work

Ironically, during the remainder of the spring Mr. Singh never needed to use the PAPR or even an N95 respirator. He was working in a ward that had no COVID-19 patients, and the staff wore surgical masks rather than N95s. Mr. Singh started his fourth year of medical school on Aug. 31.

“I don’t think it should have been this complicated for me to practice my faith and follow my career passion to help others—I’m going to continue to do both for the rest of my life,” Mr. Singh said. “But I’m thankful to those who helped me through this process, and I’m hopeful that my experience will show anyone else who is told ‘no, you can’t do this’ that there is a way forward for them, too.”

US Supreme Court denies Nevada Church’s appeal of virus rule

The Associated Press (24.07.2020) - A sharply divided U.S. Supreme Court denied a rural Nevada church’s request late Friday to strike down as unconstitutional a 50-person cap on worship services as part of the state’s ongoing response to the coronavirus.

A sharply divided U.S. Supreme Court denied a rural Nevada church’s request late Friday to strike down as unconstitutional a 50-person cap on worship services as part of the state’s ongoing response to the coronavirus.

In a 5-4 decision, the high court refused to grant the request from the Christian church east of Reno to be subjected to the same COVID-19 restrictions in Nevada that allow casinos, restaurants and other businesses to operate at 50 percent of capacity with proper social distancing.

Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley argued that the hard cap on religious gatherings was an unconstitutional violation of its parishioners' First Amendment rights to express and exercise their beliefs.

Chief Justice John Roberts sided with the liberal majority in denying the request without explanation.

Three justices wrote strongly worded dissenting opinions on behalf of the four conservatives who said they would have granted the injunctive relief while the court fully considers the merits of the case.

"That Nevada would discriminate in favor of the powerful gaming industry and its employees may not come as a surprise, but this Court's willingness to allow such discrimination is disappointing," Justice Samuel Alito wrote in a dissent joined by Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh.

"We have a duty to defend the Constitution, and even a public health emergency does not absolve us of that responsibility," Alito said. "The Constitution guarantees the free exercise of religion. It says nothing about freedom to play craps or blackjack, to feed tokens into a slot machine or to engage in any other game of chance."

Kavanaugh also wrote his own dissent, as did Justice Neil Gorsuch.

Chapel fights decision

Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley appealed to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals last month after a U.S. judge in Nevada upheld the state's policy that allows casinos and other businesses to operate at 50 percent of normal capacity.

The appellate court in San Francisco is still considering the appeal, but it has denied the church's request for an emergency injunction in the meantime. Its ruling July 2 pointed to the Supreme Court's refusal in May to strike down California's limit on the size of religious gatherings.

The church in Nevada's Lyon County appealed to the Supreme Court six days later, asking for an emergency injunction prohibiting the state from enforcing the cap on religious gatherings. "The governor allows hundreds to thousands to assemble in pursuit of financial fortunes but only 50 to gather in pursuit of spiritual ones. That is unconstitutional," its lawyers wrote in their most recent filing to the high court last week.

Nevada's lawyers said last week several courts nationwide have followed the Supreme Court's lead in upholding state authority to impose emergency restrictions in response to COVID-19. "Temporarily narrowing restrictions on the size of mass gatherings, including for religious services, protects the health and well-being of Nevada citizens during a global pandemic," they wrote.

Kavanaugh said Nevada's policy constitutes "overt discrimination against places of worship." "The state has not explained why a 50% occupancy cap is good enough for secular businesses where people congregate in large groups or remain in close proximity for extended periods — such as at restaurants, bars, casinos and gyms — but is not good enough for places of worship," he wrote.

Gorsuch said today's world "with a pandemic upon us, poses unusual challenges."

"But there is no world in which the Constitution permits Nevada to favor Caesars Palace over Calvary Chapel," he wrote.

HRWF Footnote

Calvary Chapel was an early New Religious Movement that evolved into a major international denomination. It is also the group out of whence came the Shiloh Jesus Movement group that James T. Richardson, Ph D (University of Nevada, Reno), and colleagues studied in depth and wrote about in *Organized Miracles* back in the late 1970s. The local CC in Dayton Nevada sued to ask the courts to set aside a 50 person limitation established by the Governor in Nevada for church services. There logic was simple: if there can be open casino gambling (supposedly with masks)

and other businesses operating with a 50% capacity rule then how can a 50 person limit on church services be constitutional? Justice Roberts sided with the four more liberal justices to stymie the effort by refusing to support an injunction favoring the church while the case was being decided in a lower court.

America and the Worldwide Religious Freedom

European Federation for Freedom of Belief (15.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3hAdvmW> - On June 2nd, President **Donald J. Trump** signed an Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom, instructing the U.S. State Department to prioritize international religious freedom in its implementation of foreign policy and budget.

«Religious freedom, America's first freedom, is a moral and national security imperative» the executive order reads. «Religious freedom for all people worldwide is a foreign policy priority of the United States, and the United States will respect and vigorously promote this freedom».

The new order contains a number of instructions for the State Department and federal agency heads when it comes to promoting religious freedom abroad. It involves civil society by saying «Religious communities and organizations, and other institutions of civil society, are vital partners in United States Government efforts to advance religious freedom around the world».

An invitation that FOB has already repeatedly accepted by participating through its President in the first two "Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom" meetings organized by Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo** and held in Washington DC in [2018](#) and [2019](#).

Therefore, we cannot but rejoice at this clear stance taken by the Trump administration. We fully agree when the US President says that religious freedom «is fundamental for the flourishing of our society.» NGOs such as FOB have been preaching this for years, urging the authorities of various countries by all means.

Unfortunately, the heads of governments in this part of the Atlantic apparently support the cause of religious freedom, but their statements have never resulted in anything practical to demonstrate that Religious freedom is Europe's first freedom.

On the contrary, many European states have worked to limit religious freedom in the old world. Representatives of public and political institutions at various levels have given support to the activities of small anti-religious groups, and in some cases the same state is directly engaged in activities to combat religious minorities disagreeable to some.

For example, the République Française, which proudly shows off the famous motto Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, instead of urging its civil servants to protect freedom of belief, more than 2 years ago established the "Interministerial Mission in the Fight Against Cults" (**MIVILUDES**), through which it financed with public funds a series of private anti-religious associations and a European federation of anti-cult associations spread all over the continent called **FECRIS** (European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults) producing a climate of intolerance and discrimination that has negatively influenced many EU countries and even non-European countries, such as Russia and China.

Germany has set up and financed a task force within the domestic intelligence service **BfV** (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) for twenty years aimed at spying on and

prosecuting religious minorities, placing a well-known anti-cults exponent at the head of it. Even the German example has produced disasters in various European countries.

Italy instead established fifteen years ago a special police body under the Ministry of the Interior called **S.A.S.** (Anti Cults Team), which collaborates throughout the country with various anti-religious groups carrying out farcical investigations that have developed mainly in the media.

Instead of protecting religious freedom, the European Union itself has granted **FECRIS** the participatory status with the **Council of Europe** since 2005. In recent times they have refused to withdraw this status although abundant evidence has been provided that the activity of this group disqualifies it for that status.

Thanks to the support of some European states, anti-religious groups have negatively influenced the politics of many nations. To mention a couple of cases, MILS "consultants" exported the "French method" to China twenty years ago, contributing to the beginning of the persecution against **Falun Gong**, and there is evidence that they are still at work today. While in Russia **Alexander Dvorkin**, vice president of **FECRIS**, advised the Minister of Justice on "religious cults" by spreading a climate of intolerance in that great country.

It is well known that in Russia, China and other eastern countries religious freedom is a utopian dream and religious persecution reaches levels that in the West would seem horror stories. But the same abyss that exists between these countries and Europe is comparable to the abyss that divides the latter from the United States, at least in terms of religious freedom.

Unlike the U.S., Europe does not deal with violations that occur in the rest of the world, indeed it sometimes favors them. It does nothing effective to defend the religious freedom of its citizens, indeed, knowingly or not, it works to limit it.

The difference in approach is abyssal, the United States work to support religious freedom in the whole world, while the old world states travel in the opposite direction: spontaneously or suborned, they establish and finance bodies that, evidently, work to conceal that freedom. All this in disdain of the rights guaranteed by the various national constitutions and by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

In his recent Executive Order, however, in Section 2 "Prioritization of International Religious Freedom", Trump states that «Within 180 days of the date of this order, the Secretary of State (Secretary) shall, in consultation with the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), develop a plan to prioritize international religious freedom in the planning and implementation of United States foreign policy and in the foreign assistance programs of the Department of State and USAID».

Rather than finance anti-religious organizations more or less directly as happens here, the **White House** tenant, calls for the State Department to work with the Department of the Treasury to develop «recommendations to prioritize the appropriate use of economic tools» to advance religious freedom in countries of particular concern or on the special watch list. Under Section 3, Trump's order stipulates that the State Department and USAID need to budget at least \$50 million per fiscal year for «programs that advance international religious freedom, to the extent feasible and permitted by law and subject to the availability of appropriations.»

It is not new that the United States of America wants religious freedom to be respected worldwide. The institution of the United States Commission on International Religious

Freedom (**USCIRF**) dates back to 1999, under the Clinton Administration, today chaired by commissioner **Tony Perkins**, former president of the **Family Research Council (FRC)**, a public policy organization that provides research and advocacy on issues related to religious freedom.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission, the first of its kind in the world, dedicated to defending the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad. USCIRF reviews the facts and circumstances of religious freedom violations and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the Congressional leadership of both political parties.

USCIRF Vice Chair **Gayle Manchin**, said in a statement that the commission has long called on the U.S. government to develop an "overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad" and "country-specific action plans."

"We welcome the fact that this Executive Order requires the State Department and USAID to do exactly that," Manchin said. "We also appreciate the express reference to U.S. officials working for the release of religious prisoners of conscience, which is a high priority for USCIRF."

Trump's order, appreciated at home, does not just set priorities, solicit interventions and finance initiatives, it goes far beyond and establishes that «programs that advance international religious freedom» should include those that «anticipate, prevent, and respond to attacks against individuals and groups on the basis of their religion,» as well as programs that «help ensure that such groups can persevere as distinct communities.» The programs should «ensure equal rights and legal protections for individuals and groups regardless of belief, improve the safety and security of houses of worship and public spaces for all faiths and preserve the cultural heritages of religious communities.»

Outside the United States, the executive order also states that Pompeo will direct chiefs of missions in countries that are included on the State Department's list of «countries of particular concern for international religious freedom violations and the religious freedom special watch list, to develop comprehensive action plans to inform and support the efforts» of the U.S. government «to encourage the host governments to make progress in eliminating violations of religious freedom.»

The economic tools mentioned in section 6 of the order can include «increasing religious freedom programming, realigning foreign assistance to better reflect country circumstances, or restricting the issuance of visas.» The tools can also include sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act, which allows the U.S. to target perpetrators of human rights abuses through the seizure of U.S. assets or travel bans.

Meanwhile, Congress has passed a law that provides for sanctions against officials who violate religious freedom in China, where Christians, Uighurs, Falun Gong and other religious communities not recognized by the government are persecuted. The new rule did not please the Chinese ambassador in Washington who immediately protested on behalf of his government: «We urge the United States to remedy their mistake immediately, to stop using Xinjiang-related issues (editor's note: the Region where the persecution is more ferocious) to intervene in China's internal affairs».

"The executive order stresses that religious freedom is not just a human right," said **Tom Farr**, president of the **Religious Freedom Institute**, but "a moral and national security imperative." Farr clarified that the act offers "certainty" that the government will take attacks on believers seriously, given the adoption of "important measures".

Nina Shea, director of the **Center for Religious Freedom** at the **Hudson Institute**, said the order would encourage greater "activity in the countries that appear on the State Department's Special Watch List."

For our part, we hope that the US example inspires European governments, possibly before their countries are included in the US State Department's "Special Watch List". Not for fear of the super power with stars and stripes, but for a jolt of dignity and pride, if not civilization and common sense.

Executive Order on advancing International Religious Freedom

The White House (02.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/30OyZqk> - By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, it is hereby ordered as follows:

Section 1. Policy. (a) Religious freedom, America's first freedom, is a moral and national security imperative. Religious freedom for all people worldwide is a foreign policy priority of the United States, and the United States will respect and vigorously promote this freedom. As stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, our Founders understood religious freedom not as a creation of the state, but as a gift of God to every person and a right that is fundamental for the flourishing of our society.

(b) Religious communities and organizations, and other institutions of civil society, are vital partners in United States Government efforts to advance religious freedom around the world. It is the policy of the United States to engage robustly and continually with civil society organizations — including those in foreign countries — to inform United States Government policies, programs, and activities related to international religious freedom.

Sec. 2. Prioritization of International Religious Freedom. Within 180 days of the date of this order, the Secretary of State (Secretary) shall, in consultation with the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), develop a plan to prioritize international religious freedom in the planning and implementation of United States foreign policy and in the foreign assistance programs of the Department of State and USAID.

Sec. 3. Foreign Assistance Funding for International Religious Freedom. (a) The Secretary shall, in consultation with the Administrator of USAID, budget at least \$50 million per fiscal year for programs that advance international religious freedom, to the extent feasible and permitted by law and subject to the availability of appropriations. Such programs shall include those intended to anticipate, prevent, and respond to attacks against individuals and groups on the basis of their religion, including programs designed to help ensure that such groups can persevere as distinct communities; to promote accountability for the perpetrators of such attacks; to ensure equal rights and legal protections for individuals and groups regardless of belief; to improve the safety and security of houses of worship and public spaces for all faiths; and to protect and preserve the cultural heritages of religious communities.

(b) Executive departments and agencies (agencies) that fund foreign assistance programs shall ensure that faith-based and religious entities, including eligible entities in

foreign countries, are not discriminated against on the basis of religious identity or religious belief when competing for Federal funding, to the extent permitted by law.

Sec. 4. Integrating International Religious Freedom into United States Diplomacy. (a) The Secretary shall direct Chiefs of Mission in countries of particular concern, countries on the Special Watch List, countries in which there are entities of particular concern, and any other countries that have engaged in or tolerated violations of religious freedom as noted in the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom required by section 102(b) of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-292), as amended (the "Act"), to develop comprehensive action plans to inform and support the efforts of the United States to advance international religious freedom and to encourage the host governments to make progress in eliminating violations of religious freedom.

(b) In meetings with their counterparts in foreign governments, the heads of agencies shall, when appropriate and in coordination with the Secretary, raise concerns about international religious freedom and cases that involve individuals imprisoned because of their religion.

(c) The Secretary shall advocate for United States international religious freedom policy in both bilateral and multilateral fora, when appropriate, and shall direct the Administrator of USAID to do the same.

Sec. 5. Training for Federal Officials. (a) The Secretary shall require all Department of State civil service employees in the Foreign Affairs Series to undertake training modeled on the international religious freedom training described in section 708(a) of the Foreign Service Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-465), as amended by section 103(a)(1) of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (Public Law 114-281).

(b) Within 90 days of the date of this order, the heads of all agencies that assign personnel to positions overseas shall submit plans to the President, through the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, detailing how their agencies will incorporate the type of training described in subsection (a) of this section into the training required before the start of overseas assignments for all personnel who are to be stationed abroad, or who will deploy and remain abroad, in one location for 30 days or more.

(c) All Federal employees subject to these requirements shall be required to complete international religious freedom training not less frequently than once every 3 years.

Sec. 6. Economic Tools. (a) The Secretary and the Secretary of the Treasury shall, in consultation with the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and through the process described in National Security Presidential Memorandum-4 of April 4, 2017 (Organization of the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and Subcommittees), develop recommendations to prioritize the appropriate use of economic tools to advance international religious freedom in countries of particular concern, countries on the Special Watch List, countries in which there are entities of particular concern, and any other countries that have engaged in or tolerated violations of religious freedom as noted in the report required by section 102(b) of the Act. These economic tools may include, as appropriate and to the extent permitted by law, increasing religious freedom programming, realigning foreign assistance to better reflect country circumstances, or restricting the issuance of visas under section 604(a) of the Act.

(b) The Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State, may consider imposing sanctions under Executive Order 13818 of December 20, 2017 (Blocking the Property of Persons Involved in Serious Human Rights Abuse or Corruption), which, among other things, implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Public Law 114-328).

Sec. 7. Definitions. For purposes of this order:

- (a) "Country of particular concern" is defined as provided in section 402(b)(1)(A) of the Act;
- (b) "Entity of particular concern" is defined as provided in section 301 of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (Public Law 114-281);
- (c) "Special Watch List" is defined as provided in sections 3(15) and 402(b)(1)(A)(iii) of the Act; and
- (d) "Violations of religious freedom" is defined as provided in section 3(16) of the Act.

Sec. 8. General Provisions. (a) Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect:

(i) the authority granted by law to an executive department or agency, or the head thereof; or

(ii) the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budgetary, administrative, or legislative proposals.

(b) This order shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.

(c) This order is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person.

DONALD J. TRUMP

THE WHITE HOUSE,

June 2, 2020.