

**SPEECH OF  
HON. FRANK R. WOLF  
OF VIRGINIA  
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
Wednesday, July 27, 2011**

**In Support of H.R. 440 -To provide for the establishment of the Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia.**

Mr. Speaker, before I begin I would also like to thank a few key staff members whose hard work and efforts on this bill have not gone unnoticed: Elyse Anderson, Kalinda Stephenson, Yleem Poblete, Steve Strombres, and Kyle Nevins.

This past January, in the wake of increasing violence, targeted attacks and heightened discrimination against Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and Egypt, and persistent concerns in Afghanistan and Pakistan among other nations, I introduced bipartisan legislation, H.R. 440, which would require the administration to appoint a special envoy to advocate for religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia in order to make this issue a foreign policy priority.

Since introduction this legislation has garnered widespread bipartisan support with nearly 80 cosponsors. I want to thank Rep. Anna Eshoo, the lead Democrat in the House for her work on this issue. Companion legislation has been introduced in the Senate by Senators Roy Blunt and Carl Levin.

The legislation has also been championed by a host of faith-based organizations and Diaspora communities who recognize the importance of ensuring that the vulnerable communities have an advocate within the U.S. government and around the world.

Shortly before introducing this legislation, I chaired a hearing at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the recent spate of attacks and the ongoing persecution of Christians in Iraq and Egypt.

Commission members heard testimony about the increasing sectarian tensions in the two countries and the need for greater U.S. attention to the plight of religious minorities.

The hearing was held prior to recent events in the Middle East which have in some cases created a political vacuum that have left religious minorities particularly vulnerable. I heard this fear expressed time and again during a recent trip to Egypt.

Religious minorities throughout the region, including those who are Jewish, Ahmadi, and Baha'is are under increasing pressure. In fact, many of these ancient faith communities have been forced to flee the lands they've inhabited for centuries.

Consider some of the following:

Last October, at least 70 people were killed during a siege on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad making it the worst massacre of Iraqi Christians since 2003.

Iraq's once vibrant Christian population has been reduced by at least half since 2003. This would be tragic under any circumstances but it is especially so given the rich ancestral heritage of this indigenous community.

Apart from Israel, the lands and peoples of modern day Iraq are mentioned with greater frequency in the Bible than any other country—Abraham, Jonah, Nineveh, Esther...all hail from Iraq. The Christians of Iraq today still speak Aramaic...the language of Jesus.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, countries where the United States has invested its treasure and the lives of countless brave young American soldiers, persecution of Christians runs rampant.

On November 7 last year, a Pakistani court sentenced Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, to death for the "crime" of blasphemy. Only after intervention by the international community was her execution delayed. Her fate remains unclear.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used to victimize both religious minorities and Muslims. Earlier this year Punjab's influential governor, Salman Taseer, was shot and killed by his own body guard who reportedly told police—that he "killed Mr. Taseer because of the governor's opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy law."

In April, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, a heroic man of faith whose courageous and outspoken leadership against his nation's draconian blasphemy law made him a prime target of extremist Islamist elements in his country, was assassinated. Bhatti was the only Christian member of the Pakistani cabinet.

In an interview with *The Washington Post's* Fred Hiatt, Shahbaz Bhatti "urged Americans not to forsake or forget" Pakistan's suffering religious minority community.

Members of the Jewish faith continue to experience discrimination and persecution throughout the region. The Special Envoy for Anti-Semitism Hannah Rosenthal has noted that Holocaust glorification "is especially virulent in the Middle East media."

If the international community fails to speak out, the prospects for religious pluralism and tolerance in the region are bleak.

I urge my colleagues support for H.R. 440 and thank the leadership of the House for making this legislation a priority.

I am hopeful that this bill will overwhelmingly pass the House and to send a clear and unequivocal message to both the persecutors and the persecuted, that the United States of

America stands with those whose most basic freedom—the right to worship according to the dictates of conscience—is under assault