

Rep. Frank Wolf (VA-10)

May 12, 2011

H.R. 1856 – Elevating International Religious Freedom in the State Department

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to bring to the attention of my colleagues legislation I am introducing to amend the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), including reauthorizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Religious freedom, often referred to as the first freedom, is of central import to the American experiment. As such it should feature prominently in U.S. foreign policy.

Recognizing that this critical issue and other human rights related issues are often relegated to the sidelines within the State Department, I authored legislation more than ten years ago, in 1998, to establish the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department, headed by an ambassador at-large, and to create the USCIRF—an independent, bipartisan commission charged with monitoring the status of freedom of religion or belief abroad and providing policy recommendations to the president, secretary of State, and Congress.

Since the passage of this legislation, religious freedom has been elevated within U.S. foreign policy. But it still does not enjoy the preeminence it deserves. And sadly, a strong U.S. voice on this critical issue has arguably never been more needed.

According to a Pew Research Study released in December 2009, one-third of all nations, containing 70 percent of the world's population, severely restrict religious freedom. We need look no further than the daily newspapers to know that these statistics are not mere numbers. Rather, they are sobering realities for millions of people of faith around the globe. Consider the following headlines from recent weeks alone: "Chinese Christians Face Tense Easter in Beijing," "Egyptian Copts, Reeling From Violence, Want Protection," "Baha'i Citizens Are Forced to Leave Iran," "Pakistan's Other Blemish: Anti-Religious Violence," "Indonesia Pressured Over Ahmadiyah Muslim Sect Killings," and "Thousands of Cameras Watch China's Uighurs, Inhibiting Discourse."

The bill I introduce today will make a number of strategic improvements to the Religious Freedom Office at the State Department. To start, it places the ambassador-at-large in the office of the secretary of State as opposed to burying it within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. This change is more in keeping with the original intent of the legislation that Congress passed. Over successive administrations this critical position has not been treated with the seniority it deserves and this revised language will help rectify this problem.

The legislation also provides the ambassador with oversight and management authority of the IRF Office and other religiously oriented positions and programs at the State Department and carves out funding in the larger Human Rights and Democracy Fund to enable the IRF office to

promote religious freedom through advocacy, reporting and programming. The legislation requires the secretary of State, in coordination with the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Treasury and the U.S. Agency for International Development to issue a one-time report to Congress on the best uses of foreign assistance to promote religious freedom and religious engagement.

In addition the legislation requires religious freedom training for every Foreign Service Officer (FSO) and states that USCIRF must be involved in that training. American embassies abroad must be islands of freedom. Whether in Vietnam, China, Pakistan or Iraq-every FSO should be trained and committed to advocating for those whose voices have been silenced by their own governments. This mandatory training will help ensure that our diplomatic corps is equipped in this regard.

My legislation also strengthens the "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC) designation process and effectiveness. CPCs are countries whose governments are found to have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The amended language will require that CPC designations are made 90 days after the issuance of the State Department's annual religious freedom report. One hundred and twenty days after a country has been designated a CPC, the secretary of State must submit a report to Congress that identifies the action taken, the purpose of the action, and an evaluation of its effectiveness and impact. Also included is language tightening the president's waiver authority, so that indefinite waivers are not an option.

Very significantly, this legislation will reauthorize the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom until September 30, 2018. USCIRF, unlike the State Department, is unencumbered by the impulse to maintain good bilateral relations above all else--an impulse which sadly can result in critical issues of religious freedom being sidelined in the pursuit of broader foreign policy goals.

USCIRF, as an independent, bipartisan federal government commission, has been a reliable voice for the world's persecuted people. It monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad and makes informed policy recommendations to members of Congress, the president and the State Department, based in part on information gathered during extensive travel and meetings with senior foreign officials.

USCIRF regularly holds briefings and hearings for interested parties on and off the Hill and is frequently called upon to provide expert witness testimony to Congress.

Just in the last year the Commission has taken a leadership role on a series of key issues. It was quick to recognize the strategic importance and courageous voice of the late Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's federal minister of Minorities Affairs, an outspoken critic of his nation's draconian

blasphemy laws. During a critical time for the people of Sudan, it also issued special recommendations on the implementation of the historic Comprehensive Peace Agreement. It has made a series of policy recommendations aimed at preserving and protecting Iraq's besieged religious minorities. It also has actively worked with dozens of Hill offices on combating the "defamation of religions" resolution before the United Nations.

In short, ensuring that the commission is reauthorized is of paramount importance. In a Constitution Day speech, President Ronald Reagan famously described our founding documents which enshrine basic liberties, among them religious freedom, as a "covenant we have made not only with ourselves, but with all of mankind." Passage of this legislation will go a long way in helping us keep that covenant. I urge my colleagues' support.