

## Lost religious liberty worldwide

By DOUG BANDOW

WASHINGTON — Many of us take religious liberty for granted. Unfortunately, this most fundamental freedom is not protected in many countries around the world.

Religious liberty is the proverbial canary in the mine. If a state won't respect this most basic freedom of conscience, it isn't likely to respect people's lives and dignity in any context.

There is more than enough bad news to fill the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's latest annual report. Worst were conditions in 13 "countries of particular concern."

\* Burma. In this poor Southeast Asian nation, explains the panel, "Religious freedom violations affect every religious group." Christians and other religious minorities have suffered the most, especially from government military operations.

\* China. Communist officials obviously fear religion. Reports the commission: "The Chinese government strictly controls all religious practice and represses religious activity outside state-approved organizations." Moreover, members of "unregistered religious groups, or those deemed by the government to threaten national security or social harmony" risk fines, property confiscations and prison.

\* Eritrea. This North African nation has been turned into a totalitarian tragedy by home grown revolutionaries, who suppress all freedoms indiscriminately. According to the commission: "Systematic, ongoing and egregious religious freedom violations continue." Not even members of registered faiths are safe.

\* Iran. Most vulnerable are religious minorities: Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sunni Muslims and especially Baha'is. The

latter are viewed as heretics and treated accordingly. The USCIRF points to: "prolonged detention, torture and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused."

\* Iraq. The commission details the horrors unleashed by the U.S. invasion: "Systematic, ongoing and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Iraq. Members of the country's smallest religious minorities still suffer from targeted violence, threats, and intimidation, against which they receive insufficient government protection." Iraq's Christian community, which predates the arrival of Islam, has been largely destroyed.

\* Nigeria. An estimated 12,000 have died in sectarian violence over the last decade. Reports the USCIRF, "The government of Nigeria continues to respond inadequately and ineffectively to recurrent communal and sectarian violence." Although Christians and Muslims share responsibility, violence has been concentrated in the Muslim-majority states to the north, where Shariah law has been widely imposed.

\* North Korea. In probably the most repressive state on Earth, observes the commission, "The government controls most aspects of daily life, including religious activity, which is allowed only in government-operated religious "federations" or in a small number of government-approved 'house churches.' "

\* Pakistan. The commission cites: "Systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief." Blasphemy laws are routinely abused, resulting "in the lengthy detention of, and sometimes violence against," religious minorities. Most frightening has been persistent sectarian violence.

\* Saudi Arabia. This U.S. ally avidly enforces religious totalitarianism. The USCIRF points to "Systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom." Despite official promises to tolerate private worship, the government's religious police even raid home gatherings and arrest non-Muslims. Lengthy imprisonment and torture await those arrested for religious offenses.

\* Sudan. The situation has gotten better in south Sudan, where Christians and animists predominate. But religious persecution remains distressingly common. According to the commission, violations include attempts to impose Shariah, discrimination against non-Muslims, and "the criminalization of conversion from Islam, a crime punishable by death, and the intense scrutiny, intimidation and even torture of suspected converts."

\* Turkmenistan. Human rights abuses remain rife, despite some recent improvements. According to the USCIRF, the country's religious law includes: "intrusive registration criteria; the requirement that the government be informed of all financial support received from abroad; a ban on worship in private homes and the public wearing of religious garb except by religious leaders; and severe and discriminatory restrictions on religious education." Members of disfavored faiths can end up in prison.

\* Uzbekistan. Reports the commission: "The Uzbek government harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity, regardless of their religious affiliation. A restrictive religion law severely limits the rights of all religious communities and facilitates the Uzbek government's control over them, particularly the majority Muslim community."

\* Vietnam. This communist state harshly restricts religious liberty. According to the USCIRF, the regime "continues to control government-approved religious communities, severely restrict independent religious practice, and repress individuals and groups viewed as challenging political authority." Prison is a common penalty.

Another dozen countries are on the commission's watch list. They engage in severe religious persecution, just not quite as bad as the preceding nations: Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Venezuela.

Western nations cannot force these states to change, but the world's democracies should make religious persecution part of their human rights dialogue with other nations. Equally important, free peoples should support and pray for the oppressed around the world.

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