



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on International Religious Freedom February 2013

In many countries, Christians are deprived of fundamental rights...; in other countries they endure violent attacks against their churches and their homes. At times they are forced to leave the countries they have helped to build because of persistent tensions and policies which frequently relegate them to being second-class spectators of national life. --Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 9, 2012

Background:

In **Nigeria**, an attack by Islamist insurgents on a Christian church killed 37 and wounded 57. In **Egypt**, extremists burned houses and shops in one Coptic Christian village and broke into another church, intending to convert it into a mosque and Muslim hospital. In **Iraq**, Christians continue to be targeted as different factions vie for power in a country struggling with escalating violence after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. In **Pakistan**, a Christian girl faces the death penalty for “blasphemy” and local officials demolish a Catholic center that had housed a convent, girl’s school, elderly home and chapel for over 100 years. In **China**, bishops and priests are among many, including Tibetans, who have been apprehended and held in undisclosed locations by security police. These attacks are horrible examples of the ongoing and escalating attacks against Christians around the world and an increase in religiously-motivated violence aimed at vulnerable minority communities. Decrying the violence, Pope Benedict XVI said, “At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith.”

The Holy Father chose religious freedom as the theme for his World Day of Peace Message and his annual address to the Diplomatic Corps in 2011. Respect for religious freedom was also an integral part of his 2012 and 2013 World Day of Peace Messages and addresses to the Diplomatic Corps. The Church remains particularly concerned for the challenges facing Christians in the **Middle East**, especially in Iraq and Syria. Although Christians have lived in the region for centuries, they have been vulnerable to attack during periods of political instability. Many Iraqi Christians have fled their unstable country. Of those remaining, many moved to Mosul where there was a larger Christian community, but when attacks escalated there, hundreds of families fled Mosul and live in limbo and uncertainty.

In addition to Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious groups can find themselves victims of discrimination or persecution in various countries, especially where they are a minority. Small incidents can spark large reactions and violent outbursts. Pope Benedict declared, “Religion cannot be employed as a pretext for setting aside the rules of justice and of law for the sake of the intended ‘good.’”

A 2012 Pew study on “Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion” found that 75 percent of the world’s population lives in countries “where governments, social groups or individuals restrict people’s ability to freely practice their faith.” Some countries, like **Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia, Yemen, Afghanistan,** and **Russia**, scored high or very high on both governmental and social restrictions. Others, like **Pakistan, India, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Bangladesh,** and **Israel** scored high on social hostilities, but were lower on government restrictions. And others, like **Iran, China, Syria** and **Vietnam**, scored high on government restrictions, but experienced less social hostilities.¹ According to this study, Christians were harassed in the greatest number of countries (111 out of 197 countries in 2010), more than any other major religious group.

¹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion, September 2012.

While many nations have freedom of religion provisions in their constitutions, a 2009 Pew study found that only 27 percent fully respected religious rights. Government restrictions include: controlling religious groups through registration; fines; harassment; prohibiting conversions; restricting foreign missionaries; and favoring one religious group over others. Social hostilities are “concrete, hostile actions that effectively hinder the religious activities of the targeted individuals or groups.” These may include: harassment over attire, practices and occupations which run counter to those of the majority religion; vandalism of religious property or homes of religious minorities; and beatings and murders.

Whether restrictions on religion are imposed by government or by society, religious minorities are often “perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a cultural, economic or political threat to the majority.”² In some countries, because Christians advocate for the common good and for respect of the dignity of all people, their values challenge the traditional social order and expose economic inequalities. Sometimes political parties use religion as a rallying cry to recruit supporters and mask oppression of religious minorities under the guise of preserving a national identity and culture. In other countries, tensions among ethnic groups over land, resources, and access to education and employment can erupt into violence and be framed as a religious dispute if the groups are of different religions. Some states view religious adherence as a challenge to their authority and seek to control believers.

USCCB Policy

With active USCCB support, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 that mandated the creation of a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and an Office of Religious Freedom within the Department of State headed by an Ambassador-at-Large. Both USCIRF and the State Department produce annual reports on religious freedom. Both designate “countries of particular concern” to denote those states with more egregious violations of religious freedom. At the urging of USCCB and others, USCIRF was recently reauthorized through 2014, but at a reduced budget.

The Bishops’ Conference has consistently offered strong support for the religious freedom of all and particular support and solidarity to Catholics who have experienced brutal attacks and increasing pressures. In a December 2011 letter, Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Bishop Richard Pates wrote, “Our Conference of bishops is acutely aware that the Churches of the Middle East are caught in situations of conflict and violence that have put severe strains on the ancient Church presence there. ... Our prayerful solidarity extends to all Christians who are persecuted throughout the world but in particular to those brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering in the region of our Lord’s birth.”

USCCB has written numerous letters in support of religious freedom when attacks have occurred. At times publicly and at other times privately, USCCB has appealed to the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government to exert pressure on another country’s government to uphold international human rights standards, and protect the religious freedom of all its citizens, especially Christians and other minorities. USCCB does so after consulting the local Catholic bishops’ conference to ensure that our actions express solidarity in helpful ways. USCCB continues to make religious freedom a high priority within policy deliberations. The bishops echo the teaching of Pope Benedict when he “identified religious freedom as the fundamental path to peace.”

ACTION REQUESTED

The USCCB will continue to advocate for the importance of international religious freedom to both Congress and the Administration. Please contact your member of Congress and let him or her know of the importance of religious freedom as a basic human right that should be a clear priority in policy discussions.

For information: visit www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/ or contact *Virginia Farris*, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3160 (phone); vfarris@usccb.org.

² Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Global Restrictions on Religion*, December 2009.