



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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July 8, 2014

United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:


On behalf of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I write in support of H.R. 4653, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Reauthorization Act of 2014. At a time when international religious freedom appears to be more imperiled, it is vital that USCIRF be reauthorized in order to continue its excellent work of raising the profile of those who are discriminated against, harassed and even killed for their faith.

USCCB has long advocated for the reauthorization of USCIRF because of its vital role in preserving human dignity and human rights around the world by monitoring and promoting religious freedom. Sadly, Pew Research Center reports indicate that governmental and societal restrictions on religious freedom have only gotten worse since USCIRF was reauthorized in 2011. Christians and other small religions are seeking refuge from violence in Syria, Egypt and Iraq. Religious minorities are jailed on blasphemy and apostasy charges in Pakistan, Burma, and Sudan, just to note a few countries where the vulnerable can so easily be killed with impunity. In Nigeria, over 140 young women, mainly Christians, kidnapped two months ago by Boko Haram have still not been freed. All these cases are indicative of a worldwide pandemic of religious intolerance that is threatening the stability of so many countries.

Pope Francis, in a June 14, 2014 address to an International Congress on Religious Liberty, exhorted all to “recognize, guarantee, and protect religious freedom, which is a right intrinsically inherent in human nature, in man’s dignity as a free being, and is also an indicator of a healthy democracy and one of the main sources of the legitimacy of the State.” The Holy Father found it “incomprehensible” that today, people face discrimination and their rights restricted simply because they belong or profess publicly a particular faith. He lamented that persecution of Christians is more widespread than 1700 years ago, saying it was “unacceptable that, in fact, real and proper persecutions subsist for reason of religious membership!”

In light of Pope Francis’ remarks and the Catholic Church’s long standing commitment to religious freedom around the world, I urge members of Congress to support H.R. 4653, a bipartisan bill to reauthorize USCIRF, and to work toward its swift passage through Congress. The reauthorization bill strengthens USCIRF’s work to advance religious freedom by encouraging rapid appointments of Commissioners, allowing access to relevant information, and most importantly, further integrating religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy development and training. Your support to pass H.R. 4653 will demonstrate the United States’ commitment to this vital and universal human right.

Sincerely yours,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates

Bishop of Des Moines

Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace