



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

Background on Religious Freedom February 2011

Many Christians experience daily affronts and often live in fear because of their pursuit of truth, their faith in Jesus Christ and their heartfelt pleas for respect for religious freedom. This situation is unacceptable, ...it is a threat to security and peace. --Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 2011

Background:

The New Year's Day bombing of a Coptic Church in Egypt killed over 20 and injured more than 100. In Nigeria, coordinated bombings of Christian churches on Christmas Eve killed an estimated 80 people. The October 31 attack on a Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad, Iraq killed two priests and 56 worshippers, and wounded another 75 of the 120 parishioners who had gathered for Mass. These attacks are horrific. They are symptomatic of the ongoing and escalating attacks against Christians in the Middle East and in other parts of the world and an increase in religiously-motivated conflicts and violence aimed at vulnerable minority communities. Decrying the violence, Pope Benedict XVI recently 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 for 2011 and for his annual address in January to the Diplomatic Corps. Concern for the challenges facing the Church and Christians in the Middle East, particularly Iraq, was discussed at the Synod of Bishops on the Middle East in October 2010. Although Christians have lived in the region for centuries, they have been very vulnerable to attack during periods of political instability such as in recent years in Iraq. Over the past few years many Iraqi Christians fled the 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 discriminated against or attacked in various countries, especially where they are a minority. Small incidents can spark large reactions and outbursts.

A December 2009 Pew study on "Global Restrictions on Religion" found that 64 nations, with 70 percent of the world's population, have high or very high restrictions on religion. Some countries, like Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq, scored high or very high on both governmental and social restrictions. Others, like Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Bangladesh, score high on social hostilities, but were more moderate regarding government restrictions. And others, like China and Vietnam, scored high on government restrictions, but had more moderate levels of social hostilities.¹

While many nations have freedom of religion provisions in their constitutions, the 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. The Pew study considers social hostilities to be "concrete, hostile actions that effectively hinder the religious activities of the targeted individuals or groups." These may include: harassment over attire, practices or occupations which run counter to those of the majority religion; vandalism of religious property or homes of religious minorities; and beatings and murders.

¹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Global Restrictions on Religion, December 2009

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 many countries, Christians are a religious minority that has been under attack. In some countries, Christians may be viewed as a threat because in advocating for the common good and for respect of the dignity of all people, their values challenge the traditional social order and expose economic inequalities. In some countries, political parties use religion as a rallying cry to gain 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 opportunities that erupt into violence can 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.

Congress passed an International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 that mandated the creation of a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). It also established an Office of Religious Freedom within the Department of State headed by an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Both USCIRF and the State Department are required to produce annual reports on religious freedom. Both designate “countries of particular concern” to denote those states with more egregious violations of religious freedom. Although an individual was nominated in June 2010 to serve as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, she was not confirmed in the last Congress so that position has been vacant since January 2009.

USCCB Policy

The Bishops’ Conference has consistently offered general support for the religious freedom of all and particular support and solidarity to Catholics who have experienced brutal attacks and increasing pressures in the Middle East. In a statement following the attack on the Syrian-Catholic Church in Baghdad, Cardinal Francis George said, “We stand with the bishops, Church and people of Iraq in their urgent search for greater security, freedom and protection.” Bishop Howard Hubbard, the Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, 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 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, including Christians and other minorities. USCCB has also worked with the legislative branch to support bills upholding protection of religious freedom in various countries. USCCB does so after consulting the local Catholic bishops’ conference to ensure that our actions express solidarity in helpful ways. USCCB has also written to the Administration asking that they raise the profile of religious freedom within policy deliberations and asked that the appointment of a qualified Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom be expedited. The bishops echo the teaching of Pope Benedict when he “identified religious freedom as the fundamental path to peace.”

ACTION REQUESTED

In this Congress, the USCCB will be promoting the reauthorization of the International Religious Freedom Act which expires September 2011 and will be advocating for the speedy appointment of a qualified Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Please contact your member of Congress. Let him or her know of the importance of religious freedom as a basic human right that should figure prominently in policy discussions since some conflicts today have a religious dimension or are perpetrated in the name of religion.

For information: visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/libertyind.shtml> or contact *Virginia Farris*, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3160 (phone); vfarris@usccb.org.

² Ibid.