

Introduction

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I would like to thank the Helsinki Commission for its leadership role on human rights over many years, relating to Turkmenistan and the other countries in the OSCE region.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

The USCIRF is an independent federal government agency created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). IRFA also mandated the establishment of the post of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom within the State Department as well as a Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council.

The USCIRF is the world's first government commission with the sole mission of reviewing and making policy recommendation on religious freedom violations abroad. Nine independent voting Commissioners, appointed by the President and the leadership of both parties in Congress head up USCIRF, plus the State Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom who is a non-voting member.

In May of each year, USCIRF issues its Annual Report with policy recommendations for the President, the Secretary of State and Congress. The report also critiques the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom and its implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

CPC Process

Every year, USCIRF examines the status of religious freedom around the world. On the basis of that review, USCIRF recommends that the Secretary of State designate certain countries as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs). CPCs are those countries found to have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including torture, imprisonment, prolonged detention or arrests. Once given CPC designation, the IRFA requires the president to take actions specified under that law. There are a range of such actions, including economic sanctions. The CPC process is a relatively new and significant policy option in the U.S. human rights agenda.

Turkmenistan and CPC Status

Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive states in the world today, and its government regularly engages in severe and ongoing violations of religious freedom. The USCIRF has, and continues to recommend, that Turkmenistan be named a CPC.

Has the Status of Religion in Turkmenistan Improved?

Under Turkmen law, only Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox are granted the right to legal existence and even that is limited. All other religions – ranging from Shia Muslims and Baha'is to Catholics to Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Advenists and Jehovahs Witnesses – are

banned. Religious adherents belonging to unregistered groups are subjected to a wide range of harassment and abuse, including penalties under both criminal and civil law for the practice of their faith. Many of these problems -- are detailed in the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom.

In 1999 and 2000, Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov promised senior U.S. officials that he would loosen restrictions on official recognition of minority religious communities that would allow them to operate legally and openly. However, no action was ever taken on this promise. Instead, a new law was passed that criminalized unregistered religious activity.

Then in March 2004, Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov issued a decree that purportedly will ease registration requirements for religious communities in Turkmenistan. Moreover, the decree itself relates only to a narrow aspect of the registration law; other repressive aspects remain as does the criminal penalties for unregistered religious activities. To date, however, no religious communities have been registered as a result of the decree. There is concern that President Niyazov's all-too-timely move -- just at the time when the UN Human Rights Commission was about to meet -- will nevertheless encourage the Department of State to forego a much-warranted CPC designation for Turkmenistan.

In an effort to highlight the current state of religious freedom in Turkmenistan and the political context within which these conditions should be seen, the USCIF together with the Helsinki Commission have invited three experts to share their views. Mr Uzzell will make a presentation for his organization and Forum 18. Ms. Badykova will also make a presentation. Mr. Corley will take part in the question and answer period.

Lawrence Uzzell, president of International Religious Freedom Watch, an independent research center that reports on threats to freedom of conscience in totalitarian and authoritarian countries, and former head of the Keston Institute.

Najia Badykova, Research Associate at the George Washington University and former head of the Department of Economic Relations within the Turkmen government.

Felix Corley, editor of Forum 18 News Service, a news service reporting on threats and actions against religious freedom in the former Soviet Bloc.