

Bill to Protect Christians Abroad Advances in U.S. House

A bill authored by U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) that would give the Obama Administration, and more specifically the State Department, new resources to combat escalating persecution of Christians and anti-Semitism around the world was unanimously adopted Thursday by the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, known as House Resolution 1150, is named in honor of the former congressman from Virginia who was an internationally recognized leader in the fight against religious persecution. Smith said Wolf had made advancing religious freedom a U.S. foreign policy priority.

“My legislation strengthens our resolve and ensures that every administration integrates and advances religious freedom in its foreign policy objectives and actions,” he said. “The world is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of international religious freedom, a crisis that continues to create millions of victims; a crisis that undermines liberty, prosperity and peace; a crisis that poses a direct challenge to the U.S. interests in the Middle East, Russia, China and sub-Saharan Africa.”

Specifically, Smith’s bill:

- Requires that international religious freedom policies must be integrated into national security, immigration, rule of law, and other relevant U.S. foreign policy priorities;
- Creates a Designated Persons List of individuals sanctioned for participating or directing religious freedom abuses;
- Expands diplomatic training on international religious

- freedom for all State Department diplomats;
- Creates a “tier system” for International Religious Freedom reports on countries of particular concern and a special watch list—similar to the tier system used in the Trafficking in Persons Report;
 - Requires annual Presidential designations and actions on countries with severe religious freedom abuses;
 - Gives the President the authority to designate “non-state actors” as severe violators of international religious freedom; and
 - Requires that the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom will report directly to the Secretary of State.

HR 1150, which is supported by an large and ecumenical group of religious organizations, as well as representatives of ethnic minority groups, is expected to be considered by the full House of Representatives in the next few weeks. Smith said he is confident in its passage.

“It is increasingly clear that a robust religious freedom diplomacy is necessary to advance U.S. interest in stability, security, and economic development,” Smith said. “Research shows that where there is more religious freedom, there is more economic freedom, more women’s empowerment, more political stability, more freedom of speech, and less terrorism.”