

Religious Freedom Bill Heads to President's Desk

The U.S. House of Representatives passed and sent to the president's desk for his signature on Tuesday the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act.

The bipartisan bill, authored by Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) and co-sponsored by Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) is meant to provide the federal government, particularly the Department of State, with new tools, resources and training to help counter extremism and the growing persecution of religious minorities globally. The bill is named in honor of former Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.), who authored the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998.

"Congressman Frank Wolf [was] a tireless champion for the rights of the poor and the persecuted globally," Smith, who chairs the Global Human Rights Subcommittee, said. "18 years ago, he had the foresight to make advancing the right to religious freedom a high U.S. foreign policy priority. It is largely because of his efforts that religious freedom is taken seriously as a foreign policy issue. I had the distinct honor and pleasure of working with him for over thirty years. This bill is a fitting tribute to his work and service to our great nation."

The new legislation expands on Wolf's in these ways:

- Creates a "designated persons list" for individuals who commit egregious violations of religious freedom
- Creates a comprehensive religious prisoners list—persons who are detained, imprisoned, tortured and subject to forced remission of faith.
- Integrates religious freedom into every aspect of U.S. foreign policy

- Strengthens the special adviser for religious freedom at the National Security Council
- Requires international religious freedom training for all foreign service officers
- Requires that the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom report directly to the secretary of state
- Elevates the position of the ambassador within the federal government
- Creates an “entity of particular concern” designation for non-state actors like terrorist groups
- Requires more frequent presidential actions to counter severe religious freedom violations globally
- Creates a “special watch list”—two-tier system at state (CPC countries/special watch list)
- Sets congressional expectations for staffing of the IRF office and expansion of religious freedom program grants

“From China and Vietnam to Syria and Nigeria, we are witnessing a tragic, global crisis in religious persecution, violence and terrorism, with dire consequences for religious believers and for U.S. national security,” Smith said. “Ancient Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are on the verge of extinction and other religious minorities in the Middle East face a constant assault from the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

“The freedom to practice a religion without persecution is a precious right for everyone, of whatever race, sex or location on earth. This human right is enshrined in our own founding documents, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has been a bedrock principle of open and democratic societies for centuries.” {eo}