

Religious Freedom Commission Sees Opposition in Senate

Just over three weeks ago many Christians were among a reported 26 deaths in Cairo, Egypt, when Coptic believers were attacked in the streets during what started as a peaceful protest against extremists' attacks on churches across Egypt.

A recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life report found more than 2.2 billion people live in countries where social hostilities or government restrictions on religion rose substantially from 2006 to 2009. Religious freedom experts have called the report "troubling."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is one agency the United States has to monitor and raise the profile of religious freedom around the world. It is an independent, bipartisan federal commission that makes recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress.

However, the USCIRF will cease to exist on Nov. 18 unless Congress takes action to reauthorize it. The Senate needs to pass HR 2867 (the two-year reauthorization with certain reforms) by then or USCIRF will no longer function. There is one senator who is currently preventing the bill from going to a vote. The bill passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 391-21 on Sept. 15.

"USCIRF provides valuable reporting and recommendations while drawing public attention to many violations of religious freedom worldwide that are not publicized by the mainstream media or other government agencies," says Open Doors USA director of Advocacy Lindsay Vessey. "Failure to re-authorize the USCIRF would send a message to rest of the world that religious freedom is no longer a national priority. Open Doors

urges all senators to vote for HR 2867 which makes some key reforms to the USCIRF and will ensure its doors do not close.”

“USCIRF is a valuable watchdog for international religious freedom,” says Carl Moeller, president and CEO of Open Doors USA. “I have traveled to many countries where Christians and other minorities are persecuted for their faith and don’t have a voice. The USCIRF needs to be one of those voices for religious liberty. I urge the Senate to vote for HR 2867.”

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, director of Interfaith Affairs for the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, remembers the 1970s and ’80s, when the United States linked its relationship with other countries to their performance regarding human rights. This improved the lot of tens of millions of people around the globe, he says, as well as helping to topple the Soviet Union.

“It is clear that today, it is religious freedom that determines the difference between countries which can be trusted, and those that cannot. We need a strong, independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to make a difference in the lives of millions of people who have no other voice,” Adlerstein says. “Reauthorization of USCIRF is vital to the voiceless and to U.S. interests.”

Moeller and Vessey state it is urgent people make their voices heard by contacting their senators as soon as possible.