

U.S. Legislature Fights for Religious Freedom Throughout World

The House on Thursday approved House Resolution 2867. It's a bill that reauthorizes the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The commission reviews religious freedom violations and makes policy recommendations to the president and Congress. Among its duties is the issuance of a report detailing countries that severely infringe on religious rights.

This year's report listed Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan among the world's worst offenders. Todd Nettleton with Voice of the Martyrs says, "We appreciate the U.S. government really making religious freedom an issue within our relationships with other nations. This is something that the State Department looks into."

There were several countries missing from the list, most notably Pakistan, Vietnam and Somalia. The USCIRF also recommended that Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria and Turkmenistan be on the list.

The commission reviews religious freedom violations and uses the CPC report to make policy recommendations to the president and Congress. Nettleton says the message the report sends is clear. "Overall, I think this is an important thing for our government to say that religious freedom is important and to bring this out in front of the world as the law stipulates that they will do."

Although there has been a lot of upheaval in many parts of North Africa and the Middle East as reported by religious

rights watchdogs, Nettleton notes that “there have not been any changes to the list of Countries of Particular Concern since 2009. It’s been two years since they’ve either taken somebody off of that list, or added somebody to that list.”

Some countries vigorously defend their human and religious rights records, says Nettleton. “There are always questions about what’s the terminology, how do they come to these conclusions, who gets on the list and who gets off the list. But the important thing is: we’re talking about this. It’s in front of the world.”

Others make strides to improve the conditions. “There have been some very positive developments with Turkey, and I think some of that links back to Turkey very badly wants to be a part of the European Union. The European Union, as well, has said, ‘We need to see progress in the area of religious freedom. We need to see progress in how minorities are treated in Turkey before we want you to be a part of our group,’” Nettleton explains.

Does being on the list have any teeth? Aside from sanction recommendations, “Yes,” says Nettleton. “International pressure can produce good results in countries where Christians are persecuted.”

Nettleton goes on to say that “in our conversations with legislators and with others in Washington, we’re able to say, ‘The State Department says this is going on. Let us tell you about what we know. Let us tell you what our contacts inside that country are saying as well.’ It becomes one more tool in our toolbox, as we try to be a voice for persecuted Christians, in the United States.”

Awareness of the plight of believers often leads to action. “We want people to be aware. I think the first step, particularly in churches and in the hearts of Christians, is just knowing what’s going on. That knowledge helps people to

go forward and then say, 'Okay, what we can do?'"

Once naivete is stripped away, the message of the gospel and the spiritual connection around the world are catalysts for change. Nettleton says they use that energy to encourage Christians being persecuted for their faith. "Voice of the Martyrs really directs people in some really practical things that they can do, starting with prayer. We can lift them up before God. Then, there are other things that we can do to be a voice for them: providing help directly, and providing Bibles."