

Canada Names Religious Freedom Ambassador

After nearly two years of delay, Canada on Tuesday finally named its ambassador for the Office of Religious Freedom.

At a mosque north of Toronto, Prime Minister Stephen Harper named Andrew Bennett to head the office.

“Around the world, violations of religious freedom are widespread and they are increasing,” Harper said in a speech at the Ahmadiyya Muslim community center and mosque in Vaughan, Ontario.

“Dr. Bennett is a man of principle and deep convictions and he will encourage the protection of religious minorities around the world so all can practice their faith without fear of violence and repression.”

Bennett, a Catholic, is dean of Augustine College, a Christian liberal arts college in Ottawa.

Harper first promised to create an Office of Religious Freedom during his 2011 campaign. It will be part of the Foreign Affairs ministry and have an annual budget of \$5 million.

“This was a platform commitment, to create an office of religious freedom, to make the protection of religious freedom of vulnerable religious minorities a key pillar of Canadian foreign policy,” Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, who attended the announcement, told reporters.

Creating and staffing the office has not been without controversy. Bennett was reportedly the third, possibly fourth, person to be offered the post.

And in 2011, a closed-door meeting organized by the government was criticized by some scholars because four of the six

consultants were Christian, while the other two were Jewish and Baha'i.

Critics have said the office is a misguided attempt to inject religion into foreign policy, and some have expressed concern that it would be biased toward the persecution of Christians.