

Open Doors Pleas for Senator to Lift Hold on Religious Envoy Bill

Open Doors USA launched an advocacy campaign in June to encourage the U.S. Senate to pass a bill creating a special envoy at the U.S. State Department for religious minorities, including Christians, in the Near East and in South Central Asia.

Senate bill S. 1245 was introduced last year, but it still has not been brought to a vote. Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA) has placed a hold on the bill, preventing it from moving forward.

If S. 1245 is not passed in this session of Congress and signed into law, the process will have to be started all over next year in the new session of Congress. The House overwhelmingly passed the bipartisan measure last summer. Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO) is sponsor of the Senate version of the bill.

Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA), has asked Webb to lift the hold placed on the legislation. Wolf has talked to Webb personally and to his staff.

An excerpt of the letter Rep. Wolf sent to Sen. Webb reads: “I would venture that the Coptic Christians, Baha’is, Chaldo-Assyrians, Ahmadis, small-remaining Jewish population and countless other religious minorities throughout the Middle East and South Central Asia who face daily persecution, hardship, violence, instability and even death would be hard-pressed to see your objection to this straight-forward, bipartisan legislation.

“Will a special envoy guarantee these communities’ survival—and even flourishing—in the lands they have inhabited for centuries? I do not know. But I am certain, that to do

nothing is not an option—lest on this administration's and this Congress' watch we witness a Middle East emptied of ancient faith communities, foremost among them the beleaguered Christian community."

"We applaud Rep. Wolf's efforts to urge Sen. Webb to lift his hold on S. 1245," said Sally Rae, Advocacy Assistant at Open Doors USA. "The creation of a Special Envoy will add a strategic voice of support to these vulnerable regions, especially countries such as Syria, Egypt and Iran. It would communicate that the United States is doing all we can to stem the persecution, violence and even death that religious minorities face in these countries."

"We urge those who care about moving this bill forward to contact their senators. With a third of the U.S. Senate facing election votes in the fall, it is a great time to share with your elected officials about the issues most important to you. Already over 2,300 people have joined in this timely and critical campaign."

The Near East countries include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen and also the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The South Central Asian countries include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

All of these countries are on the Open Doors 2012 World Watch List of the worst persecutors of Christians with the exception of Israel, Lebanon and Nepal. The Special Envoy would be appointed by the president of the United States and report to the president and secretary of state.