

US and EU explore cooperation on religious freedom

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February 14, 2014

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BRUSSELS (RNS) In the first meeting of its kind, members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom met with the European Parliament's working group on freedom of religion or belief to explore opportunities for trans-Atlantic and international cooperation.

"One nation speaking alone may just be accused of name-calling, but many nations speaking together will certainly have an effect, and that's what we hope to see," said Commissioner Mary Ann Glendon of U.S. foreign policy positions toward religious freedom.

Heiner Bielefeldt, the United Nations' special rapporteur on freedom of religion, delivered the keynote speech Wednesday (Feb. 12) at the European Parliament in Brussels. He noted increased interest in religious freedom in recent years but said that the topic is often viewed with unease or suspicion.

"Freedom of expression, being the epitome of liberal rights, is seen as a green light for provocation," Bielefeldt said.

Freedom of religion, on the other hand, is often considered a stop sign. In Bielefeldt's view, this "misguided" assumption stems from religious defamation, hate speech, blasphemy and apostasy being used to stifle expression.

Dennis de Jong and Peter van Dalen, co-presidents of the EU working group, discussed the group's first annual report on freedom of religion in the world. They argued that religious freedom should be given more prominence in EU foreign policy and gave recommendations for 15 countries where the situation is particularly dire.

“In Egypt, Coptic Christians must be able to freely and safely practice their faith. In Pakistan, we demand that hate speech be scrapped from school books, in particular where they are subsidized by the EU. In India, we’d like to see states that have introduced anti-conversion legislation repeal those provisions,” van Dalen said.

In its 2013 report, the U.S. commission recommended that the State Department re-designate Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan as countries of particular concern for religious freedom. The body also recommended that Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam be added to this list.

Katrina Lantos Swett, vice chair at USCIRF, outlined specific restrictions and incidents of torture, detention and harassment against faith groups in these and other countries.

“In Russia, host of the grand spectacle of the Sochi Olympics, conditions continue to worsen as the government uses extremism laws against certain Muslim groups and so-called nontraditional religious communities, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses, through raids, detentions and imprisonment,” she said.

Lantos Swett praised President Obama’s remarks on international religious freedom at last week’s National Prayer Breakfast in Washington.

“The United States cannot and should not do this work alone,” she said. “We are better and stronger when we work together.”