

Obama: religious freedom is key policy for U.S. abroad

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [March 5, 2014](#) issue

Promoting religious freedom is an important part of U.S. foreign policy, President Obama told about 3,500 attendees at the 62nd National Prayer Breakfast at a Washington hotel.

Evangelical clergy and lay leaders have in the past criticized Obama for giving little attention to Christians detained or arrested abroad. But religious freedom was the president's central theme on February 6.

"There are times when we work with governments that don't always meet our highest standards, but they're working with us on core interests such as the security of the American people," the president said.

"At the same time, we also deeply believe that it's in our interest, even with our partners, sometimes with our friends, to stand up for universal human rights."

"So promoting religious freedom is a key objective of U.S. foreign policy," he continued. "And I'm proud that no nation on Earth does more to stand up for the freedom of religion around the world than the United States of America."

Obama said that it isn't always comfortable to do so. In meetings with Chinese leaders he has been clear that the country's potential "rests on upholding universal rights, including for Christians, and Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims."

Meeting with the president of Myanmar, Obama said that Myanmar's "return to the international community depends on respecting basic freedoms, including for Christians and Muslims."

He also pledged support to people in Nigeria, home of sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims. And he highlighted efforts to protect religious minorities in Sudan and South Sudan suffering in a humanitarian disaster stemming from civil war.

“As we support Israelis and Palestinians as they engage in direct talks, we’ve made clear that lasting peace will require freedom of worship and access to holy sites for all faiths,” Obama said.

He repeated calls for the release of Americans held in foreign countries, such as Pastor Saeed Abedini in Iran and missionary Kenneth Bae in North Korea.

Obama said he looks forward to nominating the next ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, a position vacated by the October resignation of Suzan Johnson Cook, a former American Baptist pastor, author, and motivational speaker who took the oath of office in May 2011.

He thanked Shaun Casey, a professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, for his work leading the State Department’s new Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives since last August.

He recognized religious leaders’ contributions in addressing issues like poverty, immigration, and human trafficking, coordinated with the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, led by Melissa Rogers, a Baptist who previously worked at Wake Forest Divinity School, the Brookings Institution, and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

Obama encouraged faith leaders to join in a new initiative announced in his State of the Union address January 28, “an effort to help more young men of color overcome the odds, because so many boys in this country need that mentor to help them become a man and a good father.” —ABP