

Religious rights watchdog pushes to add Pakistan, Syria to list of worst offenders

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WASHINGTON (RNS) One of the nation's leading—and official—champions of religious freedom implored the Obama administration to add Pakistan and Syria to the list of nations that most egregiously violate religious rights.

Before a congressional subcommittee on Thursday (May 22) Robert P. George, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said it makes little sense that the roster compiled by the U.S. has barely changed in a decade.

The congressionally chartered commission George heads recently advocated that the State Department add eight nations to the eight already designated as “countries of particular concern.” But among the recommended additions, he singled out Pakistan and Syria for their deteriorating and troublesome record on religious liberty.

“Pakistan represents the worst religious freedom environment for a country not designated as a CPC,” said George, whose testimony highlighted Pakistan's harsh anti-blasphemy laws and chronic violence against the nation's Shiite Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Christians and Hindus.

George, a noted intellectual at Princeton University, spoke of the “horrible and tragic” sectarian conflict in Syria that has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions. Sunni versus Shiite violence is rampant. Extremist religious groups, including al-Qaida affiliates, target Christians and other religious minorities.

His remarks to a subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee come as the State Department prepares to issue its annual International Religious Freedom Report, considered the global gold standard for measuring nations' progress and failings on religious rights.

By law, the State Department must release that report by early September. The CPC list, when it is updated, has traditionally been published at the same time. George chided both Republican and Democratic administrations for failing to update the list more regularly and often.

“Not every three years, not every five years . . . every administration needs to make these designation on a regular and, we believe, annual basis,” George said. He described the list as a powerful tool to pressure countries to improve their human rights records and to give heart to religious freedom activists and the oppressed.

A State Department spokeswoman said it’s unclear when the report and a new CPC list will be released.

That same law that requires the CPC list also needs some tinkering, George added. It’s no longer realistic to limit CPCs to nation-states. It should be expanded, he said, to include non-state actors, such as Boko Haram, the militant group that kidnapped scores of Nigerian schoolgirls last month and is forcing them to live according to a harsh interpretation of Islam.

Such a change in the International Religious Freedom Act would be a “minor, limited adjustment to bring the law in line with the world,” George said.

Currently on the State Department’s list: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan. In addition to Pakistan and Syria, George’s commission wants it to add Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and Vietnam.

Representative Chris Smith (R, N.J.), who convened the hearing, also called on the Obama administration to appoint an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, a position that has sat vacant for seven months. Smith said the vacancy “is a revelation, in my opinion, of priorities.”