

State Department religious freedom report focuses on terror groups

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Secretary of State John Kerry on Wednesday (October 14) released his department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, and called terror groups the world's greatest threat to religious freedom.

The report, considered the most comprehensive accounting of religious freedom violations worldwide, covers nearly 200 countries and territories. But it is nonstate actors, Kerry said at a State Department press conference, that are today "the principal persecutors and preventers of religious tolerance and practice."

He called out these groups by name, topping the list with the Islamic State but referring to it as *Daesh*, a term with derogatory undertones used by other governments and many Arabs. Kerry continued with similarly violent groups: al-Qaida, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram.

"All have been guilty of viscious acts of unprovoked violence," Kerry said, describing the groups' murder and enslavement of the innocent. "Children have been among the victims."

Kerry released the report alongside David Saperstein, the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, who has been on the job for 10 months and highlighted other worrisome trends.

Saperstein decried blasphemy laws and apostasy laws in countries including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan.

"The United States uniformly opposes such laws, which are used to oppress those whose religious beliefs happen to offend the majority," Saperstein said. "Such laws are inconsistent with international human rights and fundamental freedoms, and we will continue to call for their universal repeal."

He also pointed to governments that abuse their citizens “for simply exercising their faith or identifying with a religious community.”

“We see this dramatized by the plight of countless numbers of prisoners of conscience,” he said, and spoke of his travels to Vietnam, where he “saw firsthand how religious groups are forced to undergo onerous and arbitrary registration process to legally operate.”

The report this year did not include what is often the most anticipated aspect: the listing of “Countries of Particular Concern.” The CPCs are not always tied to the report and will be released soon, said a State Department spokesman.

The countries currently on the CPC list are: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.