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## United States Senate

COMMITTEES:  
FINANCE  
ENERGY AND NATURAL  
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ETHICS  
INDIAN AFFAIRS  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND  
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

December 13, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
United States Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

Since our founding, the United States has boldly recognized the inherent right of freedom of religion for all faiths and declared that protection as a fundamental human right for all people everywhere. Unfortunately, for many people and groups of faith around the world, this inherent right seems unattainable, as governments continue to restrict, oppress, and punish the free exercise of religion.

Nevertheless, we have been encouraged by the long-standing commitment of many entities within the United States Government, particularly the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) at the Department of State and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), to ensure that the right to have faith, live that faith, change faiths or have no faith is promoted and protected around the globe. It is vital that the United States continue to provide global leadership to advance this crucial element of the human rights framework.

To accomplish this goal, we must first publicly highlight abuse, persecution and discrimination experienced by people and groups of faith around the world. It is impossible to solve a problem without awareness of its existence or scope. Congress recognized this vital responsibility when it enacted the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) more than two decades ago. In addition to establishing the IRF office and USCIRF, this law required that an annual report detailing the state of religious freedom in each foreign country, violations of religious freedom by foreign governments and actions and policies of the United States that support religious freedom be transmitted to Congress.

IRFA requires the President to fully consider the CPC recommendations of USCIRF when making CPC determinations. However, since the enactment of IRFA, CPC designations by the Secretary of State and USCIRF recommendations have not always aligned, and the reasons for the divergence have been unclear to Congress. As such, the Senate Appropriations Committee report accompanying the FY 2021 and FY 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Acts required the Department to provide the rationale for differences in CPC designations to the appropriate congressional committees within 30 days of such decision. To date, this report has yet to be provided to Congress.

This report is a valuable assessment tool for Congress, particularly in light of recent instances of religious hostility and discrimination around the globe such as the brutal murder of Deborah Samuel

Yakubu<sup>1</sup>, China's continued genocide of Uyghur Muslims and other minority groups<sup>2</sup>, and Pakistan sentencing 16 individuals to death based on blasphemy charges.<sup>3</sup>

I write to you today to request the expeditious transmission of this report to the appropriate Congressional committees in light of a number of troubling omissions from the Department's designations as compared to USCIRF's recommendations and the factual religious freedom conditions reported by the Department.

I am extremely disappointed with the Department's decision not to re-designate Nigeria as a CPC. USCIRF has recommended Nigeria be designated a CPC since 2009, and before that, inclusion on the Special Watch List (SWL) since 2002. While some violence may be attributable to ethnic divisions as well as religious tensions, the continued violence toward religious communities without sufficient response by the Nigerian government continues. As the Department referenced in its report, one Catholic Bishop said that conditions in Nigeria have "become a massive killing field, as both government and the governed look on helplessly."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Nigeria aggressively enforces its blasphemy laws that run afoul of basic human rights. For example, Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a Christian college student, was violently stoned to death and then burned for comments she made about her faith on WhatsApp. This horrific story only demonstrates that religious freedom conditions in Nigeria are getting progressively worse. A strong condemnation from the United States Government, such as an official designation as a Country of Particular Concern, is warranted. I am expressly discouraged that the Department did not designate Nigeria as a CPC in light of the rampant and severe violations of religious freedom in the country.

Similarly, Afghanistan did not receive any formal designation, despite USCIRF's repeated recommendation. Among the many ramifications from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is the fact that religious minorities are at increased risk under the Taliban regime, which was designated as an Entity of Particular Concern last year. As the Taliban now acts as the governing entity of Afghanistan, I am incredulous as to why the State Department chose not to update the designation of Afghanistan to reflect the Taliban's hostility toward religious minorities and brutality toward people of faith.

Additionally, India was not formally designated despite overt and repeated severe violations of religious freedom. India is an important security partner for the United States and a key counter-weight against China in the Indo-Pacific region. In the context of that partnership, the United States must have a robust discussion about the deteriorating religious freedom conditions for religious minorities in India. The purpose of any designation – whether it be CPC or SWL – is to shine a light on the most egregious religious freedom violators and promote continued engagement on the value of religious liberty at all levels of government. Formally designating countries under IRFA can be an effective

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/13/africa/female-student-blasphemy-attack-intl/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/xinjiang/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nigeria/>

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diplomatic tool to encourage and secure changes in behavior. I welcome the Department's explanation for why, in its view, a formal designation would not enhance our efforts to promote human rights in partner countries, such as India.

The United States must continue to be a leader in calling attention and responding to religious persecution wherever it occurs. But it is the responsibility of all nations to encourage these rights of freedom of religion, belief and conscience worldwide to ensure all people have the right to have a faith, live their faith, change their faith or have no faith at all. With this shared goal in mind, I eagerly await the Department's legally-required report to Congress.

In God We Trust,



James Lankford  
United States Senator