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The Worldwide Persecution of Christians

*Excerpts of Remarks by U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Chairman, House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
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Good morning. We are here today to focus attention on the persecution of Christians worldwide, a topic which has been neglected by our media and world leaders – including those in the United States.

Today's focus on anti-Christian persecution is not meant to minimize the suffering of other religious minorities who are imprisoned or killed for their beliefs: as the poet John Donne wrote, "Any man's death doth diminish me."

We stand for human dignity and respect for life from the womb to the tomb, and this subcommittee has and will continue to highlight the suffering of religious minorities around the globe, be they Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, Ba'hai in Iran, Buddhists in occupied Tibet, Yazidis in Iraq or the Muslim Royhinga people in Burma.

Christians, however, remain the most persecuted religious group the world over, and thus deserve the special attention that today's hearing will give them. As one of today's witnesses, the distinguished journalist John Allen has written: "Christians today indisputably are the most persecuted religious body on the planet, and too often their martyrs suffer in silence."

Researchers from the Pew Center have documented incidents of harassment of religious groups worldwide – a term defined as including "physical assaults; arrests and detentions; desecration of holy sites; and discrimination against religious groups in employment, education and housing" – and has concluded that Christians are the single most harassed group today. In the year 2012, Pew reports, Christians were harassed in 110 countries around the world.

This is particularly true in the Middle East where, as one of those we will hear from today, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, has said, "flagrant and widespread persecution of Christians rages... even as we meet."

Archbishop Chullikatt was the papal nuncio to Iraq, where we have seen repeated violent assaults on Christians, such as the as the October 31, 2010 assault upon Our Lady of Deliverance Syrian Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad in which 58 people were killed and another 70 wounded. Attacks such as this have led the Christian population of Iraq – whose roots date back to the time of the Apostles – to dwindle from 1.4 million in 1987 prior to the first Gulf War, to as little as 150,000 today, according to some estimates. Much of this exodus has occurred during a time in which our country invested heavily in blood and treasure in seeking to help Iraqis build a democracy. As we witness the black flag of al-Qaeda again fly over cities such as Fallujah, which we had won at the cost of so much American blood, we wonder how it is that for Christians in Iraq, life appears to be worse now than it was under the vicious dictator Saddam Hussein.

If we turn to Egypt, we see a Christian population which dates back to the Apostle St. Mark also being oppressed. At a hearing we had last December 10 – Human Rights Day – we heard how churches have been subjected to mob attacks and burned. For example, in April of 2012, St. Mark’s Cathedral, seat of the Coptic Pope, was attacked by 30-40 Muslim youths. While dozens of Copts were sheltering inside, security forces joined the mob. Rather than dispersing the crowd, they participated in the all-night attack or stood idly by as rocks, gasoline bombs, and gas canisters were lobbed into the iconic cathedral.

I call your attention to the photographs of churches in Egypt to help illustrate the outrages perpetrated against Christians, simply for being Christian.

Likewise, last year this Subcommittee held a hearing on persecution of religious minorities in Syria. Syria had been a place of relative tolerance for religious minorities in the Middle East, including groups like the Mandeans, who trace their roots to the time of John the Baptist and whom they still revere.

It is this connection with the past which has helped bring radical Islamists to Syria, where not only do they seek to overthrow a violent dictator—Bashar al-Assad, but also seek to eradicate Christianity from the land.

Last September, members of al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda linked group, attacked the town of Malula. Why this is significant is because Malula is a living link with the time of Christ, a Christian village in Syria where Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is still spoken. It is for this reason that Malula was targeted—in the words of one of those attacking this small village whose way of life had remained largely unchanged over the centuries, the Mujahadeen are seeking to “conquer the capital of the Crusaders.” Such is the perspective of one whose vision has been distorted by hatred.

But it is not just in the Middle East where we see the persecution of Christians.

I would like to recall one story of one man I met, first in Jos, Nigeria, and then in Washington when we held a hearing on the terror group, Boko Haram last October. It was in the face of this one man that I was able to witness the face of the persecuted Church, which indeed is also the face of Christ.

Habila Adamu is a businessman from Yobe State in Northern Nigeria. On the night of November 28, 2012, masked gunmen armed with AK-47 entered his home. They told his wife to leave, as they were here to “do the work of Allah.”

The questioning began.

“Are you a policeman?”

“No.”

“Are you a Nigerian soldier?”

“No.”

“Are you a Christian?”

“Yes.”

They then asked him why he has not accepted Islam, when he has heard the message of Muhammad.

He replied that “I am a Christian. We are also preaching the gospel of the true God to you and to other people who do not yet know God.”

They then asked, “Habila, Are you ready to die as a Christian?”

“I am ready to die as a Christian.”

They asked him again, “Are you ready to die as a Christian?”

He replied, “I am ready...” And before he had closed his mouth, a bullet ripped through him.

You can see the exit point of the wound in the photo before you...

How many of us, who profess Christ, would have been able to stare martyrdom in the face and refuse to renounce Christ?

Habila Adamu, by the grace of God, survived. The term “hero” is one thrown around loosely these days, but he is a hero of his faith.

And there are many more like him. We will hear today stories from around the world, where Christians are under attack simply for the beliefs they profess. We will hear witnesses discuss persecution in places such as Burma, Vietnam, Eritrea, even in this hemisphere.

According to some estimates, China is on track to become the largest Christian nation in the world, though numbers are hard to pin down, because most of these Christians remain underground and cannot worship freely.

As US Commission on International Freedom Commissioner Elliott Abrams points out, independent Protestants and Catholics continue to face persecution for refusing to affiliate with government-approved religious groups. Protestant “house church” groups that refuse to join the state-approved Protestant religious organization are deemed illegal and experience harassment, fines, detentions, and imprisonment. Approximately 900 Protestants were detained in the past year for conducting public worship activities. Seven Protestant leaders also were imprisoned for terms exceeding one year. The Chinese government issued a directive to “eradicate” unregistered Protestant churches over the next ten years, including through force. Police have embraced the plan, raiding meetings, seeking to break up large churches that previously operated openly, and detaining religious leaders.

The Chinese government continues to appoint Bishops without Vatican approval and place them in leadership positions, setting back Vatican-Beijing relations. Dozens of Catholic clergy, including three Bishops, remain in detention, in home confinement, under surveillance, or disappeared. Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin, the Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai, has been missing since he publicly announced his resignation from the state-approved Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association in June 2012. Bishop James Su Zhimin, arrested in 1996 while participating in a religious procession and convicted of QUOTE “unregistered religious activity” – in other words for remaining loyal to the Catholic Church, and not the State-authorized Church. Bishop Su has not been heard of since his arrest, and the Chinese government has repeatedly rebuffed inquiries as to his condition.

In Vietnam, to name one of these countries, churches are forced to register, and worship outside of State-authorized churches is forbidden. Christian ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong and Montagnard, are allowed to exist in uneasy tension with the governing authorities, knowing that the heavy hand of the state could stop their worship at any time. Vietnam’s Catholics, both clergy and laity, fill Vietnam’s jails as prisoners of conscience, for calling the government to account to a higher law than that of arbitrary dictates. The attack on a Catholic funeral procession in the village of Con Dau in 2010 resulted in more than 100 villagers injured, 62 arrested, five tortured, and at least three deaths; this should remind one of the brutality that Christians in Vietnam face.

And I mention Vietnam because now, in secrecy, negotiations are being held over the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Vietnam seeks entry, and if we focus on the utility and profits of increased trade without holding Vietnam to account for its human rights record, we miss an opportunity to better the lives of those who are beaten, imprisoned and even killed for their faith.

I would like to thank our witnesses for how most of them have traveled here to be with us today from great distances, and at their own expense. It is important to hear from voices from outside the Beltway, and we appreciate our witnesses coming here from as far away as India, the United Kingdom, Mexico, and, from within the United States from Denver and New York. And, lest we appear ungrateful, thanks also to the incomparable US Commission on International Religious Freedom Commissioner Elliott Abrams, who is a couple of stops away on the Metro and also joins us here this morning.

A word about protocol and procedure – we will first hear from Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, the representative of the Holy See to the United Nations. As Archbishop Chullikatt holds the equivalent of the rank of Ambassador, he will not be testifying, but rather briefing Congress this morning. As he will not be subject to questioning, we have asked him to extend his remarks so we can get as full a briefing as possible, following which we will turn to our first panel, with our witness from USCIRF, followed by the five private witnesses.