



USCIRF Testifies to Killing, Harassment of Mideast Christians

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) --- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) vice chair testified Friday before a house subcommittee that Christian minorities in the Middle East are killed and harassed by governments.

In a hearing titled "The Plight of Religious Minorities: Can Religion Pluralism Survive?" Nina Shea, USCIRF Vice Chair, spoke about the religious freedom conditions in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and offered recommendations for U.S. policy.

"One of the common themes that cuts across each of these countries, and several others for that matter, is the extent to which a government perpetuates hatred against religious minorities and fosters religious extremism within its society or even beyond its borders through its education system, the official media, and other government policies," Shea summarized after reporting on the situation in each country before the House International Relations (HIRC) Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations yesterday.

The USCIRF vice chair began her testimony with Egypt, which has been on the Commission's Watch List since 2002. Shea reported that "discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations" is affecting a wide range of religious groups including Coptic Orthodox Christians and those that do not adhere to the state-favored interpretation of Sunni Islam occur in Egypt.

Shea noted that relations between Egypt's Muslims and Christians are "increasingly strained," giving as an example knife attacks on Christian worshippers at three churches in Alexandria in April that left an elderly man dead and up to 16 injured.

"Although the government claimed that a mentally disturbed man was the lone perpetrator, there is evidence that these attacks were religiously motivated," said Shea.

Christians were also attacked by extremists earlier this year near Luxor, where more than a dozen were injured, and last October in Alexandria, where three were killed during clashes.

In addition, permits to build or repair non-Muslim houses of worship are difficult under restrictive rules, according to Shea.

Iran's religious freedom record was said to have "deteriorated" over the past year as "all minority groups are facing intensified harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. Repression has risen to a level not seen since the years immediately following the 1979 revolution," testified the international human rights lawyer.

In particular, reports indicate that many Iranian Christians have fled the country after falling victim to persecution.

"In the face of this violence, members of these fragile communities continue to flee the country in an exodus that may mean the end of the presence in Iraq of ancient Christians and other religious minority communities that have lived on those same lands for 2,000 years," said Shea.

As example, Shea noted that in the past 15 years, many Christian have been reportedly killed at the hands of government authorities and more than a dozen are reported missing or "disappeared."

The indigenous, ancient Iraqi Christian community is also under the threat of fleeing the country under the constant threat of violence, including the target of coordinated bomb attacks, over the past two years.

In Pakistan, religious extremism resulting in violence and discriminatory legislations were stated as the two sources of problems.

Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, the government violates religious freedom through the strict enforcement of intolerant laws banning all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and enforcement of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam.

Commissioner Shea has served on the Commission since it began its work in 1999, has been an international human rights lawyer for 25 years, and is the director of the Center for Religious Freedom, a division of Freedom House.

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The USCIRF was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

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