

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN RELIEF

Testimony by Dr. David Curry, President & CEO, Global Christian Relief Before the House Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs

Hearing on “Faith Under Fire: An Examination of Global Religious Persecution”

October 25, 2023

10:00 AM

Rayburn 2154

Oral Remarks

Thank you, Chair Grothman, Ranking Member Garcia, and all of the Members of the Committee for inviting me to testify today on behalf of Global Christian Relief.

I would like to begin my testimony today with the story of Abigail. Abigail is a young mother of three who, until last year, lived in a small Christian village in Northern Nigeria.

On the night of March 22nd, 2022, Islamist gunmen stormed Abigail’s village, shooting dozens of her friends and family members. After the attack, Abigail was nowhere to be found. It would only be in the days afterwards that the terrorists would call, using the villagers own stolen cell phones, to let her family know Abigail and others had been kidnapped. Abigail is just one of almost 8,000 Christians who have been abducted in Nigeria in just the past three years. She remains missing to this day.

Abigail’s story is emblematic of the truly horrific levels of violence many people face today because of the faith they have chosen to follow. Contrary to popular belief, religious persecution is not a thing of the past. It is a major and growing challenge around the globe, with billions of people living in nearly 80 countries that maintain high levels of government restrictions or social hostility towards people of faithⁱ. Faith really is under fire.

For Christians specifically, the numbers are staggering. Approximately 360 million Christians globally experience high levels of persecution and discrimination for their beliefs.ⁱⁱ In Abigail’s home country, Nigeria, terror groups driven by extremist ideology have killed 12,793 Christians since late 2019. We know that the victims are explicitly targeted for being Christians, both because the killers and kidnappers often expressly say so, and because Christians are suffering killings and abductions at a rate vastly disproportionate to other faiths in the region.ⁱⁱⁱ

In China, over 100 million Christians must practice their faith under an almost totalitarian system of laws and surveillance. Refusing to join a government-controlled church is illegal, but as many as 60 million Chinese Christians choose to do so regardless^{iv}, risking their freedom and social standing to worship and hear sermons not dictated to them by Communist party members.

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN RELIEF

Some governments, and especially U.S. adversaries, choose to co-opt religion to support violent aggression against their rivals and engage in religious persecution.

The Russian government has formed what I have termed an “unholy alliance” with the Russian orthodox church, whipping up religious support to justify its invasion of Ukraine and the persecution of other Christian denominations.^v According to one report, nearly 500 religious buildings and sacred sites in Ukraine have been destroyed by the Russian military since the start of the war last year.

In Iran, the government uses Islam as a pretext to imprison Christians and others attempting to run non-Islamic places of worship. Those who attempt to convert from Islam to another faith face severe repression from friends and family, repression Iranian officials willingly overlook. Of course, Iran’s intolerance of people of other faiths does not stop at it’s borders. Hamas and Hezbollah, both supported by Iran, not only terrorize those of non-Muslim faith, but prevent Muslim’s who live under their control from choosing their religion for themselves.

What is the answer to such overwhelming challenges? The answer, in short, is religious freedom.

At Global Christian Relief, we’re working to bandage and heal those broken by persecution, but we also advocate for religious freedom because its implementation means the end of the most severe forms of persecution. When religious freedom is protected, no one is killed or abducted for their faith, and people are free to pursue truth without fear.

The advancement of religious freedom is also important to U.S. national security interests. As we have seen in the examples I’ve given today, where religious freedom is not protected, extremism and authoritarianism flourish. The more the United States can do to advance this critical freedom, the more we will deter the very groups who wish to do us harm.

With this in mind, I would like to offer the following three recommendations:

1. First – This Committee should encourage the Biden Administration to appoint a Special Advisor for International Religious Freedom to the National Security Council. This position was first recommended by Congress with the passage of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016^{vi}, but it has only been filled once by a dedicated official, during the final year of the Trump Administration.
2. Second – The members of this Committee should consider sponsorship of House Resolution 82^{vii}, calling on the Department of State to redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern. The CPC designation, as it is called, is reserved for the worst violators of religious freedom. Despite the failure of Nigeria’s government to prevent the targeted killing and abduction of thousands of Nigerians on the basis of faith, the State Department removed this designation from Nigeria in 2021. This is unacceptable.
3. Third – I recommend that the Committee directly encourage officials at the State Department to give the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom greater leeway in calling out violations of religious freedom. Ambassador Hussain and his staff have been working tirelessly to advance protections for persecuted communities and must be given the greatest liberty possible in publicly addressing incidents of persecution.

Thank you again to the Members of the Committee and with that, I conclude my opening remarks.

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN RELIEF

ⁱ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/29/how-covid-19-restrictions-affected-religious-groups-around-the-world-in-2020/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://iirf.global/publications/reports/killings-and-abductions-in-nigeria-10-2019-9-2022/>

^{iv} <https://www.palladiummag.com/2019/08/19/inside-the-house-church-movement-in-china/>

^v <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/putin-or-thodox-church-forge-unholy-alliance-take-over-ukraine>

^{vi} <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ281/PLAW-114publ281.pdf>

^{vii} <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/82/cosponsors?s=1&r=110&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22n%22%5D%7D>