

International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief
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Good morning,

Thank you for inviting me to address this meeting of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States. On behalf of our president at the Religious Freedom Institute, Thomas Farr, thank you for your work on behalf of human security, religious freedom, and other universal human rights.

The mission of the Religious Freedom Institute is to achieve broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a source of national and international security. Thus, it is appropriate that we reflect on the state of religious freedom in the world, especially in our own hemisphere, today.

Tomorrow, August 22, has been designated by the UN General Assembly as the “International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.”¹ In proclaiming this day of remembrance, the UN expressed serious concerns with:

...continuing acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief against individuals, including against persons belonging to religious communities and religious minorities around the world, and at the increasing number and intensity of such incidents, which are often of a criminal nature and may have international characteristics...

Sadly, we live in a world that has become less, rather than more, free in recent years: more restrictions on liberties such as religion, assembly, speech, and the press; and, more persecution in some regions based on religious identity, religious conviction, and religious practice.

There are at least two main types of religious persecution. The first is perpetrated by those in power claiming a religious justification for harming others. The second is the targeting of individuals or communities for persecution because of their religion. We have seen examples of both in recent years, such as:

- the *government* of the People’s Republic of China persecutes people of faith, particularly Muslims and Christians, because religious adherence calls into question absolute subservience to the rule of the Communist Party.
- in Sri Lanka we see a cycle of violence that includes repression, extra-judicial killing, and terrorism, pitting *people* of different ethno-religious groups against one another.
- of course, ISIS or Islamic State, exemplifies the worst of the worst: a cabal that used explicit religious justifications to undergird its authority to enact violence, while

¹ Note: August 21 is a UN-designated day commemorating the victims of terrorism.

denominating persecuted classes based on their religious identity. ISIS insidiously called its strategy the “purification” of the land, but we know what it really was: ethnic cleansing and the genocide of peoples, their histories, and cultural heritage sites based on their religious identity.

Though such outrages have happened throughout history and continue today, we must not become complacent. We must instead resolve to look closely at patterns that lead to repression, persecution, and violence in order to call out, and take resolute action against, systematic violations of human rights.

So, what challenges do we face in our own hemisphere? What patterns are we seeing today?

The first trend that is worrying is an increasingly *militant secularism* that seeks to push religious people, religious institutions, and religious ideas entirely out of the public square. This is typically a lawfare strategy, to weaponize new regulations in ways that deny religious people their livelihoods as well as their religious rights. For instance, in Canada, recently passed legislation in the province of Quebec, labeled Quebec Bill 21, denies religious people in public service the right to wear religious symbols while on duty. This Bill is in clear violation of the Canadian Constitution. Bill 21 means that a Christian may not wear a small crucifix necklace, a Jew may not wear a kippah, and a Muslim may not cover her hair while in the workplace.

In recent years in the United States, similar laws and lawsuits have tried to force faith-based organizations and charities to violate their deeply held convictions on issues such as paying for contraception or whether employees should affirm the religious values of their faith-based employer. The result of such policy is to push religious people and institutions out of government and the marketplace—or out of business altogether—and make religion a private matter of worship behind closed doors, excluded from the public square. In short, the erosion of religious freedom – the liberty to speak and act in private and public life consistent with our religious convictions – in the U.S. and Canada is deeply worrying.

Thankfully, the Western Hemisphere is not wracked by conflict in the same way that some other parts of the world are. Nonetheless, looking at the religious landscape of Latin America today, let me note a few other examples of religious repression and persecution.

- In some places, notably Cuba, onerous legal restrictions are designed to put religious people at jeopardy of breaking the law, and then those citizens are hounded by the police, fined, and jailed. For instance, according to the U.S. Department of State, the Cuban Communist Party’s Office of Religious Affairs and the government’s Ministry of Justice use, “threats, international and domestic travel restrictions, detentions, and violence against some religious leaders and their followers, and restricted the rights of prisoners to practice religion freely. Media and religious leaders said the government continued to harass or detain members of religious groups advocating for greater religious and political freedom.”² Moreover, it is extremely difficult to register a church, rent property, open a new church, update existing buildings, or build a new church in Cuba—regardless of whether one’s congregation is Catholic or Protestant.

² United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report (2018).

- Mexico is a place of religious vibrancy, but also of persecution and violence. According to one report, Mexico is the most dangerous place in the world for Catholic priests because many priests, as well as Catholic laity, are targeted for killing by drug cartels for taking a stand against violence and corruption.³ Separately, there remain places in Mexico, such as in Chiapas, where local authorities punish—including with beatings and jail—those who convert from Catholicism to another faith. Sadly, this is a global problem: the use of governmental violence to inhibit or punish the fundamental right of individuals to make religious choices, including a change of religion, consistent with their conscience.
- Venezuela has seen a surge of anti-Semitism, due in large part to government propaganda that is anti-Jewish and anti-Israel. In Venezuela and Nicaragua, religious figures, both clergy and laity, have been investigated, harassed, and in some cases indicted and punished for taking public stands against corruption.

The UN declaration for this *International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief* notes

...that States have the primary responsibility to promote and protect human rights, including the human rights of persons belonging to religious minorities, including their right to exercise their religion or belief freely, (and that)

that freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of association are interdependent, interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and these rights can play [a role] in the fight against all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief...

In other words, religious freedom is critical to peace and security in our hemisphere. Let me conclude with the Religious Freedom Institute's vision for a world where religious freedom is protected for everyone, everywhere:

We envision a world that respects religion as an individual and social good, and that protects religious freedom as a fundamental human right, as well as an indispensable driver of democracy, social stability, civil liberty, economic prosperity, equality of women, and the defeat of violent extremism. Religious freedom encompasses the rights of individuals and communities to practice their beliefs in private and to exercise their religious convictions in public, including in civil society, economic enterprise, politics, and law.

Today we mourn the victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, and we resolve to work toward a better future for our neighbors and our children.

Thank you very much.

³ Catholic Media Center reported in United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report (2018).