

State Department report: China among worst offenders of religious freedom

WASHINGTON (CNS) – Top U.S. State Department officials singled out China as one of the world's worst offenders of religious freedom because it had subjected religious minorities to imprisonment and forced labor.

Sam Brownback, ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, told reporters during a news conference June 10 that the U.S. Department of State had no evidence that Muslim Uighurs had been released from prison or detention and that workers had been placed into forced labor.

The comments from Brownback and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the release of the annual Report on International Religious Freedom covering 2019 continued the U.S. government's monthslong campaign of strong criticism of the Chinese government's actions on a number of fronts.

The report follows the signing of an executive order June 2 by President Donald Trump prioritizing U.S. support for religious freedom in diplomacy worldwide.

China has been designated a "country of particular concern" in annual reports dating to 1999.

"China continues its decades-long war on faith," Pompeo told reporters.

"The Chinese Communist Party is now ordering religious organizations to obey CCP leadership and infuse communist dogma into their teachings and practice of their faith," he added. "The mass detentions of Uighurs in Xinjiang continues. So does the repression of Tibetans and Buddhists and Falun

Gong and Christians.”

The section on China was the largest in the report. It cited widespread discrimination of Uighur Muslims as a cause for particular concern.

The Chinese government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Members of each of these religious groups must register before they can participate in religious services. Many faith practitioners have reported they are subject to surveillance and persecution, however.

The report said the Chinese government continued to justify restrictions on religious practices of Muslims in Xinjiang because of what it called the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism and violent terrorism.”

More than 1 million Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui and members of other Muslim groups as well as Uighur Christians have been held in internment camps in Xinjiang, the report said. Those being held have been subjected to “forced disappearance, political indoctrination, torture, physical and psychological abuse, including forced sterilization and sexual abuse, forced labor, and prolonged detention without trial because of their religion and ethnicity,” it said.

The report also identified other countries for infringements on religious freedom.

In Nigeria, “terrorist groups,” including Boko Haram and Islamic State-West Africa “attacked population centers and religious targets and maintained a growing ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers.”

The report repeated earlier findings that in Vietnam “members of religious groups said some local and provincial authorities

used the local and national regulatory systems to slow, delegitimize, and suppress religious activities of groups that resisted close government management of their leadership, training programs, assemblies, and other activities.”

The report said religious groups without official government recognition “reported various forms of government harassment” including assaults, arrests, prosecutions, surveillance, travel restrictions and property seizure or destruction as well as denials of requests for registration or no response to such requests.

In India, a close U.S. ally, increased reports of violence against religious and ethnic minorities and critics of the government and the government’s inability to prevent such incidents were cited in the report.

“Some officials of Hindu-majority parties, including from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), made inflammatory public remarks or social media posts against minority communities,” the report said.

Brownback noted as well that ally Saudi Arabia is the only country to prohibit all churches. Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 “for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.”

“Most recently, on Dec. 18, the secretary of state redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation,” the report added.

Pompeo pointed to positive developments in terms of actions being taken to hold violators of religious freedom accountable:

– Gambia has charged in a case in the International Court of Justice that Myanmar has committed genocide against the

predominantly Muslim Rohingya ethnic group.

- Uzbekistan has boosted religious freedom and ended police raids on unregistered religious groups.
- United Arab Emirates has become the first Middle East country to allow the construction of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The report also credited the Democratic Republic of the Congo for improving relations between the government and religious communities since the inauguration of President Felix Tshisekedi in January 2019, based on media reports and statements from religious leaders.

“Unlike the year prior, there were no reports of acts of violence or intimidation against Catholic Church officials by the government. In March, the government freed several political prisoners from the Catholic lay community (CLC) who had been arrested in 2018 for leading protests, which nongovernmental organizations and others had called an arbitrary action,” the report said.

The report is based on the findings of individual U.S. embassies in each nation. U.S. diplomats gather information from government officials, religious groups, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, human rights monitors, academics, media and others, said the report’s introduction.

The State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom also collects and analyzes additional information from separate sources.