

Efforts to protect religious freedom around world mark 10th year

WASHINGTON - With the daily news from Capitol Hill focused on the often-combative process of passing legislation to reform immigration, fund the war in Iraq or even reauthorize the farm bill, it's refreshing to look back at another carefully negotiated bill that took a less contentious course.

Ten years ago a diverse coalition of religious and human rights organizations and a bipartisan group in Congress worked together to create a system for addressing religious freedom abuses internationally that arguably is doing what it set out to accomplish.

The International Religious Freedom Act, passed by vast majorities in both houses of Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton in October 1998, created a multipronged system for promoting religious freedom, including establishing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Nearly 10 years later, some of the people involved in passing the measure point to flaws in how it has worked, but said it has improved the U.S. government's interest in and ability to respond to abuses of religious rights.

Said Tom Farr, a former director of the State Department office charged with implementing the law, "There are probably hundreds, maybe thousands of people walking the earth free today because of this law."

But Farr, now an author and vice chair of the board of Christian Solidarity Worldwide-USA, an international nongovernmental organization that advocates religious freedom, quickly added a caution.

"But has it perceptibly reduced religious freedom abuses in the past 10 years?" he asked. "The answer is it has not."

Nina Shea, vice chair of the commission, told Catholic News Service important work is clearly being accomplished. But she also ticked off ways U.S. actions and

responses abroad fall short of the ideals she and others had 10 years ago as they worked to pass the law.

Beginning in 1997, over a year or so of working on the bill behind the scenes and in congressional hearings and conferences, imams, Catholic bishops and evangelical Protestant ministers reached common ground. The Family Research Council, the Eagle Forum and the Prison Fellowship worked alongside Amnesty International, the Anti-Defamation League, the AFL-CIO, Human Rights Watch and the National Council of Churches.

The organizations and the bill's congressional sponsors worked out differences of opinion over such points as which religious groups it covered and how specifically the administration's role should be defined.

Ms. Shea said important work is being accomplished, such as focusing on fundamentalists in southern Sudan who were targeting non-Muslims for elimination. Bringing international attention to that situation helped resolve the problem in that corner of Sudan, she said.

In other places, success is not the rule. Ms. Shea gave the example of an ongoing battle to persuade Saudi Arabia's government to stop using official textbooks that promote violence in support of the notion that the Wahabi strain of Islam is superior to all other religions.

She also criticized as uneven the way some U.S. embassies treat religious rights issues in their dealings with a country, and the lack of administration attention to "Christians being eradicated from Iraq."

The religious freedom commission is an independent federal organization of part-time volunteers from different faith backgrounds with expertise on the subject of religious rights. Its members monitor religious freedom issues - frequently traveling to trouble spots - and advising the administration.

Ms. Shea, a human rights lawyer who heads the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute, is the only commission member who has been on it since the beginning.

The commission's work complements that done by an office established within the State Department to promote religious freedom as an objective of U.S. foreign policy. The Office of International Religious Freedom, headed by an ambassador-at-large, monitors religious persecution and discrimination, recommends and implements policies to promote religious freedom.

The law formally set as U.S. policy the practice of condemning religious freedom abuses and defined steps the administration should follow, ranging from diplomatic pressure to trade and financial sanctions.

At an early May panel discussion hosted by the Pew Research Center, John Hanford III, the current ambassador-at-large for the office, said among the Religious Freedom Act's accomplishments are laws in some countries that have been changed and people have been released from prison as a result of U.S. intervention.

He said his office's influence in affecting foreign policy is "about as strong as any office in the State Department."

In some countries, the office's annual report on religious freedom is posted at U.S. embassies in the local language, said Mr. Hanford.

But another panelist said religious rights are still not in the mainstream of foreign policy.

John Shattuck, president of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, in the mid-1990s headed the State Department's Office of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, which now oversees staffing of the Office of International Religious Freedom.

He said there are misunderstandings especially abroad about the law's intent, such as assumptions held by some that it exists to make it easier to "export a U.S. brand of religion" or is intended to protect only "missionary religions" that proselytize abroad. Others see the law as "another example of U.S. unilateralism," he said.

While it's true that some of the early motivation for the law came from evangelical Christians whose members were targeted in some countries, the legislative process and the diversity of those involved turned it into a much broader bill, he said.

Nevertheless, Mr. Shattuck said in many ways "we're stuck in the same place the

Human Rights Bureau was in the early 1990s - naming and shaming, focused on failures and fixes.”

Religion is a factor in economic, political, diplomatic and security concerns, he said.

At a time of “unprecedented diversity of religion and unprecedented contact with each other,” the federal government at all levels ought to have greater interest in understanding and protecting religious beliefs, he said.