

# On 10th anniversary religious freedom law garners praise, caution

WASHINGTON – Mixing church and state may raise some eyebrows in the nation's capital, but in the 10 years since a federal commission began examining worldwide religious liberties, international attention has been drawn to countries that fail to let their citizens worship openly and freely.

Though President George W. Bush praised the global accomplishments of the International Religious Freedom Act during a July 14 White House ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the law, he acknowledged that countries such as China, Vietnam and Sudan have more work to do, a sentiment that has been reiterated a little more forcefully by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

"In too many countries, expressions of freedom were silenced by tyranny, intolerance and oppression," Bush told members of the commission, a select group of congressmen and the media. "Our thoughts turn especially to those living in the countries where religious freedom is of particular concern. Some of these nations have taken steps toward reform. Others haven't."

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

Some 10 years later, a few of those involved in the commission point to flaws in how the act has worked, but said it has improved the U.S. government's ability to respond to abuses of religious rights.

"The international community awarded China the 2008 Summer (Olympic) Games with the trust that Beijing would improve its protections of fundamental human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief," said the commission's chairwoman, Felice D. Gaer. "The commission concludes that China

has not lived up to its promises and continues to engage in serious violations of religious freedom.”

Bush has been criticized for sticking to his promise to attend the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, but he countered that it would be an insult to the people of China for him to snub the games.

The president said that in marking the religious freedom law’s 10th anniversary, he was also reminded that people in Iran, Eritrea, North Korea, Myanmar, Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia continue their struggle to practice their faith freely and urged leaders of those nations to respect the rights of those who seek only to worship their God as they see fit.

Though the commission this year named Vietnam as one of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom, the president made a point of praising that nation’s recent efforts to improve its record on religious liberty.

“The United States used the tools of this act to press for the release of dozens of religious prisoners – all of whom have been freed,” Bush said. “Vietnam’s government has reopened many of the churches it had shut down. And most religious groups report a decrease in the government’s oppression of believers.

“This act has encouraged Vietnam to take some promising first steps toward religious liberty,” he said, “and we’re going to continue to work toward the day when all Vietnamese are free to worship as they so desire.”

Vietnam’s religious communities, including Catholics, face ongoing and serious problems because the reforms meant to improve their situation are inconsistent and vary throughout the country, the commission said in its annual report released May 2.

Vietnam also continues to detain religious prisoners and, overall, the human rights situation is deteriorating, the commission added.

In late June, Vietnamese Cardinal Jean-Baptiste Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh City toured the U.S. and told Catholic News Service that he agreed there have been improvements on religious freedom in his country, but the government still has a

long way to go in its efforts.

Though no U.S. Catholic leaders currently serve on the commission, three bishops and a cardinal have served on the panel in the past.

Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, was appointed by then-Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle and served from 1999 to 2001. Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., was appointed by Bush and served from 2001 to 2003. Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., was appointed by Daschle and served from 2003 to 2007, as did Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver, who was appointed by Bush.

Bishop Ramirez – who believes the commission has done a good job of bringing worldwide attention to abuses of religious liberty – is disappointed there are no Catholic leaders currently serving with the group.

“I think that because the Roman Catholic Church is a worldwide organization, there should always be a bishop on the commission,” he told CNS July 17. “We have a connection with the Vatican, with a worldwide network of bishops. Simply put, the church itself is interested in promoting religious freedom, not only for its own sake, but for the sake of other believers.”

Shortly after the White House anniversary ceremony, the commission issued a statement calling for the president to use his upcoming trip to China to seek visits with prominent human rights defenders and religious leaders and then make a strong public declaration about the importance of religious freedom and human rights in U.S.-China relations.

“My message to (Chinese) President Hu Jintao, when I last met him,” Bush said during the White House ceremony, “was this: ‘So long as there are those who want to fight for their liberty, the United States stands with them.’ Whenever and wherever I meet leaders, I’m going to constantly remind them that they ought to welcome religion in their society, not fear it.”

Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, countries with the most severe religious freedom violations can be punished by any of 15 presidential

actions, including limiting or suspending security assistance to them, not exporting technology to them and refusing them loans or credit.

North Korea was first designated a country of particular concern in 2001. As a result the U.S. secretary of state imposed a sanction that placed restrictions on normal trade relations.

“I’ve attended worship services from Hanoi to Beijing,” Bush said at the White House, “and when I speak to world leaders, I remind them – leaders in those countries – that the worship services are a necessary part of developing a society for which they can be proud.”