

Religious freedom still eludes many abroad

In his story which appeared in the May 9 edition of The Baltimore Sun, reporter Matthew Hay Brown chronicles Maryland's up and down road to religious freedom by taking readers on a tour of Southern Maryland's "Religious Freedom Byway." The journey includes visits to places like Port Tobacco, St. Mary's City and St. Clement's Island, where settlers to the new land first arrived in 1634 and where Jesuit Father Andrew White celebrated the first Mass.

While Maryland is considered the birthplace of religious freedom in our country, Mr. Brown writes that nearly every tour guide along the Byway reported that this freedom did not come without a cost to the early settlers, who often had to worship in private and were unable to participate in government.

Fast forward some 375 years later. Though citizens of this country enjoy the freedoms granted by our nation's constitution, religion being among them, there still are nations in our world where this basic human right is deprived to its citizens.

At a meeting of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace this past week in Washington, D.C., my brother bishops and I were reminded just how prevalent and how violent government-sponsored religious discrimination is in other parts of the world today - 2010!

The materials we received were from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent U.S. government commission that monitors religious freedom worldwide and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress. It is the only government commission in

the world with the sole mission of reviewing and making policy recommendations on violations of religious freedom in foreign lands.

A few weeks ago, the commission issued a list of 13 nations (Burma, China, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam) “where freedom of religion is obstructed and related human rights are trampled.”

Religious freedom violations can take many shapes. Though the common perception of this abuse typically conjures images of people being prevented from worshipping as they choose - certainly true in many cases - an equally prevalent threat comes in the form of impunity, government’s failure to punish those who perpetrate religiously motivated violence.

Sadly, the latter was witnessed firsthand by commission members in nation after nation in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The absence of peacekeeping and law enforcement has not only failed to prevent religiously-motivated attacks against individuals whose beliefs don’t conform, it has encouraged it.

The examples cited in the Commission’s 2010 Annual Report, are disheartening:

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