

Speakers push for reauthorization of US religious freedom commission

WASHINGTON – Current and past members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urged Congress Nov. 17 to keep the rights-monitoring agency alive and said its work must be given higher priority in foreign policy.

The commission's congressional mandate technically expired Nov. 18, but an extension until Dec. 16 was included in the "minibus" continuing appropriations resolution approved by the House and Senate Nov. 17 and signed by President Barack Obama Nov. 18. The legislation to authorize the commission still faces a separate vote before the continuing resolution – intended to keep the government operating while budget-cutting negotiations continued – expires Dec. 16.

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., who served on the commission from 2003 to 2007, said in a Nov. 17 hearing that although there are detailed reports on religious freedom prepared annually by the commission and the State Department, "there is too little public evidence that protection of religious freedom is factored into major bilateral foreign policy decisions on a day-to-day basis."

In his testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights, Bishop Ramirez said that in practice, religious freedom discussions seldom makes it into the public record about dialogue with key countries.

"The issue may have been raised in private, but there needs to be a more overt recognition of the importance that the U.S. places on protection of religious freedom," he said. "Otherwise, it may appear that our nation is going through the motions of satisfying a congressional mandate, but not following up by making religious freedom an integral part of the foreign policy decision-making process."

Bishop Ramirez listed some of the recent events that he said show religious freedom is under attack in many countries.

"A Pew study showed that Christians, more than any other religious group, face

some form of either governmental or societal harassment in 133 countries,” he said.

He gave several examples of ongoing hardships and violence people suffer daily for their religious beliefs, including police crackdowns on people “who simply want a place to pray and worship in China, the burning of churches and attacks by extremists against Copts in Egypt, and the persecution of Christians in Eritrea, Baha’is in Iran, Ahmaddis in Indonesia, and Muslims in Uzbekistan who reject state government control over religious practice.”

In addition, the bishop said, there were “the January and March 2011 assassinations in Pakistan of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer (a Muslim) and of Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti (a Catholic and the only Christian member of the cabinet) for their support for amending blasphemy laws; the New Year’s Day bombing of a Coptic church in Egypt; the Christmas eve bombings of Christian churches in Nigeria; and the October 2010 attack on worshippers at a Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad are just a few of the more horrific reminders of how people are paying with their lives for what they believe.”

Other witnesses at the House hearing included Leonard Leo, current chairman of the commission, and representatives of other organizations that are involved in religious rights and solidarity work.

In his testimony, Leo said the Senate had so far failed to reauthorize the commission, known as USCIRF, because a vote has been blocked “reportedly by concerns about a totally unrelated issue.”

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., has put a hold on the legislation, apparently as a negotiating tactic with the House leadership on an unrelated matter, observers say.

Leo said that “disbanding USCIRF would be a tragic blunder. It would signal to the world that the United States is retreating from the cause of religious freedom.”

The commission was established by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The law also established the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, whose staff monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide.

The commission is an independent, bipartisan government agency charged with reviewing violations of religious freedom throughout the world and making appropriate policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress.

Other Catholic leaders who have served on the commission include Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, now retired archbishop of Washington; Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y.; and Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, now head of the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

In an Oct. 27 letter to the Senate, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., chairman of the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, also urged the commission's reauthorization.

He said the commission's work is "more important than ever" and that the independent, bipartisan commission "provides essential information concerning persecution and violations of human rights throughout the world. In addition, it plays a significant role in raising the profile of religious freedom around the globe."

"Abolition of this body would send an unintended message to the rest of the world," he said. "Oppressive groups may come to believe that the United States is not committed to the protection of religious liberty."