News



Secretary of State Rex Tillerson speaks on the release of the 2016 annual report on International Religious Freedom on Aug. 15, 2017, at the State Department in Washington, D.C. (AP/Susan Walsh)

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Washington — August 15, 2017
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Secretary of State Rex Tillerson underlined the nation's commitment to protecting religious and ethnic groups targeted by the Islamic State as he issued his department's first international religious freedom report since President Donald Trump took office.

“ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled,” said Tillerson on Aug. 15 at the State Department, linking ISIS to ethnic cleansing of religious minorities and attacks on churches and Christian pilgrims in Egypt.

“The protection of these groups — and others subject to violent extremism — is a human rights priority for the Trump administration,” he said. “We will continue working with our regional partners to protect religious minority communities from terrorist attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage.”

The release of the 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, in its 19th year, comes as Trump has been accused of exacerbating hostility toward Muslims and hesitating to condemn white supremacism and anti-Semitism within his own nation. He also has instituted a temporary ban on people traveling from six Muslim-majority countries and reduced the number of refugees accepted into the U.S.

The report states in an appendix on 2016 U.S. refugee policy that the U.S. recognizes resettlement as a “vital tool for providing refugees protection.” Asked on a conference call with reporters how that squares with recent administration actions on refugees, Ambassador Michael Kozak said regulations on refugees vary from country to country.

“There have always been different protocols for vetting refugees for security and other reasons,’’ said Kozak, a senior adviser to the State Department’s Bureau of

Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. “In the areas liberated from ISIS, the preferred option is to allow people to return to their traditional villages.”

In his remarks, Tillerson cited examples of governments that use discriminatory laws to abridge religious freedoms of their citizens — from attacks targeting Shiite Muslims in Saudi Arabia to Falun Gong members dying in detention in China to the demolition of churches in Sudan.

“Iran continues to sentence individuals to death under vague apostasy laws — 20 individuals were executed in 2016 on charges that included ‘waging war against God,’” he said. “Members of the Baha’i community are in prison today simply for abiding by their beliefs.”

He also noted the United States’ continuing advocacy for the release of American pastor Andrew Brunson, whom he said Turkey has “wrongfully imprisoned.”

Kozak said that despite the 199-country report’s tally of serious religious freedom violations across the globe, U.S. engagement has led to some positive developments. He cited Sudan’s release of some people imprisoned for their religious beliefs and passage of Vietnam’s new religion law, which is expected to lead to the recognition of more religious groups.

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“In both countries, the situations remain of grave concern and so we will stay engaged,” he said. “But this is the kind of activity that we’re looking for: incremental progress in improving religious freedom.”

Tillerson also noted that he looks forward to the “swift confirmation” of Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, who was recently nominated as the next ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. Tillerson described the former U.S. senator as “the highest-ranking official ever to take up this important post.”

The annual report does not include a new list of “Countries of Particular Concern,” but the State Department is legally required to update them within 90 days of issuing the report. The countries currently listed, as of October 2016, are: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.