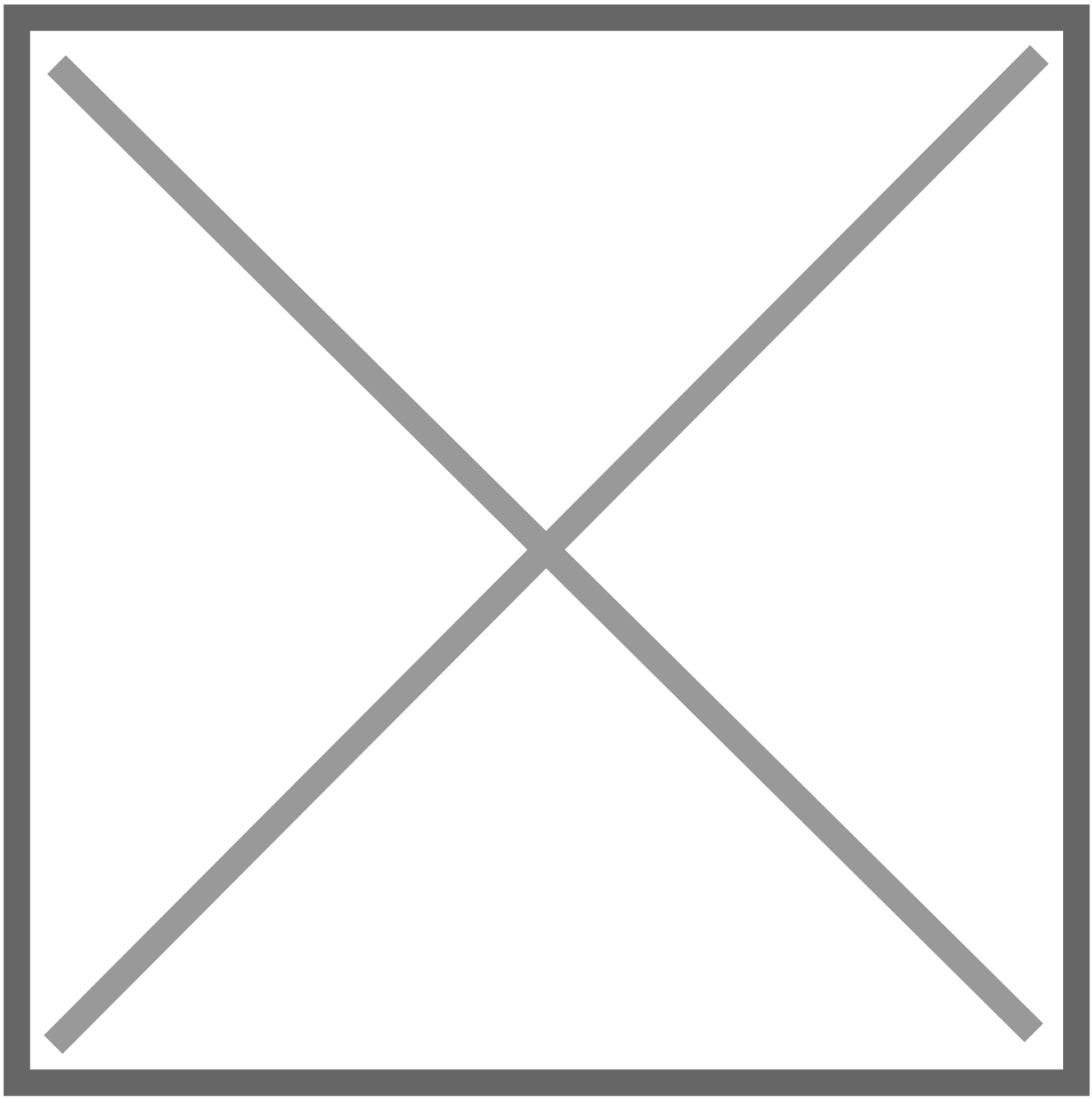
News



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with co-chairs of his campaign March 19, 2018 at the Kremlin in Moscow. (CNS/pool via Reuters/Yuri Kadobnov)

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A religious freedom watchdog is urging the State Department to name four additional countries to its list of the worst religious liberty offenders.

In its 2021 annual report, released April 21, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said India, Russia, Syria and Vietnam should be considered "countries of particular concern." Those nations have been found to have engaged in or permitted ongoing, systematic and egregious religious freedom violations.

USCIRF also asked that 10 countries designated by the State Department in December continue to be labeled in the same way: Myanmar, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Among the violations the commission highlighted were atrocities against Rohingya Muslims by Myanmar's military, persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses by Russia's government and China's detention of millions of Uyghurs and other Muslims in concentration camps.

During a virtual news conference announcing the report, commissioners of the independent watchdog expressed concerns about how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected global religious freedom.

They cited persecuted Christians in South Korea and Shiite Muslims in Pakistan who were targeted and scapegoated for the virus's spread and the use of anti-Semitic

imagery to protest European public health measures.

USCIRF Vice Chair Anurima Bhargava said commissioners also are concerned about religious prisoners of conscience as "COVID continues to ravage prisons and countries globally," but she added they were encouraged that some of those prisoners were released and placed under house arrest. Those included three prisoners in Vietnam, Yemen and Iran that commissioners had "adopted" to raise awareness about their detentions.

Leaders of the bipartisan commission criticized the Chinese Communist Party's hostility toward certain groups, including Tibetan Buddhists, Christians and Muslims. USCIRF Vice Chair Tony Perkins said such violations as well as its attempts to pressure U.S. and other international businesses to ignore its human rights abuses were among "the most troubling developments that we saw in 2020."

USCIRF also recommended 10 additional countries be added to the State Department's "special watch list": Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

The State Department included Cuba and Nicaragua on that second-tier list in December 2020.

USCIRF cited violations such as raids on Algeria's evangelical Protestant churches, Uzbekistan's continuing incarceration of about 2,000 religious prisoners and Indonesia's prosecutions for blasphemy.

Noting President Joe Biden's signing of a memorandum last week that could speed refugee admissions to the U.S., Bhargava said: "USCIRF urges the president and his administration to raise the refugee ceiling as soon as possible and prioritize survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution."

Commissioners also encouraged the Biden administration to fill vacancies in the State Department, including the roles of the international religious freedom ambassador, the coordinator for Tibetan issues and the envoy monitoring anti-Semitism.

The watchdog has removed recommendations it has previously made for three countries to be placed on the special watch list. It said Bahrain, the Central African Republic and Sudan continue to raise religious freedom concerns but did not meet

the list's threshold for designation.

USCIRF noted, for example, that Shiite Muslims were permitted to observe the Ashura holiday in 2020 with COVID-19 social distancing precautions. CAR saw a reduction in violence against people based on their religious identity. Sudan passed a law in July that repealed previous apostasy legislation, barred female genital mutilation and halted flogging for blasphemy.

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