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The U.S. Capitol is seen in Washington, D.C., July 24. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Kate Scanlon

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The U.S. should not retreat from its vital role in defending and promoting religious freedom around the globe, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urged in a March 25 event unveiling its 2025 annual report.

USCIRF, an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission that monitors religious freedom around the globe, released the report at an event in the Capitol complex.

That report said the second administration of President Donald Trump "faces a complex international environment in which to build on its previous success of centering religious freedom as a cornerstone of foreign policy and global leadership," and urging him to take certain actions including to promptly fill the role of ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, "who leads initiatives through the U.S. Department of State to highlight and address religious freedom concerns around the world."

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF commissioner and chair, said in remarks at the event that the change in presidential administrations "has involved policy shifts that will undoubtedly impact international religious freedom."

"This has included the suspension or cancellation of programs that Congress had funded specifically for (international religious freedom) related work, including emergency support to victims of religious regression, and we have likewise seen a suspension of refugee resettlement programs for those fleeing religious persecution in their countries of origin," he said.

"We at USCIRF encourage the new administration of Donald J. Trump to demonstrate the same or even greater commitment to advancing international religious freedom, as was so evident in his first administration," he added.

Multiple commissioners pointed to the agency's status as congressionally created when asked by OSV News if they are concerned about the potential of Tesla CEO Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, an unofficial task force with the stated intent of curbing federal spending, targeting it for cuts. But the report

contained signs of those cuts in its recommendations to Executive Branch entities. For example, multiple recommendations were made for tasks for the U.S. Agency for International Development, the government's now-shuttered humanitarian aid agency in countries around the globe.

One such recommendation was for "USAID and relevant U.S. embassies to support" efforts "to restore, preserve, and protect places of worship and other religious heritage sites in areas where they are particularly vulnerable or under threat," such as religious sites in Ukraine destroyed by Russia.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., also blasted a recent Trump administration action to shutter Voice of America and the privately incorporated international broadcasters it previously funded, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, as making the defense of religious freedom around the world more difficult.

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"But I have to tell you, I worry about the future. For its meticulous research, your report relies on the essential reporting of Radio Free Asia, on developments in China, Vietnam, and North Korea. The same with Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty in Russia, Turkmenistan and beyond," McGovern, who cited his own Catholic faith in his remarks, said, adding, "This is as shocking as it is self-defeating, and unless a bipartisan coalition in Congress can save them, these indispensable sources of independent information from within closed societies will disappear."

A bipartisan, bicameral group of lawmakers, including Catholic lawmakers like House Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., also issued a staunch defense of U.S. commitment to international religious freedom.

"Again this year, we see the heavy human toll taken by acceleration of the forces of autocracy, bigotry and violence," Pelosi said, citing threats to religious freedom, including the Chinese Communist Party's "genocide" of Uyghurs.

"Make no mistake, the freedom of worship is a bedrock human right," she said. "Indeed, it is a liberty that transcends borders and when it comes under threat, America has a sacred duty to speak out."

Pelosi cited three decades of work with Smith on international religious freedom issues, arguing, "support for international religious freedom has long been bipartisan and bicameral in the Congress."

"That is one thing that has brought us together all the time," she said.

In his own remarks, Smith pointed to his push for the State Department to redesignate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC.

"There have been more Christians killed in Nigeria than any other place in the world because of their faith, Muslims are being killed as well," he said. "If they speak up, they will be slaughtered as well by the radical Islamists, who unfortunately are not being combated by the government."
The cover of the report featured Bishop Rolando Álvarez, a Catholic prelate imprisoned and later exiled by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, whose regime has targeted Catholic and other faith communities who voiced opposition to his dictatorship.

That image, Schneck said, "illustrates both the destruction caused by violations of religious freedom and the perseverance of the persecuted," as well as "the depths of repression to which Nicaragua's Ortega Mario regime has sunk."

Nicaragua, Nigeria and China were among the 16 countries USCIRF recommended to Secretary of State Marco Rubio for designation as CPCs for particularly severe freedom of religion or belief violations under the International Religious Freedom Act. IRFA requires the U.S. government to designate CPCs annually, which are defined in law and policy as countries where governments either engage in or tolerate "particularly severe violations" of religious freedom. Non-state actors who engage in similar conduct are designated as "entities of particular concern."

The other countries on that list were Afghanistan, Burma, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.