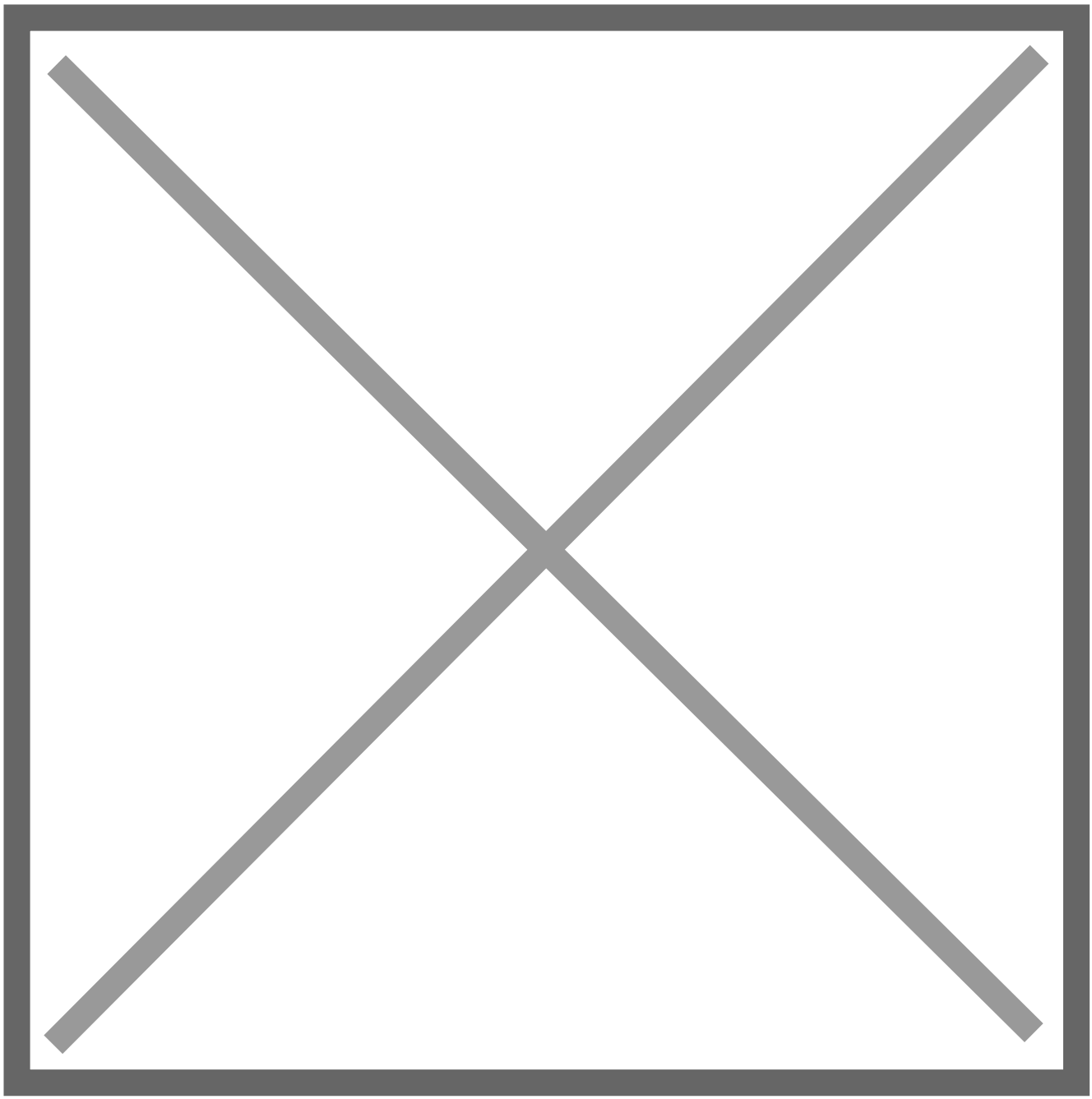
News



A file photo shows thousands of Christians at a rally in Jabalpur, central India, to protest against religious persecution. (OSV News/UCAN/Thomas Saji)

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Washington — January 16, 2026
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Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., a longtime champion of religious liberty, particularly in Tibet, proudly wears a bracelet of brown prayer beads, called mala, given to him by the Dalai Lama during a visit to India in 2024.

Their purpose, he told a hearing of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on Jan. 13, is to lower stress and anxiety.

"I want to see him soon to tell him they're not working," McGovern quipped.

"When human rights are decoupled from other rights, our efforts are less effective," he said.

The congressman's observations ranged from Vietnam, where he said the government continues to criminalize religious practice, to Nigeria, where more than 250 pupils and staff members were abducted from St. Mary's Catholic School in Papiri in November, to Catholic clergy not being permitted to enter certain Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, facilities to provide sacraments to Catholics detained there.

In Nigeria, all the children and staff were eventually freed before the end of December, but their abductors, believed to be members of a criminal gang, "have not been held accountable," McGovern said.

Although individual accounts are by now familiar to many, the purpose of the hearing, said Vicky Hartzler, a former congresswoman from Missouri and an

evangelical Christian who is currently chair of the commission, was to draw attention to what she called "a dark picture for religious freedom" with persecution of all faiths by official government policy.

She called China, where the government has targeted Catholics, "a stark illustration of just how far governments will go to restrict religion or belief."

Myanmar, a country also known as Burma, prohibits all religious gatherings, she observed, and more than 200 churches there have been destroyed, with 85 clergy members killed.

Rep. Mary Miller, R-Ill., praised President Donald Trump's administration for its decision in November to officially return Nigeria to the classification of Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations there. The CPC designation comes from the International Religious Freedom Act and allows the imposition of economic sanctions. Trump first imposed the designation in 2021 during his first administration, but President Joe Biden's administration revoked it the following year.

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On Christmas Day, Trump announced that the United States had bombed Islamist State militants in Nigeria. In a Truth Social post, he said the airstrikes responded to attacks which "have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians" in Northern Nigeria and the country's Middle Belt region.

"It's evident that human rights abuses in Nigeria" have only one purpose, and that is to extend the sectarian fighting there, said Rep. John Rose, R-Tenn. "And the United States is no longer turning a blind eye to this violence."

"The United States is not powerless in the face of this persecution," said Asif Mahmood, vice chair of the commission, as well as a doctor and human rights activist in California. Moves by governments "to harass, imprison or mistreat Christians on the basis of their faith," he said, is also a violation of international law.

Grace Jin Drexel, daughter of Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri, who shepherds the independent Zion Church of Beijing, said the arrest of her father, who has been detained by the government since last October, and those of 30 others "came from centralized

government planning."

"Many watched parents handcuffed and dragged off in the middle of the night," she said.

Another witness at the hearing was Catholic researcher Martha Patricia Molina, whose report, "Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church" is now in its seventh edition. Pope Leo IV received the latest version in December.

Speaking through an interpreter, Molina said that not only has President Daniel Ortega's ban on religious processions intensified in Nicaragua since 2022, but also that the faithful at Masses "cannot pray out loud."

There is now a shortage of priests because of the fear of the government punishing or exiling them, and as a result, Catholics "don't get to go to confession regularly," she said.

A choir member there was arrested "simply for sharing a video of himself singing at Mass," she said. "Altar boys are harassed by Nicaraguan police and forced to sign documents they don't understand."