

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 30, 2014 at 8:12am

Top brass say they're not aware of bias against military chaplains

by Adelle M. Banks by Religion News Service

Washington — Lawmakers peppered Pentagon officials Wednesday about claims that military chaplains have faced discrimination for their beliefs, and time and again, chaplains and personnel officials said they were unaware of any bias.

Virginia Penrod, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military personnel policy, told the House Subcommittee on Military Personnel that she could not cite specific instances where chaplains had to preach a sermon or oversee a ceremony that conflicted with their beliefs.

"There's absolutely nothing in policy or code that prohibits a chaplain from praying according to the dictates of their faith," she said.

In recent years, conservative activists have complained that some military chaplains have been restricted in fully preaching their beliefs or have been muzzled or forced to follow policies they disagree with.

The hearing came a week after the Pentagon released an updated "instruction" on accommodating religious practices. Additional updates, including specific policies about chaplains, will be completed this summer, Penrod said.

Members of the panel questioned whether military commanders are allowed to proselytize. Brig. Gen. Charles R. Bailey, the Army's deputy chief of chaplains, said it would be "wrong" for commanders to say that their faith is superior to any other, but other kinds of private conversations about faith are permitted.

"They're never told they cannot share their own personal faith of any sort," he said.

Some members of Congress seem to have a different impression from the military's top chaplains about the state of religious accommodation in the military, said Bishop James Magness of the Episcopal church's armed services office.

"There's a real disconnect," Magness said, "if things are being said to members of Congress that are not getting to the chiefs of chaplains. I don't have a reason for why."

Sikhs concerned about the need for greater accommodation showed up at the packed hearing room and provided written statements to the committee saying a "presumptive ban on Sikh articles of faith" remains in the new policy. The military has said that Sikhs, who wear turbans and beards in accordance with their faith, must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Rep. Joe Heck, R-Nev., expressed concern that Sikhs "still require a new waiver every time there's a change of assignment."

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Penrod said the military "tries to balance the needs of the service member with the needs for mission accomplishment."

Army Maj. Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi, who attended the hearing in his camouflage turban, said afterward that Sikhs will continue to petition Congress and the military to change the policy to prevent Sikhs from having to "choose between God and country. Nobody should be put into that situation."

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