

Religious Freedom Is Moral, Strategic Concern for U.S.

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer | 20 May 2013



In its annual report, the United States documents how governments around the world protect the human right of religious freedom.

Washington — Attacks on religious freedom are both a moral and a strategic national security concern for the United States, says U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

During a May 20 press briefing for the release of the 2012 *International Religious Freedom Report*, Kerry said, “When countries undermine or attack religious freedom, they not only unjustly threaten those whom they target; they also threaten their country's own stability, and we see that in so many places.”

The report, which assesses the religious freedom — or lack thereof — in nearly 200 countries and territories, is “a demonstration of the abiding commitment of the American people and the entire U.S. government to the advancement of freedom of religion worldwide,” he said.

Enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, freedom of religion is “a core American value,” Kerry said, but it “is not an American invention.” Freedom of religion, he said, is “a universal value.”

“The freedom to profess and practice one's faith, to believe or not to believe, or to change one's beliefs, that is a birthright of every human being,” Kerry said. “These rights are rightly recognized under international law.

“The promotion of international religious freedom is a priority for President Obama and it is a priority for me as secretary of state,” Kerry said. “I am making certain, and will continue to, that religious freedom remains an integral part of our global diplomatic engagement.”

The State Department’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report*, Kerry said, “is a clear-eyed, objective look at the state of religious freedom around the world,” but he acknowledged that it will displease some governments.

“When necessary, yes, it does directly call out some of our close friends, as well as some countries with whom we seek stronger ties,” the secretary said. “And it does so in order to try to make progress, even though we know that it may cause some discomfort.”

Kerry added that, “while this report underscores the challenges to religious freedom, it is also true that it is harder than ever to restrict human freedom.

“It has never been easier,” he said, “in all of human history, for people to share their views, to find information, to connect with others, even to send messages of desperation that ask for help or that shed light on abuses that are taking place because of instant communication. So while serious challenges to religious freedom remain, I also could not be more optimistic about the prospects for freedom around the world because there are great prospects for accountability around the world.”

Among the serious challenges to religious freedom in the world today is evidence of “the potential rise of anti-Semitism,” he said. To meet this challenge, Kerry announced his appointment of Ira Forman to the position of special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism.

Another troubling trend identified in the 2012 report is the increasing use of laws governing blasphemy and apostasy, the secretary said.

“These laws are frequently used to repress dissent, to harass political opponents and to settle personal vendettas,” Kerry said. “Laws such as these violate fundamental freedoms of expression and religion, and we believe they ought to be repealed.”

Suzan Johnson Cook, U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, noted that among the findings of the most recent report is that “many governments failed to prosecute the perpetrators of crimes motivated by religious animosity, creating a climate of impunity that fueled further discrimination and violence.”

“Societal intolerance against religious minorities is on the rise,” Cook said. “Too often this intolerance finds expression in acts of violence, vandalism and desecration.”

In its work to promote religious tolerance worldwide, the United States partners with members of international communities to support religious freedom, to protect religious minorities and to safeguard freedom of expression,” Cook said. “We particularly advocate engaging women and youth on religious freedom, as their voices are a positive force for change,” she said.

The goal, Cook said, is “that people will take small steps for progress, because what we ultimately want is religious freedom for all in every country.”

The full text of the 2012 *International Religious Freedom Report* is available on the website for the State Department’s [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#). Also see the State Department fact sheet [U.S. Policy and Programs in Support of International Religious Freedom](#).