



*International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief*

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Good morning,

Thank you for inviting me to address the 9<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Alliance. On behalf of team at the Religious Freedom Institute, thank you for your work on behalf of religious liberty and other associated fundamental freedoms.

The mission of the Religious Freedom Institute is to achieve broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, the cornerstone of a successful society, a source of individual and social flourishing, and a driver of national and international security. Thus, it is appropriate that we reflect on the state of religious freedom in the world, especially in our own hemisphere, today.

Today, August 22, has been designated by the UN General Assembly as the “International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.”<sup>1</sup> In proclaiming this day of remembrance, the UN expressed serious concerns with:

...continuing acts of intolerance and violence based on religion or belief against individuals, including against persons belonging to religious communities and religious minorities around the world, and at the increasing number and intensity of such incidents, which are often of a criminal nature and may have international characteristics...

Sadly, we live in a world that has become less, rather than more, free in recent years: more restrictions on liberties such as religion, assembly, speech, and the press; and, more persecution in some regions based on religious identity, religious conviction, and religious practice.

There are at least two main types of religious persecution. The first is perpetrated *by those in power* claiming a religious justification for harming others. The second is the targeting of individuals or communities for persecution: they are *victims because of their religion*. We have seen examples of both in recent years, such as:

- the *government* of the People’s Republic of China persecutes people of faith, particularly Muslims and Christians, because religious adherence calls into question absolute subservience to the rule of the Communist Party.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: August 21 is a UN-designated day commemorating the victims of terrorism.

- in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan we see a cycle of violence that includes repression, extra-judicial killing, and terrorism, pitting *people* of different ethno-religious groups against one another.
- in Nigeria, terrorists have killed well over 100,000 Nigerian citizens in the past 15 years. Shockingly, Nigeria's Middle Belt has become one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian, with over 4,000 Christians brutally killed in each of the past three years.
- of course, Islamist terrorists such as Daesh (ISIS), Boko Haram, and al Qaeda, exemplify the worst of the worst: cabals that use explicit religious justifications to undergird their authority to enact violence, while denominating persecuted classes based on their religious identity. They insidiously called their strategy the "purification" of the land, but we know what it really is: ethno-religious cleansing and, in some cases the genocide, of peoples, their histories, and cultural heritage sites based on their religious identity.

Our own hemisphere is not immune to religious persecution.

- In some Cuba, onerous legal restrictions are designed to put religious people at jeopardy of breaking the law, and then those citizens are hounded by the police, fined, and jailed.
- Nicaragua's Ortega regime is notorious for stripping people of their citizenship, banishing them from the country, and the imprisonment of priests and others who speak out against the regime's crimes and corruption.
- Venezuela has seen a surge of anti-Semitism, due in large part to government propaganda that is anti-Jewish and anti-Israel. In Venezuela, like Cuba and Nicaragua, religious figures, both clergy and laity, have been investigated, harassed, and in some cases indicted and punished for taking public stands against corruption.

In every one of the cases that I have mentioned, there are victims of violence based on religion or belief. Although we often don't know their names, they are not nameless. They were the children of parents. They were someone's friend or sibling. They were real people with real hopes and dreams.

The UN declaration for this *International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief* notes

...that States have the primary responsibility to promote and protect human rights, including the human rights of persons belonging to religious minorities, including their right to exercise their religion or belief freely, (and that)

that freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of association are interdependent, interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and these rights can play [a role] in the fight against all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief...

In other words, religious freedom is critical to peace and security in our hemisphere.

So, what is to be done? One important way to commemorate the victims is to take action to blunt religious persecution and work to end it once and for all. Allow me to suggest a number of specific action items.

First, governments and civil society agencies should systematically implement best practices that integrate religious freedom into human rights, humanitarian, and diplomatic protocols. For example, RFI and Open Doors International recently spearheaded a [protocol](#) for addressing religious freedom violations, which mainly helps refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers.

Second, governments, such as those involved with the annual International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, should publish a formal outcome document signed by participating governments. Such a move would encourage governments to formally commit and collaborate with other entities to achieve the universality of religious freedom rights.

Third, efforts should be made to replicate the annual Washington, DC-based International Religious Freedom Summit in cities across the United States and elsewhere. This will connect local citizens to diaspora communities in their own neighborhood: former refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who have come to the U.S. fleeing persecution and seeking a better life.

Fourth, we must take vigilant action about de-programming, de-platforming, and other restrictions in the sphere of electronic communications. Religious freedom advocates should make every effort to engage governments on all egregious violations of expression, speech, and press while simultaneously investing in and investigating alternative platforms for finance, records, distribution of materials, and communication.

Finally, the hedonistic, anti-faith, revolutionary, and nihilistic messages reverberating across the media and social media are anti-religious and anti-freedom. Because of this threat, religious freedom advocates must pursue an international, collaborative investment in legacy and social media to shape positive attitudes toward religion and religious freedom.

Religious freedom is under threat across the world. Yet, because of the shared experience that religion engenders in all of us, that of humanity's natural impulse to search for truth, we have a fighting chance to turn the tide.

Today we mourn the victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, and we resolve to work toward a better future for our neighbors and our children.

Thank you very much.