



March 20, 2018

The Honorable Ambassador Sam Brownback
Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom
The Office of International Religious Freedom
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Ambassador Brownback:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation. As you are aware, Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) is a movement that campaigns for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all. AIUSA has more than a million members and activists in all 50 states.

We were glad to hear your recent comments spotlighting the gravity of the crisis facing Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Rakhine State. We're grateful for your taking time to discuss this issue with our colleagues earlier this week.

Since the founding of our movement, Amnesty International has campaigned all around the world for thousands of prisoners of conscience - someone who has not used or advocated violence but is imprisoned because of who they are or what they believe.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss AIUSA's global religious freedom concerns. Could you kindly suggest several times that would fit your schedule in the coming weeks?

For your convenience, we have outlined below some of the core issues we would like to raise.

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL – RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PRIORITIES

AFRICA

The Central African Republic: The civil war in the Central African Republic started in December 2012 and has continued involving parties of government, rebels from the Muslim Seleka coalition and the Christian Anti-balaka militias. The conflict has been marked by systematic human right abuses by all parties. The armed groups continued to fight for territorial control and target civilians, humanitarian workers and peacekeepers. Experts estimate that more than 1.1 million people have fled their homes in a country of about 5 million people, the highest figure ever recorded in the Central African Republic.

Nigeria: In Northeastern Nigeria, the armed group Boko Haram has targeted government institutions like schools, post offices and police station. While the organization is most famous for its attacks on two Christian girls' schools, in Chibok in 2014 and Yobe in 2018, it has victimized members of all communities. Unfortunately, the Nigerian security forces' response to Boko Haram attacks is marred with arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture, and other ill-treatment, resulting in scores of deaths. At least 340 detainees have died in 2017. The government has failed to address religious tensions fueling the conflict and its efforts to build bridges between Muslim and Christian have been limited and unconvincing.

ASIA

Myanmar: The Myanmar military has committed crimes against humanity in northern Rakhine State where the army burned entire Muslim Rohingya villages, killed adults and children, and raped women and girls. The mass human rights violations forced more than 655,000 Rohingya to escape persecution by fleeing to Bangladesh. Those who remained in Myanmar continued to live under a regime amounting to apartheid in which their rights, including to equality before the law and freedom of movement, as well as access to health, education and work, were severely restricted.

Indonesia: In Indonesia, blasphemy provisions in Articles 156 and 156(a) of the Criminal Code and Article 28(2) of the ITE Law were used to imprison those who peacefully exercised

their rights to freedom of religion and belief. Individuals belonging to minority religions or faiths or holding minority beliefs were often targeted for prosecution. By the end of 2017, at least 30 prisoners of conscience remained in detention for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression or of religion and belief. At least 11 people were convicted under blasphemy laws.

EURASIA

Kazakhstan: Authorities in Kazakhstan have violated religious freedoms by detaining religious persons, restricting registration of religious groups, and passing laws that inhibit freedom of worship. Religious Muslims and Christian minorities (e.g. Jehova’s Witnesses and Baptists) are especially vulnerable to government repression. In 2017, courts in Kazakhstan handed down at least 24 criminal convictions to individuals exercising their freedom of belief. Only Muslim groups associated with the state controlled “Spiritual Administration”, are permitted to register and operate. Commonplace religious activities, such as “conducting religious rites”, “publishing religious literature”, and “teaching religion” are strictly regulated. The Trump administration has announced its plans to end the provisions of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment. The Office of International Religious Freedom should ensure that Kazakhstan takes steps to improve its record on freedom of religion prior the establishment of Permanent Normal Trade Relations.

Uzbekistan: In Uzbekistan, officials have routinely used anti-terrorism legislation to target religious Muslims who peacefully practice their religion. Members of Protestant denominations similarly faced raids on their places of worship and confiscation of their religious materials. The United States Department of State has designated Uzbekistan as a “Country of Particular Concern” over its violations of religious freedom. The 2016 leadership transition in Uzbekistan has created a potential thaw, with President Mirziyoyev ordering the release of numerous detainees. State Department officials should take advantage of this “Uzbek thaw” to press authorities to lift restrictions on freedom of belief.

LATIN AMERICA

Brazil: Throughout 2017, religious centers of Umbanda and Candomblé, two Afro-descendant religions, suffered several attacks by private individuals, criminal gangs and members of other faiths. In August and September, at least eight centers were attacked and destroyed, most of them in Rio de Janeiro city and surrounding municipalities in the Baixada Fluminense region. As the State Department reactivates U.S. – Brazil collaboration on Social Inclusion, it should use the process to raise concerns about violence against practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Iran: Iranian authorities continue to impose codes of public conduct rooted in a strict interpretation of Shi'a Islam on individuals of all faiths. Members of the Baha'i minority suffer widespread and systematic attacks. Non-believers and Christian converts risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and the death penalty for "apostasy". Sunni Muslims continued to report discrimination. Other religious minorities not recognized under the Constitution, such as Yaresan (Ahl-e Haq), also faced systematic discrimination, including in education and employment, and were persecuted for practicing their faith.

Yemen: In Sana'a and other areas under their control, the Huthis and their allies continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain members of the Baha'i community, subjecting many to enforced disappearance. Five Baha'i men remained in detention at the end of the year. One of the men had been held for nearly four years, accused by the Huthis of apostasy, which carries the death penalty under Yemeni law.