

State Department raps China on religious rights: Eight countries cited in all

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The U.S. State Department, in its annual report on international religious freedom, has admonished several Asian nations, including China, for severely repressing religion.

Listing “countries of particular concern” that engage in or tolerate “particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” the report highlights everything from government persecution to patriotic education campaigns designed to extirpate religion.

The eight countries of particular concern cited in the report issued September 19 are Myanmar (formerly Burma), China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan.

China rejected the U.S. analysis four days later. “China is strongly dissatisfied and resolutely opposed to the U.S. accusation in its religious freedom report,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu said, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

The State Department report, mandated by federal law, has been compiled by diplomats and human rights activists every year since 1999.

“In exposing injustice, this report lights a candle—an 800-page candle—that we trust will encourage justice and greater respect for the rights of religious believers across the globe,” said John V. Hanford, U.S. ambassador at large for religious freedom.

Despite sanctions and diplomacy, China’s suppression of religious freedom intensified in the past year, especially prior to the Olympic Games, the report says.

Churches were closed, foreigners detained, Falon Gong practitioners arrested and possibly killed, Muslims prohibited from taking the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and Buddhist monks forced to undergo “patriotic education” campaigns, according to the report.

Ambassador Hanford said the harsh treatment of Buddhist monks in Tibet was a “major factor” in the March riots in the Himalayan region, during which dozens were killed.

The “patriotic education” campaigns, which force monks and nuns to study communist texts and denounce the Dalai Lama, “need to cease.” Added Hanford: “The government must not interfere in naming Buddhist lamas, or leading teachers. This should be the prerogative of religious leaders, not of a government.” -*Religion News Service*