

Activists bemoan low priority given to religious freedom

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Religious freedom advocates on Wednesday (Oct. 26) lamented America's failure to protect the faithful abroad, saying things have gotten worse, not better, since the issue first gained traction more than a decade ago.

The soul-searching session, sponsored by the conservative Family Research Council, brought together panelists from government, academia and nonprofit groups who painted a dismal global picture of religious persecution, and weak U.S. attempts to combat it.

"What a parade of horrors," said Georgetown University professor Thomas Farr, shaking his head at the statistics and anecdotes reeled off by other panelists: Coptic Christians massacred in Egypt, dissidents jailed in China, a pastor burned to death in Nigeria.

Farr, who in 1999 became the State Department's first point man on international religious freedom, added another sobering statistic: According to a 2011 study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 70 percent of the world lives in countries with high restrictions on religion.

That same Pew study showed religious persecution on the rise globally, a trend all the more discouraging to panelists because Congress in 1998 passed the International Religious Freedom Act, which aimed to boost U.S. efforts to help religious freedom bloom abroad.

"The situation has grown so much worse in the past 13 years," said Tina Ramirez, director of international and government relations at the Washington-based Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

And though forum organizers came down particularly hard on the Obama administration for failing to prioritize religious freedom, panelists also found fault with his two predecessors, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

The view from the White House is more optimistic. Joshua DuBois, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said the administration's record on defending the dignity of people with different religious backgrounds has been "extraordinarily strong."

"It's an issue of deep passion for the president and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton," he said.

Dubois pointed to Obama's appointment of an interagency working group on religious freedom at the White House to assure that the issue is not isolated in one office. "They are reaching out across government and saying that religious freedom is everyone's responsibility," he said.

At the forum, several panelists said U.S. foreign policymakers at the very least need to speak more strongly against the abuse of religious minorities.

Elyse Anderson, foreign policy director for Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., one of the staunchest congressional advocates for religious freedom, acknowledged circumstances abroad can often supersede the United States' ability to improve the lot of oppressed religious groups.

"Our leverage may be limited," she said, "but it most certainly exists."

To that end, she suggested making U.S. foreign aid conditional on measurable improvements in religious freedom.

Farr said training on protecting religious freedom should be mandatory for Foreign Service officers, and said the ambassador-at-large for religious freedom should report directly to the secretary of state.

But most importantly, Farr continued, the U.S. needs to embrace the strategic reasons to safeguard religious freedom abroad, because humanitarian appeals for the oppressed have failed.

Farr called for making explicit connections between religious freedom and counterterrorism, pointing to research showing that religiously tolerant societies

make poor breeding grounds for terrorists.

What if Osama bin Laden had been raised not in an intolerant Saudi Arabia, Farr asked, but one in which Saudis were exposed to a marketplace of religious thought? "Would 9/11 have happened?"