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Mike Pompeo

Address at the First Annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom

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Thank you, Secretary Pompeo. To the Secretary, to Ambassador Brownback, to Administrator Green, Director Mulvaney, to the representatives of more than 80 nations gathered here, and especially to the survivors of religious persecution who honor us by their presence here today: It is my great honor to address this first ever, and first annual, Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom.

And I bring greetings from a champion of religious freedom, at home and abroad. I bring greetings this morning, and gratitude for all the efforts represented here, from the 45th President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump.

As President Trump has said on many occasions, the United States of America is a "nation of faith," and religious freedom is a top priority of this Administration.



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Since the earliest days of our nation, America has stood for religious freedom. Our earliest settlers left their homes to set sail for a New World, where they could practice their faith without fear of persecution. Our forebears carved protections for religion into the founding charters and their early laws.

And after this great nation secured our independence, the American Founders enshrined religious freedom as the first freedom in the Constitution of the United States. And America has always, and will always, lead the world by our example.

As our first President, George Washington, wrote in his famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, he said, and I quote, "The United States of America [has] given to mankind...a policy worthy of imitation," for here, as he said, "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." We "require only that they who live under [our] protection should demean themselves as good citizens."

And in the long history of this nation, religious freedom has been our first freedom. But as our Founders knew, this precious liberty is endowed not by government, but by our Creator. And we believe that it belongs not just to the American people, but to all people so endowed.

The right to believe or not believe is the most fundamental of freedoms. When religious liberty is denied or destroyed, we know that other freedoms -- freedom of speech, of press, assembly, and even democratic institutions themselves -- are imperiled.

That's why the United States of America stands for religious freedom yesterday, today, and always. We do this because it is right. But we also do this because religious freedom is in the interest of the peace and security of the world.

Those nations that reject religious freedom breed radicalism and resentment in their citizens. They sow the seeds of violence within their borders -- violence that often spills over into their neighbors and across the world.

And as history has shown too many times, those who deny religious freedom for their own people have no qualms trampling upon the rights of other people, undermining security and peace across the wider world.



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Let me single out a few great American leaders today for their efforts to advance religious liberty around the world. First and foremost, let me invite you to thank the United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, for bringing together this historic ministerial.

By bringing together 80 nations, the Secretary of State put feet on President Trump's ambition to make religious liberty a priority of the United States on the world stage. Mr. Secretary, we are grateful.

I also want to mention the extraordinary efforts and travels of the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, a lifelong champion of religious liberty, Sam Brownback. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

As the Secretary and Ambassador Brownback know, while the discussions that have taken place this week are promising, we have much work to do. For today, tragically, a stunning 83 percent of the world's population live in nations where religious freedom is either threatened or even banned.

The victims of religious persecution face economic sanctions. They're often arrested and imprisoned. They're the target of mob violence and state-sanctioned terror. And all too often, those whose beliefs run counter to their rulers face not just persecution but death.

The list of religious freedom violators is long; their crimes and oppressions span the width of our world. Here in our own hemisphere, in Nicaragua, the government of Daniel Ortega is virtually waging war on the Catholic Church. For months, Nicaragua's bishops have sought to broker a national dialogue following pro-democracy protests that swept through the country earlier this year. But government-backed mobs armed with machetes, and even heavy weapons, have attacked parishes and church properties, and bishops and priests have been physically assaulted by the police.

We're joined today by Father Raul Zamora, who shepherds a flock at Divine Mercy Church and is a hero of the faith. Last week, the Ortega government laid siege to his church after more than 200 students sought shelter there, and 2 students lost their lives. They joined the more than 350 courageous Nicaraguans who've died in the cause of freedom this year alone.



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Let me say to you, Father: Our prayers are with you, and the people of America stand with you for freedom of religion and freedom in Nicaragua.

Farther from home, but close to our hearts, religious persecution is growing in both scope and scale in the world's most populous country, the People's Republic of China. The State Department's annual International Religious Freedom report has labeled China as a religious freedom violator every year since 1999. Together with other religious minorities, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians are often under attack.

With us today is Kusho Golog Jigme, a Tibetan Buddhist monk. For nearly 70 years, the Tibetan people have been brutally repressed by the Chinese government. Kusho was jailed and tortured after he spoke out against the Chinese rule in his homeland. While he escaped China, his people's fight to practice their religion and protect their culture goes on. I say to Kusho, we are honored by your presence and we admire your courage and your stand for liberty.

Sadly, as we speak as well, Beijing is holding hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, of Uyghur Muslims in so-called "re-education camps," where they're forced to endure around-the-clock political indoctrination and to denounce their religious beliefs and their cultural identity as the goal.

But for all of China's abuses, their neighbor in North Korea is much worse. While we all hope that relations between the United States and North Korea continue to improve, and we certainly hope that the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic weapons program can be eliminated, there is no escaping the plain fact that North Korea's leadership has exacted unparalleled privation and cruelty upon its people for decades.

Torture, mass starvation, public executions, murders, and even forced abortions, and industrial-scale slave labor have been the means by which that regime has retained hold on its power for more than 70 years. Today, as we gather at this ministerial, an estimated 130,000 North Koreans are imprisoned for life in unimaginably brutal slave labor camps.

Contrasted with a thriving Christian community in South Korea, North Korea's persecution of Christians has no rival on the Earth.



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It is unforgiving, systematic, unyielding and often fatal. The mere possession of a Christian Bible is a capital offense. And those identified by the regime as Christians are regularly executed or condemned with their families to North Korea's gulags.

That's what happened to Ji Hyeona, who is here with us, and who I had the honor to meet when I traveled to the region earlier this year. Ji Hyeona was imprisoned and tortured simply for having a Bible that her mother had given her. And after a failed escape attempt, the North Korean authorities forced her to abort her unborn child. Hyeona was lucky enough to escape with her life, and we are honored to have you with us today. Your faith and your courage inspire us all.

In Russia, more than 170,000 Jehovah's Witnesses face similar persecution to other countries around the world. They're legally banned from practicing their faith. Government agents have seized Jehovah Witnesses' headquarters near St. Petersburg, raided their prayer halls across the country, and arrested and imprisoned scores of believers.

And turning our attention to the leading state sponsor of terror, the Islamic Republic of Iran, we recognize that the Iranian people enjoy few, if any, freedoms -- least of all, the freedom of religion.

Christians, Jews, Sunnis, Baha'is, and other minority religious groups are denied the most basic rights enjoyed by the Shia majority, and they are routinely fined, flogged, arrested, assaulted, and even killed. In 2016 alone, 20 Sunni Kurds were executed for the crime of allegedly "waging war against God," simply for practicing their faith.

And the people of the United States of America have a message to the long-suffering people of Iran: Even as we stand strong against the threats and malign actions of your leaders in Tehran, know that we are with you. We pray for you. And we urge you, the good people of Iran, to press on with courage in the cause of freedom and a peaceful future for your people.

While religious freedom is always in danger in authoritarian regimes, threats to religious minorities are not confined to autocracies or dictatorships. They can, and do, arise in free societies, as well -- not from government persecution, but from prejudice and hatred.



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In Europe, where religious freedom was born as a principle and is enshrined in law, sadly, religious intolerance is on the rise in many quarters. Just 70 years after the Holocaust, attacks on Jews, even on aging Holocaust survivors, are growing at an alarming rate.

Last year, hate crimes against Jews hit a record high in the United Kingdom. And in the same period of time, there were an average of nearly four attacks against Jews every day.

In France and Germany, things have gotten so bad that Jewish religious leaders have warned their followers not to wear kippahs in public for fear that they could be violently attacked, and in too many cases, that's exactly what's happened. From the 2012 murder of four small children outside their Jewish school in Toulouse, to the 2016 terrorist assault on a Paris kosher supermarket, the world has watched in horror as these attacks on Jewish people have taken place.

It is remarkable to think that within the very lifetimes of some French Jews -- the same French Jews that were forced by the Nazis to wear identifiable Jewish clothing -- that some of those same people are now being warned by their democratic leaders not to wear identifiable Jewish clothing. These acts of violence and hatred and anti-Semitism must end.

There are many more examples across the world. And while they're all deserving our attention, we must never forget the barbarism and the violence committed by the terrorists of ISIS and the magnitude of their acts.

ISIS has shown a savagery unseen in the Middle East since the Middle Ages. And across the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and beyond, ISIS continues to seek to subjugate and eradicate all who would reject its apocalyptic mania. And believers of many backgrounds have suffered grievously at its hands, including Muslims, Christians, Druze, and many others.

But perhaps no faith community was so cruelly targeted by ISIS as the Yazidis. Nadia Murad is with us today. Four years ago, the butchers of ISIS entered her village and slaughtered more than 600 Yazidi men and boys, including six of Nadia's brothers and stepbrothers. Then they stole Nadia away and all the young women, and subjugated them to the most degrading form of human slavery.



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Nadia was brutalized by ISIS fighters during her captivity. She was only able to escape because her captor left a door unlocked, and a neighboring family hid her until she could be smuggled to safety.

But too many of her Yazidi sisters weren't so lucky, and thousands of Yazidis remain missing to this day or in ISIS captivity. To Nadia, I say: We are honored by your presence. We are inspired by your courage. And the United States of America, I promise you, will always call ISIS brutality what it truly is: It is genocide, plain and simple. Nadia, thank you for being with us and for your courage.

The suffering of the Yazidi people, and all the victims of ISIS has sickened the American people and mobilized this President and this Administration to action.

From the very first days of this Administration, President Trump directed our military to take decisive action, along with our coalition partners to confront ISIS. And thanks to the courage of our armed forces, I am proud to report that ISIS is on the run, their caliphate has fallen, and I promise you, we will not rest or relent until ISIS is driven from the face of the Earth.

But victory in combat is only half the battle. That's why our Administration has already devoted more than \$110 million to support persecuted religious communities to rebuild across the Middle East.

The United States is also committed to ensure that religious freedom and religious pluralism prosper across the Middle East as well. To that end, America is launching a new initiative that will not only deliver additional support to the most vulnerable communities, but we trust that it will also embolden civil society to help stop violence in the future. And it's my privilege as Vice President to announce today that the United States of America will establish the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program, effective today.

Under this new program, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development will closely partner with local faith and community leaders to rapidly deliver aid to persecuted communities, beginning with Iraq. Crucially, this support will flow directly to individuals and households most in need of help.



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And this program will bring together funding not only from the United States government, but from the vast network of American philanthropists and believers who share our desire to support our brothers-and-sisters-in-faith as they rebuild after years of suffering and war.

America will help the victims of ISIS reclaim their lands, rebuild their lives, and replant their roots in their ancient homelands so that all religions can flourish, once again, across the Middle East and the ancient world.

America will always stand for religious freedom, and we will always speak out boldly wherever and whenever it's threatened. To that end as well, the United States is also launching a new initiative to leverage our resources, together with other nations, to support those who fight for religious freedom and suffer from religious persecution. And today, I'm also pleased, as Vice President, to announce that the United States will launch the new International Religious Freedom Fund.

America is proud to launch and support this program. And we're earnest in our appeal to all the nations gathered here and around the world that you might join us in this fund. Together, we will champion the cause of liberty as never before, and I believe that our combined leadership will make a difference for freedom of faith, for generations to come.

We will never lose sight of the true importance of religious freedom. It's about beliefs, it's about faith, and discovering truth, and the ability to live out that truth in one's life. It's also about community and communal responsibility. It's about the unalienable right to believe what we wish and not be disturbed for that belief. It is, in a very real sense, the first freedom, the first freedom of everyone in the world.

To all the victims of persecution who are here with us today, many of whose stories I've had the opportunity to tell and those that I have not, know this: We are with you. The people of the United States are inspired by your testimony and your strength and your faith. And it steels our resolve to stand for your religious liberty in the years ahead.

But as we gather today, there's one victim of religious persecution that bears mentioning as well. A victim of persecution who is not with us -- an American named Pastor Andrew Brunson.



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Pastor Andrew Brunson is an American citizen who's lived in Turkey for more than two decades, raising his family there, and sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, faithfully, in his ministry.

In 2016, Pastor Brunson was arrested by Turkish authorities, as part of a massive crackdown following a failed coup attempt. Tens of thousands of journalists, activists, judges, army officers, teachers, and others were arrested and remain imprisoned to this day.

Pastor Brunson was imprisoned without being charged for more than a year. And when the Turkish government finally indicted him, they accused him, allegedly, of "dividing and separating" Turkey by simply spreading his Christian faith.

Pastor Andrew Brunson is an innocent man. There is no credible evidence against him. Our entire Administration has worked tirelessly to secure Pastor Brunson's release.

Yesterday, Turkey released Pastor Brunson from prison, only to place him under house arrest. This is a welcome first step, but it is not good enough.

I spoke to Pastor Brunson and his wife Norine yesterday. I know that his faith will sustain him, but it shouldn't have to. Pastor Andrew Brunson deserves to be free.

Today, we're honored to be joined by a member of his family, his daughter Jacqueline. To Jacqueline, I promise you: As I told your father yesterday, President Trump and I will continue to fight to secure your father's full release until he is restored to your family and returns to the United States of America.

To believers across America, I say: Pray for Pastor Brunson. While he is out of jail, he is still not free.

And to President Erdogan and the Turkish government, I have a message on behalf of the President of the United States of America: Release Pastor Andrew Brunson now, or be prepared to face the consequences. If Turkey does not take immediate action to free this innocent man of faith and send him home to America, the United States will impose significant sanctions on Turkey until Pastor Andrew Brunson is free.



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So thank you again for being here today -- all of the distinguished Americans who are here, all the representatives of 80 countries, and these extraordinary and courageous men and women of faith who join us here to put a face on the reality of religious persecution in the world.

We have discussed much here, and we know we have much work to do in the days ahead. But as we labor, I think we can take confidence from what we have heard in this place and the determination of the nations gathered here to advance a cause of religious liberty. Our cause is just. We're advancing the first freedom that is essential to the people of all of our nations and to the world.

In America, we prove every day that religious freedom buttresses all other rights. It provides a foundation on which a society can thrive.

Here, in America, believers of all backgrounds live side-by-side, adding their unique voices to the chorus of our nation, proving that religious freedom means not only the right to practice one faith; it lays a foundation for boundless opportunity, prosperity, security, and peace.

The American people will always cherish religious freedom. And we will always stand with people across the world who stand for their faith.

So today, I want to close with faith. Faith in the good people of this nation of faith, the United States of America. And from our founding, have cherished that foundation of belief and cherish it still.

Faith in our President, whose deep commitment to religious liberty at home and abroad has been evident every day of this Administration.

Faith in all of you and the nations represented here, and your renewed commitment to the cause of religious liberty in your nations and around the world.

And I also close with faith that, from this renewed beginning today, we will make progress on behalf of religious liberty in the years ahead. And my faith ultimately comes from what's in my heart.



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And in the ancient words inscribed on our Liberty Bell, displayed in Philadelphia, the words of the ancient text of Leviticus that read, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, and unto [all] the inhabitants thereof." We've done it throughout our history. And I know that as each one of us renew our commitment to proclaim liberty throughout all of our lands, that freedom will prevail, for as the Bible tells us, "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." So freedom always wins when Faith in Him is held high.

So thank you all. Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for your partnership.

May God bless you and your nations.

May God bless all who yearn for freedom and labor beneath persecution.

And may God bless the United States of America.