

## UPF Washington, D.C. Takes Leading Role in Religious Freedom Summit

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**Washington, D.C., USA** -- UPF was one of the main partner organizations supporting the International Religious Freedom Summit 2023.

Religious freedom advocates from around the world attended the third IRF Summit, which was held on January 31 and February 1, 2023, in the Washington Hilton Hotel.

The summit attracted many senior U.S. politicians, such as former U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, high-level State Department officials, religious freedom rapporteurs from various nations, and many of the world's top religious freedom experts, such as Dr. Ján Figel' from Slovakia, a former European commissioner (2004-2009) and special envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union (2016-2019).



The summit partners included media institutions such as *Deseret News* and *Faith and Media* as well as non-profit organizations such as Global Christian Relief, Universal Peace Federation, Washington Times Foundation, Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, Alliance Defending Freedom International

and others.

Among the 75 partner organizations in various categories, UPF and The Washington Times Foundation, an organization that is affiliated with UPF, secured the role of "Title Partners," meaning that they were the principal sponsors and collaborators with the summit and had the greatest influence of any of the sponsors (which included major organizations such as Meta Platforms, the company that owns Facebook) over the summit program and content.



The summit's presentations fell into four tracks: "Defending IRF," "Documenting IRF," "Developing IRF," and "Denial of IRF."

- "Defending IRF" focused on the legal, justice, and accountability aspects of freedom of religion or belief.
- "Documenting IRF" highlighted the importance of journalism and gathering evidence.
- "Developing IRF" examined and developed advocacy efforts and highlighted country-level achievements.
- Lastly, "Denial of IRF" highlighted victims who have been persecuted on the basis of their religion or belief.

This was the ideal forum in which to focus attention on the unjust persecution of the Unification Movement in Japan, where it is being falsely accused of responsibility for the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, in Nara City, Japan.

International leaders of UPF and affiliated organizations comprised a 10-member team, which included UPF International Chair Dr. Thomas Walsh, UPF International President Dr. Michael Jenkins, *The Washington Times* Chair Thomas McDevitt, and International Media Association for Peace Europe-Middle East Coordinator Peter Zoehrer. They freely distributed literature about the Japan situation and conversed with delegates (including the religious freedom rapporteurs of a number of nations), about the matter.

One whole "dinner session" with around 350 attendees focused for almost two hours on the religious freedom violations of the Japanese government and media against the Unification Movement, which were roundly condemned by former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, among others. At the end of the session, the great majority of the distinguished audience signed UPF's Declaration in Support of Fundamental Human Rights and Human Dignity.

Through the summit as a whole, many of the world's top experts and officials concerned with religious freedom were made aware of the situation in Japan and in many cases got involved in seeking to resolve it. The Japanese government no doubt will come to realize how much damage it is doing to its own reputation and standing in the world by failing to abide by the most basic principles of human rights and religious freedom in its treatment of the Unification Movement.



### Background

Religious freedom is regarded as the most fundamental of human rights guaranteed by the Charter of the United Nations and by other key human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, it often is referred to as "the first freedom" and one on which all other freedoms depend for their existence.

However, this "first freedom" is honored far more in its absence than in its observance. It is estimated that almost 80 percent of the world's population live in countries with significant restrictions on what they can believe and how they can worship.

The United States has played a central role in pioneering international religious freedom advocacy.



Already in 1998, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) was created as an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government agency by the International Religious Freedom Act.

USCIRF monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) abroad; makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress; and tracks the implementation of these recommendations.

USCIRF's nine commissioners are appointed by either the president or congressional leaders of each political party, supported by a non-partisan professional staff. While USCIRF is independent of the State Department, the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom is a non-voting member. USCIRF's analysis is based on international standards.

USCIRF issues an Annual Report on FoRB, which assesses countries that violate religious freedom in a systematic, ongoing, and/or egregious manner; highlights thematic issues affecting religious freedom abroad; evaluates U.S. policy; and makes recommendations to the U.S. government.



As a result, religious freedom advocates around the world have felt great encouragement from USCIRF. The Vienna-based human rights group Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF) Europe and many religious freedom advocates around Europe often are consulted by US Embassy staff of behalf of USCIRF on religious freedom violations. The interviews have been raw material for the USCIRF annual religious freedom report which is published on US Embassy websites and disseminated in articles and publications. Religious freedom advocates have perceived the report as additional empowerment by a mighty ally to their (often lonely) activism which mostly targeted state-sanctioned religious freedom violations.

Since its founding, USCIRF has been calling out the worst violators of religious freedom and occasionally even punished them through sanctions. One could consider the US government's substantial engagement for FoRB on the global scale as the very foundation for more recent initiatives, such as the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and the IRF Summit.

Considering the vital role of USCIRF over more than two decades, it is only logical that one of its former chairs, Dr. Katarina Lantos-Swett, acted as co-chair of this year's magnificent IRF Summit 2023, along with Ambassador Sam Brownback, a former U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

Another leading advocate for religious freedom is the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. The 40 or so nations that are most committed to upholding religious freedom (mostly in Europe and North America) signed a series of treaties over the last 10 years or so, through which they pledged to work together to promote the observance of religious freedom around the world. Ironically, Japan, although not itself a signatory, is classified as "a friend" of the alliance.

### **A Realistic View of the Challenges Ahead**

Beth Van Schaak, a U.S. Department of State ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, gave a realistic view of the challenges ahead:

*I want to thank the IRF Summit for convening today's important discussion on documenting mass*

*atrocities. As is well known within this community, religious persecution continues unabated around the world and at unprecedented levels. To mention just a few areas in which my office works:*

*In Afghanistan, the Taliban continue to persecute members of religious minority groups and mandate inhumane punishments for residents in areas under its control, including public stonings.*

*In Burma [Myanmar], we have witnessed more than 1.2 million flee horrific violence in the country, the vast majority being members of religious and ethnic minority communities, including Rohingya, who are predominantly Muslim and who have faced decades of systematic discrimination, statelessness, and targeted violence.*



*In the Central African Republic, although conflict is driven primarily by competition over political power and control of resources, violence at times has targeted communities based on actual or perceived religious affiliation. In cycles of violence over the past ten years, Christian- and Muslim-affiliated militias have attacked communities and houses of worship, including in 2014, at one peak of violence, resulting in the destruction of almost all of the country's mosques and displacement of an estimated 80 percent of the Muslim population. More than one quarter of the country's population remain displaced. The Kremlin-backed [paramilitary organization] Wagner Group also stands accused of specifically targeting Muslim and Fulani communities in horrific attacks.*

*And in China, members of religious communities have long experienced repression, and we have seen a dramatic increase in abuses under Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping's rule, such that at least since 2017 crimes against humanity and genocide have been committed against Uyghurs, who are predominantly Muslim, and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang. Across China more broadly, religious persecution also is directed at Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, Christians, and so many others seeking only to peacefully practice their beliefs.*

## **Conclusion**

On reflection, one may ask why it is that the United States is leading the global battle for religious freedom. It's probably in the DNA of its people. The Founding Fathers fled across the ocean to seek religious liberty. The so-called "first freedom" is even enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. [Former U.S. President] Ronald Reagan reminded us of the paramount significance of religious freedom with the words that are today as significant as ever: "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free."

*All photographs by Peter Zoehrer*