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U.S. State Department report says 'religious intolerance remains far too common' around world

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[Myanmar arrests Buddhist monks](#)

[Slavery, execution and forced conversions](#)

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NEW YORK -- In its second annual report on international religious freedom, the U.S. State Department cited [China](#), [Myanmar](#), [Iran](#), [Iraq](#) and Sudan for persecuting people for their religious faith and practices.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, presenting the report to the media in New York on Tuesday, said much of the report made "grim reading."

"The sad truth is that religious intolerance remains far too common in far too many places," she said.

The report noted that "much of the world's population lives in countries where the right to religious freedom is restricted or prohibited" despite the fact that 144 countries belong to an international covenant that acknowledges the right of all citizens to religious freedom.

China accused of persecuting religious groups

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CNN's Andrea Koppel reports on alleged religious persecution in some countries



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China "deteriorated markedly" over the last year, the report said. It found the Chinese government actively persecutes members of unregistered and minority religious groups, including Tibetan Buddhists and followers of the Falun Gong sect.

It also found "credible reports" of religious detainees being beaten and tortured.

Robert Seiple, the U.S. ambassador at large for religious freedom, cited the case of an unnamed 60-year-old female Falun Gong practitioner who died in custody and whose body was covered in bruises, with dried blood in her ears, eye and nose and all of her teeth broken.

"We have one credible report that says she was made to run outside in the snow with her shoes off until she dropped. I don't know what the right words are to describe that kind of inhumane, brutal treatment of people," he added.

The criticism of China comes at a politically sensitive time, with Congress due to vote this month on legislation to provide permanent normal trade relations with China. It would eliminate annual congressional reviews that linked normal trade ties with China's human rights performance.

Myanmar arrests Buddhist monks

In Myanmar, the government systematically represses members of both religious minorities and the majority Buddhist population, the report said. Ethnic minorities also were subjected to "government discrimination," sentenced to forced labor and required to desecrate their own churches.

"Buddhist monks who promoted human and political rights were arrested, and some Buddhist monasteries were destroyed," the report said. "Government security forces frequently employed coercion to induce Christian members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism."

The report also said that discrimination in Myanmar continues despite a halt to U.S. aid to the country and a recent suspension of exports for violation of religious freedoms.

Slavery, execution and forced conversions

The report cited Iran for implementing policies designed to intimidate religious groups and continuing abuse of the country's religious minorities, most notably Jews. The report made special mention of this summer's trial of 10 Jews who were convicted on charges of espionage, saying the Iranian court deprived the defendants of nearly all legitimate means of defense.

Iraq was also seen as hostile to certain religions and was cited by the report for a decade-long campaign of "murder, summary execution and protracted arbitrary detention" against the religious leaders and followers of Iraq's Shi'a Muslim population.

The report cites tens of thousands of arrests, widespread desecration of holy sites and forced removal of religious populations from certain areas of the country, and concludes the Iraqi government has managed to prevent followers from practicing their religion.

Religious minorities are also subject to persecution in Sudan, the report says. Religious followers who deviate from government-sponsored Islam have been subject to arrest, violence, and even forced conversion.

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A Falun Gong demonstrator is arrested in Tiananmen Square in Beijing

The country's civil war has set the stage, said the report, for continued religious persecution. "The [Sudanese] government's support of slavery and its continued military action which has resulted in numerous deaths are due in part to the victims' religious beliefs," the report says.

Some U.S. allies rebuked

The State Department also rebuked some allies, including Saudi Arabia, Germany and France.

Religions associated with cults or sects are often stigmatized, the report says. It listed Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France and Germany as countries where information campaigns have been disseminated by the government against such religions, including Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology.

Saudi Arabia was singled out in the report as a country where religious freedom does not exist. Meanwhile, the Arab population in Israel was subjected to "various forms of discrimination," the report says.

Azerbaijan and Laos were listed as having significantly improved in their respect for religious freedom. While the countries retain a poor human rights record, both nations have seen changes "striking enough to raise the hope" that a more systematic change is near, the report said.

In Azerbaijan, the report traced the changed situation to a presidential pledge last November to improve the status of religious minorities.

In Laos, the government released in mid-June a large number of Christians who had been imprisoned because of their faith, the report said.

It added that there were noteworthy improvements in 31 other countries.

The report, which covers July 1999 through June 2000, details U.S. policy toward countries where religious freedom is violated.

It is mandated by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, which created the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom to help integrate U.S. policy on religious freedom into overall U.S. international policy.

CNN State Department Producer Elise Labott, The [Associated Press](#) and [Reuters](#) contributed to this report.

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