



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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FoRB VICTIMS LIST

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Victims List

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Overview

In 2019, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) launched its [Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#) database, which catalogues individuals targeted for their religious belief, religious activity, and religious freedom advocacy. USCIRF's FoRB Victims List profiles more than 1,800 victims—each of whom has suffered for their religious convictions and whose families and communities, by extension, have often suffered repression and reprisals.

Authorizing Legislation

Congress passed the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) in 1998, establishing several entities through which the U.S. government monitors and reports on religious freedom and holds violators accountable. Among those entities includes the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom \(USCIRF\)](#), an independent U.S. government agency. IRFA [mandates](#) that USCIRF (1) monitor religious freedom conditions abroad; (2) review and evaluate U.S. policy in response to violations, as well as progress, for religious freedom; (3) make recommendations for U.S. policy to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on matters involving international religious freedom; and (4) track the implementation by the U.S. government of USCIRF's recommendations.

Eighteen years later, Congress passed the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#), mandating additional responsibilities for USCIRF, including maintaining a "Victims List." The text of the legislation specifies that:

The Commission shall make publicly available, to the extent practicable, online and in official publications, lists of persons it determines are imprisoned or detained, have disappeared, been placed under house arrest, been tortured, or subjected to forced renunciations of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country that the Commission recommends for designation as a country of particular concern for religious freedom under section 402(b)(1)(A)(ii) or by a nonstate actor that the Commission recommends for designation as an entity of particular concern for religious freedom under section 301 of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act and include as much publicly available information as practicable on the conditions and circumstances of such persons.

To implement this provision, USCIRF created the FoRB Victims List—an online public database that documents persons who have been detained, imprisoned, disappeared, placed under house arrest, subjected to forced renunciation of faith, or tortured for their religion or belief in countries USCIRF recommends for Country of Particular Concern (CPC) or Special Watch List (SWL) status. The list also includes such victims located in the de facto territories of nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) status, according to the same criteria.

Methodology

In accordance with IRFA, as amended, USCIRF relies on international standards as the basis for its analysis and reporting. USCIRF uses the terms religious freedom, freedom of religion, and freedom of religion or belief interchangeably to refer to the broad right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief protected under international human rights law, namely Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

The human rights violations documented in the FoRB Victims List are defined in line with international standards as follows:

1. **Detainment:** refers to persons who have been held in custody by the country or entity for a minimum of three days but not formally sentenced.

2. **Imprisonment:** refers to persons who have been deprived of their physical liberty, sentenced, and confined to a prison or other penal institution.

3. **Disappearance:** as defined in the [International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance](#), refers to “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.”

4. **House Arrest:** refers to persons who have been deprived of their physical liberty and are confined to their residence or another location outside of a prison or other penal institution.

5. **Forced Renunciation of Faith:** refers to persons who have been legally or physically coerced into renouncing their religion or belief.

6. **Torture:** as defined in the [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#), refers to “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as ... any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.”

The FoRB Victims List only includes victims of the described violations for countries and entities that USCIRF recommends for CPC, SWL, or EPC status. In 2022, USCIRF made the following country and entity recommendations:

- **CPC:** Afghanistan, Burma, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam.
- **SWL:** Algeria, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Turkey, Uzbekistan.
- **EPC:** al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Houthis in Yemen, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in West Africa, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in North and West Africa.

When USCIRF no longer recommends a country or entity for CPC, SWL, or EPC status, profiles featured in the FoRB Victims List remain viewable to the public. However, USCIRF excludes any additional submissions until or unless it officially recommends the country or entity once again for CPC, SWL, or EPC status.

USCIRF only accepts submissions to the FoRB Victims List that involve ongoing religious freedom violations. Victims who experienced religious freedom violations in the past but are not currently experiencing one of the described violations are excluded from the FoRB Victims List. However, such information may be incorporated into other forms of USCIRF reporting.

Due to limited resources and—tragically—the number of such victims worldwide, USCIRF is unable to identify and document all whose circumstances meet the statutory requirements for inclusion in the FoRB Victims List. As such, the data contained in the database is not comprehensive nor is it a statistical representation of country, regional, or global trends.

Submission Process

USCIRF uses various methods to document individuals on the FoRB Victims List. It relies on submissions and information received from credible sources, including outside individuals and organizations. USCIRF independently verifies the facts of the cases and determines whether the person meets the inclusionary requirements for the FoRB Victims List, such as whether the individual has been targeted on the basis of religion or belief.

USCIRF encourages individuals and organizations with credible information on victims to submit that information for possible inclusion in the database by using the [FoRB Victims List Intake Form](#). Those submitting the form should include as much of the requested information as possible. Missing or unknown details, however, do not necessarily disqualify a submission from review or inclusion.

Several of the form's sections afford an opportunity to include relevant details important to each respective case and explanations as needed. The following highlights the type of information to be included in each section.

- **Summary of Circumstances** – include information that explains the religious nature of a person's persecution, the violations experienced, dates of arrest and sentencing, treatment in prison, and/or other key details.
- **Potential Controversies** – include information related to statements or actions that would potentially disqualify a person from inclusion in the database such as the use of or advocacy for violence.
- **International Recognition and Support** – include letters, communiqués, social media posts, and other activities from UN officials, UN Working Groups, or other reputable international actors advocating on the behalf of the person.
- **Other Considerations** – is the final opportunity to include any other information believed to be relevant for inclusion in the database, such as a person's medical considerations.

Submissions that do not entail one of the six described violations are not included in the FoRB Victims List. For example, violations related to fines, mob violence, and forced migration will be included in USCIRF's other reporting. Similarly, submissions that USCIRF is unable to corroborate also may not be included. However, USCIRF maintains the discretion to include submissions once additional information is verified.

As part of the review process, USCIRF conducts open-source research to verify case details with each submission, including through government and NGO reports, media, as well as social media tools, and court documents when applicable and available.

Most profiles are accessible to the public; however, the Frank R. Wolf Act mandates that USCIRF exercise “appropriate discretion” to maintain the safety and security of those accounted for in the FoRB Victims List and their families. As such, not all collected information on a given person is made public.

Structure and Layout: Using the FoRB Victims List

Recent updates to the [FoRB Victims List](#) have made data more accessible to users and improved user-friendliness. A new search function allows users to search any key word or phrase found on a victim's profile, and it supports searching in some other languages, such as Russian and Farsi, provided that the word appears within a given profile.

On both the main page and search result page, users have the option to select victim data by multiple filters, which allows users to find cases through a wide range of categories and to identify trends within the database. Some of these filters include:

- “Most Recent Type of Abuse” refers to the most recent violation a victim has experienced among the six violations that merit inclusion in the FoRB Victims List.
- “Perpetrator” refers to the country or entity that has committed the violation.
- “Reason for Persecution” refers to the specific belief, activity, advocacy, activism, background, or other factors serving as the motive behind a perpetrator's targeting of the victim.
- “Nature of Charges” refers to the kind of charges foreign governments and entities use to justify incarceration through their relevant criminal justice system.

FoRB Victims List and USCIRF's Work

The violations documented in the FoRB Victims List—including the number of victims, the severity of the violations committed against them, and their subsequent conditions in custody—serve to inform USCIRF's reporting and policy recommendations. USCIRF has long integrated information on FoRB victims into its other broader reporting, and it has continued to do so since the more recent addition of the formal list to its congressional mandate. USCIRF's [Annual Report](#) and other [publications](#) commonly feature specific victim cases linked to the FoRB Victims List.

USCIRF's [Spotlight Podcast](#) also regularly highlights cases of victims featured in the FoRB Victims List. Individual victim cases are an integral part of USCIRF's advocacy for advancing religious freedom abroad, through social media, press statements, [hearings](#), and other [events](#). Additionally, USCIRF partners with members of Congress to advocate for victims through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedoms Project](#). Finally, the FoRB Victims List is a crucial tool for USCIRF to raise the cases of victims through engagement with government officials and during international travel. USCIRF's advocacy has led to the improvement of conditions for victims and in some cases resulted in their early release from prison.

Conclusion

The FoRB Victims List identifies and documents persons targeted for their religion, belief, or religious freedom advocacy. It raises the public's awareness of religious freedom conditions abroad by highlighting the violations against individuals targeted by governments or entities based on their religion or belief.

Furthermore, the FoRB Victims List is a vital resource in informing the U.S. government in its effort to pursue effective religious freedom advocacy and to hold accountable violators of religious freedom as an integral part of U.S. foreign policy.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.