

**Rep. Frank Wolf (VA-10)**  
**Statement of Introduction**  
**H.R. 440 - Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of**  
**Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia.**

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to draw the attention of my colleagues to the plight of Christians and other religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia and to announce that I am introducing legislation which would require the administration to appoint a special envoy for religious minorities in these regions to make this issue a foreign policy priority. I hope my colleagues will join me in supporting this important legislation.

Last October, at least 70 people were killed during a siege on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad making it the worst massacre of Iraqi Christians since 2003. Less than two months later, extremists bombed the homes of more than a dozen Christian families throughout Baghdad. In a hearing before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, an Iraqi nun testified that the current spate of violence against Christians is worse than anything experienced under the ruthless dictator Saddam Hussein. The U.S. has a moral imperative to ensure that these minorities are protected.

On New Year's Eve, Mariam Fekry, a 22-year-old Egyptian woman posted on her Facebook page before leaving for mass that "2010 is over. This year has the best memories of my life. Really enjoyed this year. I hope that 2011 is much better. Plz God stay beside me & help make it all true." Tragically, that evening Miriam and 22 other people were killed by a suicide bomber in Alexandria, Egypt while coming out of mass at St. Mark and St. Peter Coptic Church. It was the worst violence against the country's Christian minority in a decade. Just ten days after the attack in Alexandria, an off-duty police officer fatally shot a Coptic Christian man and wounded five others Copts on a train in Egypt.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, countries where the United States has invested its treasure and the lives of countless brave young American soldiers, persecution of Christians runs rampant. On November 7 last year, a Pakistani court sentenced Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, to death for the "crime" of blasphemy. Only after intervention by the international community was her execution delayed. Her fate remains unclear. Unfortunately this is symptomatic of a much larger problem in Pakistan. Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used to victimize both religious minorities and Muslims. In fact, Punjab's governor influential governor, Salman Taseer was shot and killed by his own body guard who reportedly told police, "that he killed Mr. Taseer because of the governor's opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy law."

In Afghanistan, a televised broadcast of Afghans being baptized resulted in the arrest of four Christians last August, who were eventually released due to international pressure. However, two Afghan converts to Christianity remain imprisoned on account of their faith. One of the

Christian converts who is facing a possible death sentence reportedly said, "Without my faith I would not be able to live."

Other religious minorities including the Ahmadis, Baha'is, Zoroastrians and Jews are under increasing pressure in the region.

Last May, militants in Pakistan attacked two Ahmadi mosques in Pakistan killing at least 80 people. While the Ahmadis consider themselves Muslim, Pakistani law does not recognize them as such and they have been the target of large-scale coordinated attacks by extremist groups.

According to the Baha'i World News Service, some 335 Baha'is have been arrested in Iran on account of their religious beliefs. Seven leaders of the Baha'i faith in Iran have been imprisoned since their arrest in 2008. According to the State Department's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, Zoroastrians living in Iran also face persecution and blatant discrimination.

Members of the Jewish faith continue to experience discrimination and persecution throughout the region. The Special Envoy for Anti-Semitism Hannah Rosenthal has noted that Holocaust glorification "is especially virulent in the Middle East media."

In the wake of these devastating attacks on religious freedom, which in some cases are so severe that they literally threaten to wipe these ancient indigenous communities from the lands they've inhabited for centuries, it is clear that more must be done. Sadly, against the backdrop of these attacks, the post of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom at the State Department has been vacant for two years.

If the international community fails to speak out, the prospects for religious pluralism and tolerance in the region are bleak. President Ronald Reagan once said that the U.S. Constitution is a "covenant that we have made not only with ourselves, but with all of mankind."

I believe that the United States has an obligation to speak out for the voiceless around the world, and I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting my legislation calling for a special envoy dedicated to speaking out for religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia and elevating this issue as a foreign policy priority for America.