

US panel wants Pak on list for religious freedom violations

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Washington: The US should designate Pakistan among nations listed as worst violators of religious freedom due to frequent attacks on minorities including Hindus in the country, an independent US religious commission has recommended to the Obama administration.

“In 2015, the Pakistani government continued to perpetrate and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations,” US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said in its annual report yesterday.

As such USCIRF again recommended the State Department to designate Pakistan a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has recommended since 2002. Its recommendations are non-binding and Pakistan has not been designated as a CPC country by the State Department.

In addition to Pakistan, USCIRF has recommended to the State Department to designate seven other countries as CPC: Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, Tajikistan and Vietnam.

The State Department designated CPC countries are Myanmar, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

“Religiously-discriminatory constitutional provisions and legislation, such as the country’s blasphemy law and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, intrinsically violate international standards of freedom of religion or belief and result in prosecutions and imprisonments,” the report said.

The actions of non-state actors, including US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban), continue to threaten all Pakistanis and the country’s overall security, it said.

Religious minority communities, including Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, experience chronic sectarian and religious violence from both terrorist organisations and individuals within society, it added.

The government’s failure to provide adequate protection for likely targets of such violence or prosecute perpetrators has created a deep rooted climate of impunity, it said, noting that discriminatory content against minorities in provincial textbooks remains a significant concern, as are reports of forced conversions and marriages of Christian and Hindu girls and women.

“While the Pakistani government has taken some steps over the last two years to address egregious religious freedom violations, it has failed to implement systemic changes,” the report noted.

“For years, the Pakistani government has failed to protect citizens, minority and majority alike, from sectarian and religiously-motivated violence,” USCIRF said.

USCIRF in its report expressed its disappointment over US policy towards Pakistan. “Human rights and religious freedom have not been among the highest priorities in the bilateral relationship,” it said.

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