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Catholic Courier

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THURSDAY, AUGUST 21, 1997

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Religious Persecution

Activists debate responses to nations that attack Christians, other believers

In the 15th chapter of St. John's Gospel, Jesus tells his Apostles, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." Reports on religious persecution from around the world show that even today, Jesus' words continue to be prophetic.

According to the U.S. State Department, persecution of Christians and many other people of different faiths is rampant in the modern world. An 86-page report the department released July 22 summarized information from 78 countries on religious persecution, particularly that directed at Christians, the Catholic News Service reported.

Prepared at the request of Congress, the report notes, for example, the requirement in dozens of countries that religious groups register with the government. In some countries, nonregistered churches are subject to criminal prosecution; in others they are harassed or forbidden to build worship centers or officially hold services, CNS reported.

Growing concern over religious persecution has prompted a number of responses in the United States.

Two members of Congress proposed a bill in May that mandates sanctions against the governments of persecuting countries. The bill cites the persecution of Christians, Tibetan Buddhists and Bahais, and lists the governments of China, Vietnam, Sudan, Cuba, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, North Korea, Indonesia and Laos as their prime tormentors.

But the bill has critics — including those in the religious and human rights communities who fear that, if passed, the bill may impede the the U.S. government's flexibility when responding to religious persecution.

Meanwhile, an ad hoc State Department advisory committee is studying, in part, how the government can respond to religious persecution abroad. The committee, an interfaith group of U.S. religious leaders, will release its first recommendations sometime this fall, according to Gerard Powers, foreign policy adviser to the U.S. Catholic Conference's Office of International Justice and Peace. Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick of Newark, N.J., and Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., serve on the committee.

And a number of religious people in the country are organizing an international Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church on Sept. 16. The national organizer, the Rev. Steve Haas, a Chicago-based Presbyterian minister, plans to visit the Rochester area this month.

A world of crosses

What's prompting all this action can be found in the catalog of hu-

man rights horrors the State Department reported, according to CNS.

For example, the report points to China, which routinely imprisons Tibetan Buddhists and leaders of religious groups it does not recognize, such as Catholics who refuse to join a government-approved Catholic church.

China's treatment of believers is also cited by Paul Marshall in his book *Their Blood Cries Out*, released in March by Dallas-based Word Publishing.

Marshall details how two Chinese Christians, Chen Zhuman and Zhang Ruiyu, have been beaten, tortured and imprisoned for practicing their faith:

"After being arrested in late 1991, (Chen Zhuman) was tortured and beaten by police at the Putian County Detention Center, and left hanging upside down in a window frame for hours ...," the book reads. "Chen has suffered hearing loss and other physical destruction as a result of his mistreatment. He remains in prison."

Several countries that are strong U.S. allies in political and economic terms also engage in persecuting Christians and other believers, according to the State Department report.

For instance, Saudi Arabia requires all citizens to be Muslims and prohibits public and private practice of other faiths. Non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, lashing and deportation if they attract official attention, the report noted.

Even Israel, while legally providing freedom of religion, is considering a bill to outlaw proselytizing. And in Germany, despite broad protections for religion, Scientologists and evangelical Protestants report harassment by local governments and the public.

And Marshall reported the story of a Kuwaiti who converted from Islam to Christianity while studying in the United States. After returning to Kuwait, he suffered dearly for his conversion:

"On May 29, 1996, a religious court in Kuwait found (Robert) Hussein to be an 'apostate' ...," Marshall wrote. "Once newspapers reported his story, Hussein's life was forever changed ... He was driven into hiding and continues to live under death threats."

Voices for the voiceless

A number of U.S. religious and human rights activists want to shed more light on religious persecution and are taking steps to do so. One such step is being taken by Rev. Haas, U.S. coordinator of the Second Annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

In an interview with the *Courier*, Rev. Haas said organizers are at
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