

Persecuted Christians

Specter seeks to safeguard world's religious minorities

■ STEVE FELDMAN
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Last year, when dozens of predominantly black churches were set ablaze in this country, there was a tremendous outcry from the Clinton administration and from concerned organizations and individuals.

But when Christian churches in Indonesia were torched last year, there was little notice and the Clinton administration did not do enough, activists say.

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., other lawmakers in the Senate and House, and a number of activists also charge that the White House's response has been inadequate when Christian worshipers in China and Islamic countries, such as Sudan, are tortured and killed.

In many parts of the world, Catholics and Protestants are religious minorities, particularly in countries that have Communist regimes or are controlled by radical Muslims.



Sen. Arlen Specter

Now Specter and others are calling on President Clinton to appoint a chief adviser who will monitor religious persecution throughout the world and report directly to Clinton, the senator said in an interview Monday.

Pennsylvania's senior senator is working on legislation requiring Clinton to appoint such an adviser, who would issue reports on problem areas and take steps against countries that violate

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religious freedoms.

In November, the State Department created an Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad to look into violations of religious rights throughout the world.

John Shattuck, assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, heads the committee, whose 20 members include

Rabbi Irving Greenberg of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

At its inception, Clinton said the committee would "call attention to problems of religious persecution abroad. It is also expected to provide advice on how to bring about reconciliation in those areas where religious enmity is a threat to peace."

White House spokeswoman Patricia Lewis said on Tuesday that this is not a "paper committee," but "a working group of people with strong feelings."

Not enough

Specter said the committee is not sufficient in light of the situation's severity. Clinton, he said, "promised to appoint a special adviser. He hasn't done it."

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SEN. ARLEN SPECTER

The senator said it should not seem unusual that a Jew is taking a leading role in safeguarding the religious freedom of Christians.

"When you persecute anybody, you persecute everybody," Specter said. "I think religious persecution is awful in any form. It is the ultimate freedom: religion and speech."

Michael Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute — "a mostly moderate conservative think tank," as he described it — has been among those at the forefront pressing for action to save Christians throughout the world from persecution.

'Mounting persecution'

Horowitz, who is Jewish, said, "There is pretty horrible and mounting persecution of Christians" in China, Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea, Sudan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Ethiopia and Iran and elsewhere.

In some of those countries, said Horowitz, "there are not enough Jews left to play the scapegoat role. We, as Jews, know that these thugs need vulnerable scapegoats."

In Iran and Sudan in particular, said Horowitz, the persecution is

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