

NEPAL 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the country as a “secular state” but defines secularism as “protection of the age-old religion and culture and religious and cultural freedom.” It provides for the right to profess and practice one’s own religion. The constitution prohibits converting persons from one religion to another and prohibits religious behavior disturbing public order or contrary to public health, decency, and morality. The law prohibits both proselytism and “harming the religious sentiment” of any caste, ethnic community, or class. The law does not provide for registration or official recognition of religious organizations as religious institutions, except for Buddhist monasteries. All other religious groups must register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or nonprofit organizations to own property or operate legally. One man was killed by police in August in a confrontation with the Muslim community over cow slaughter. In September, police and protestors clashed in Lalitpur District when the government tried to prevent the celebration of a local religious holiday due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Officials arrested several pastors for violating the COVID-19 lockdown, including one who was arrested while sending parishioners home from their church. Another pastor was arrested, first for providing what the government said was misinformation about COVID-19, released on bail, and then arrested twice more for seeking to convert Hindus to Christianity. Police arrested seven Jehovah’s Witnesses during the year for proselytizing, including two U.S. citizens, who were released on bail and were awaiting trial as of the end of the year. In several locations, police arrested individuals accused of slaughtering cows or oxen. Tibetan community leaders said government authorities generally permitted them to celebrate most Buddhist holidays in private ceremonies but prohibited the public celebration of the Dalai Lama’s birthday and continued to drastically curtail their ability to hold public celebrations. During the year, police surveillance of Tibetans remained high. Authorities cited the pandemic in restricting public ceremonies and gatherings while maintaining, and in some cases increasing, prepandemic levels of security personnel and scrutiny of Tibetan cultural and religious celebrations, particularly those involving the Dalai Lama. Christian religious leaders expressed concern about the anti-Christian sentiment of the Hindu nationalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), which seeks to reestablish the country as a Hindu state. Christian groups continued to report difficulties registering or operating as NGOs. The government again did not recognize Christmas or Eid al-Adha as public holidays, but allowed Christians and Muslims time off from work to celebrate and continued to recognize Buddha’s birthday as a public holiday. Christian and

Muslim groups said they continued to face difficulties in buying or using land for burials.

In August, assailants shot and killed a Hindu priest on temple grounds in southern Nepal in an attack that some sources stated was religiously motivated. Police arrested and charged two suspects and stated they were seeking three others in connection with the case. In September, a clash between Hindus and Muslims in a southern district left more than a dozen people injured. Christian leaders said that a Hindu activist openly threatened Christians on a television interview in January. Catholic and Protestant sources stated that threats of violence against Christians on social media had increased. Local media again published occasional reports of alleged harmful practices by religious minorities that were disputed by local authorities, witnesses, and media. According to NGOs, Hindu priests and other “high-caste” individuals continued to prevent persons of “lower” castes, particularly Dalits, from accessing Hindu temples and performing religious rites. There were incidents of vandalism against a church and a mosque, characterized by sources as minor and which were addressed by authorities.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador, U.S. embassy officers, and visiting U.S. government representatives met with government officials to express concern over restrictions on freedom of religion posed by provisions in the constitution and the criminal code, including the continued criminalization of converting others and proselytizing. They also met with representatives of civil society groups and religious groups to discuss concerns about access to burial grounds, public celebrations of religious holidays, the prohibition against “forced or induced” conversion, and verbal attacks on Christian communities by Hindu politicians. The embassy used social media to communicate religious freedom messages, highlight the country’s religious diversity, and promote respect and tolerance. Following the arrests of U.S. citizens on proselytizing charges, embassy officers spoke with the detainees, their lawyer, and police. Embassy outreach and assistance programs continued to promote religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent, Hindus constitute 81.3 percent of the population, Buddhists 9 percent, Muslims (the vast majority of whom are Sunni) 4.4 percent, and Christians (a large majority Protestant and a minority Roman Catholic) 1.4 percent. Other groups, which together constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Kirats (an indigenous religion with

Hindu influence), animists, adherents of Bon (a Tibetan religious tradition), Jains, Baha'is, and Sikhs. According to some Muslim leaders, Muslims constitute at least 5.5 percent of the population, mostly concentrated in the south. According to some Christian groups, Christians constitute 3 to 5 percent of the population. Many individuals adhere to a syncretic faith encompassing elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional folk practices, according to scholars.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country to be a secular state but defines secularism as “protection of the age-old religion and culture and religious and cultural freedom.” The constitution stipulates every person has the right to profess, practice, and protect his or her religion. While exercising this right, the constitution bans individuals from engaging in any acts “contrary to public health, decency, and morality” or that “disturb the public law and order situation.” It also prohibits converting “another person from one religion to another or any act or conduct that may jeopardize other’s religion,” and states that violations are punishable by law.

The criminal code sets five years’ imprisonment as the punishment for converting, or encouraging the conversion of, another person via coercion or inducement (which officials commonly refer to as “forced conversion”) or for engaging in any act, including the propagating of religion, that undermines the religion, faith, or belief of any caste or ethnic group. It stipulates a fine of up to 50,000 Nepali rupees (\$430) and subjects foreign nationals convicted of these crimes to deportation. The criminal code also imposes punishments of up to two years’ imprisonment and a fine of up to 20,000 rupees (\$170) for “harming the religious sentiment” of any caste, ethnic community, or class, either in speech or in writing.

The law does not provide for registration or official recognition of religious organizations as religious institutions, except for Buddhist monasteries. It is not mandatory for Buddhist monasteries to register with the government, although doing so is a prerequisite for receiving government funding for maintenance of facilities, skills training for monks, and study tours. A monastery development committee under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation oversees the registration process. Requirements for registration include providing a recommendation from a local government body, information on the members of the monastery’s management committee, a land ownership certificate, and photographs of the premises.

Except for Buddhist monasteries, all religious groups must register as NGOs or nonprofit organizations to own land or other property, operate legally as institutions, or gain eligibility for public service-related government grants and partnerships. Religious organizations follow the same registration process as other NGOs and nonprofit organizations, including preparing a constitution and furnishing information on the organization's objectives as well as details on its executive committee members. To renew the registration, which must be completed annually, organizations must submit annual financial audits and activity progress reports.

The law prohibits the killing or harming of cattle. Violators are subject to a maximum sentence of three years in prison for killing cattle and six months' imprisonment and a fine of up to 50,000 rupees (\$430) for harming cattle.

The law requires the government to provide protection for religious groups carrying out funeral rites in the exercise of their constitutional right to practice their religion, but it also states the government is not obligated to provide land grants for this purpose. There is no law specifically addressing the funeral practices of religious groups.

The constitution establishes the government's authority to "make laws to operate and protect a religious place or religious trust and to manage trust property and regulate land management."

The law does not require religiously affiliated schools to register, but Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic religious schools must register as religious educational institutions with local district education offices (under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology) and supply information about their funding sources to receive funding at the same levels as nonreligious public/community schools. Religious public/community schools follow the same registration procedure as nonreligious public/community schools. Catholic and Protestant groups must register as NGOs to operate private schools. The law does not allow Christian schools to register as public/community schools, and they are not eligible for government funding. Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim groups may also register as NGOs to operate private schools, but they too are not eligible to receive government funding.

The law criminalizes acts of caste-based discrimination in places of worship. Penalties for violations are three months' to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 200,000 rupees (\$430 to \$1,700).

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to members of civil society groups, on August 27, one man was killed by police in Jhapa during a confrontation between police and the Muslim community after two persons were arrested for slaughtering cows.

Police clashed with approximately 1,000 protestors on September 3 when they gathered in Lalitpur District to celebrate the Buddhist festival of Rato Machindranath in contravention of the government's COVID-19 restrictions against festivals, large gatherings, or any nonessential activities. According to media reports, the crowd began to throw rocks and debris and to fire slingshots when police tried to stop them from pulling a five-story high ceremonial chariot through the streets. Approximately 650 Nepal Police and Armed Police Force officers responded with water cannons and tear gas and arrested nine protestors. The two sides clashed for four hours until community leaders and the Lalitpur Chief District Officer agreed on a compromise. District authorities imposed a day-long curfew enforced by armed police on September 5, the first unrest-related curfew in the Kathmandu Valley since November 2009.

On March 23, according to media reports and religious groups, police in Pokhara arrested Christian preacher Keshav Raj Acharya for spreading misinformation about COVID-19. A February 21 YouTube video showed Acharya praying to "damn" the virus and stating that those who follow Christ would not become infected. The Kaski District Administration Office released Acharya with a 5,000-rupee (\$43) fine for the COVID-19 related charges, but police kept him in jail and subsequently charged him with religious conversion and offending religious sensibilities. On April 19, the administration office set bail for these charges at 500,000 rupees (\$4,300). On May 13, when Acharya was released on bail, he was immediately rearrested at the courthouse and transferred 400 miles to Dolpa District to face additional charges of religious conversion. On June 30, Acharya was released on 300,000 rupees bail (\$2,600). Multiple religious groups stated that local police prejudice continued to factor heavily in the selective enforcement of the vague criminal code provision against "forced conversion." In a July 18 letter to Nepal's Attorney General, the International Religious Freedom Roundtable

described Acharya's arrest as "arbitrary" and "discriminatory" and called for charges against him to be dropped.

According to media reports, police arrested two pastors on March 28, charging them with holding worship services in violation of COVID-19 restrictions. In the first case, Pastor Mohan Gurung was arrested in the Surkhet District of Karnali Province while he was talking with family members and assistant pastors who lived on church property with him. Gurung said "police jumped over the church gate, barged inside the premises, and accused [him] of holding a worship service" while he "was having family time, chatting, and studying the Bible." In the second case, Pastor Prem Bahadur Bishwakarma was arrested in his church building, also in Surkhet District, while telling members of his congregation not to gather because of pandemic restrictions and showing them pictures depicting COVID-19 health precautions. Bahadur told the media that police officers using lathis (clubs) "charged at us" before arresting him. The two pastors were charged with violating the lockdown, disturbing the peace, and putting public health at risk. Both were released on bail on March 29.

According to a Christian news portal, in February, the government deported two Japanese and three Taiwanese individuals for spreading Christianity on tourist visas. The local NGO INSEC (Informal Sector Service Center) stated that four Japanese and two Taiwanese were transferred to the Department of Immigration in Kathmandu in late February, but it could not confirm their deportations.

According to civil society sources, during the year police arrested seven Jehovah's Witnesses on two separate occasions in Pokhara for proselytizing. Two were U.S. citizens and five were Nepali citizens. The Nepali citizens were arrested on February 1 and released February 27 on 200,000 rupees (\$1,700) bail per person. The U.S. citizens were arrested on March 17 and charged with religious conversion while they were visiting the house of friends, who were also Jehovah's Witnesses. They were detained in police custody pending investigation for 11 days. On March 27, police released them due to COVID-19 protocols on 230,000 rupees (\$2,000) bail each. On April 24, police recalled them and detained them until April 26, when the district court released them on an additional 200,000 rupees (\$1,700) bail each, pending trial. The original 230,000 rupee bail was refunded to the U.S. citizens after they paid the second bail. As of the end of the year, their case was pending in Kaski District Court.

According to the Society for Humanism Nepal, 35 individuals were arrested for cow slaughter in nine separate incidents through October. These arrests took place in eight different districts throughout the country.

The government continued deepened restrictions on Tibetans' ability to publicly celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday on July 6, stating the religious celebrations represented "anti-China" activities. Although authorities allowed small private celebrations of the Dalai Lama's birthday in July, security personnel around these events outnumbered the Tibetan attendees. Similarly, Tibetans could only conduct other ceremonies with cultural and religious significance in private, such as Losar, the Tibetan New Year, and World Peace Day, which commemorates the Dalai Lama receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

Tibetan leaders urged Tibetans to respect government-imposed restrictions on public gatherings to combat the spread of COVID-19 by celebrating days of religious significance in private. Tibetan leaders organized small "official" commemorations of these occasions, which were subjected to heightened scrutiny from security personnel despite compliance with government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions. Civil society organizations said this scrutiny was the result of the government's policy to treat all religious programs associated with the Dalai Lama as constituting "anti-China activities."

Abbots of Buddhist monasteries reported that monasteries and their related social welfare projects generally continued to operate without government interference, but they and other monks said police surveillance and questioning increased significantly during the year. Police continued to gather information from a 2019 circular sent to Tibetan institutes about Tibetan refugees studying in monasteries and nunneries. Tibetan Buddhist business owners also reported what they termed unwarranted police questioning about religious and social affiliations in their businesses and homes.

Human rights lawyers and leaders of religious minorities continued to express concern that the constitution's and criminal code's conversion bans could make religious minorities subject to legal prosecution for actions carried out in the normal course of their religious practices, and also vulnerable to prosecution for preaching, public displays of faith, and distribution of religious materials in contravention of constitutional assurances of freedom of speech and expression.

Human rights experts continued to express concern that a provision in the criminal code prohibiting speech or writing harmful to others' religious sentiments could be

misused to settle personal scores or target religious minorities arbitrarily. According to numerous civil society and international community legal experts, some provisions in the law restricting conversion could be invoked against a wide range of expressions of religion or belief, including the charitable activities of religious groups or merely speaking about one's faith. Media and academic analysts continued to state that discussions on prohibiting conversion had entered into religious spheres in the country and that those seeking political advantage manipulated the issue, prompting religious groups to restrict some activities.

According to legal experts and leaders of religious minority groups, the constitutional language on protecting the "age-old religion" and the prohibition on conversion was intended by the drafters to mandate the protection of Hinduism. Christian religious leaders continued to state that the emphasis of politicians in the RPP on re-establishing the country as a Hindu state continued to negatively affect public perception of Christians and Christianity. The RPP currently holds one seat in Parliament and civil society sources stated that it uses anti-Christian sentiment to garner populist support. (The country was a Hindu monarchy until 2007, when the interim constitution established a secular democracy.)

Leaders of the RPP outside of Parliament continued their calls for the reestablishment of Hindu statehood and advocated strong legal action against those accused of killing cows. Kamal Thapa, chairman of the RPP, tweeted praise for the Prime Minister's efforts to control conversion, criticized the government for not doing more, and likened conversion to an epidemic. Civil society leaders said pressure from India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and other Hindu groups in India continued to push politicians in Nepal, particularly from the RPP, to support reversion to a Hindu state.

Civil society leaders said what they characterized as right-wing religious groups associated with the BJP in India continued to provide money to influential politicians of all parties to advocate for Hindu statehood. According to NGOs and Christian leaders, small numbers of *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalist) supporters were endeavoring to create an unfriendly environment for Christians on social media and occasionally at small political rallies and encouraging "upper-caste" Hindus to enforce caste-based discrimination.

Religious leaders said the requirement for NGOs to register annually with local government authorities placed their organizations at political risk, and one source reported their religious group was denied reregistration. Christian leaders

expressed fears that changing obligations could potentially limit the establishment of churches, which must be registered as NGOs.

As in recent years, the government did not recognize Christmas as a public holiday. The government, however, allowed Christians and Muslims time off from work to celebrate major holidays such as Christmas and Eid al-Adha, and continued to recognize Buddha's birthday as public holiday.

Christian leaders said the government-funded Pashupati Area Development Trust continued to prevent Christian burials in a common cemetery behind the Pashupati Hindu Temple in Kathmandu while allowing burials of individuals from other non-Hindu indigenous faiths. According to Christian leaders, the government continued its inconsistent enforcement of a court ruling requiring protection of congregations carrying out burials. Protestant churches continued to report difficulties gaining access to land they bought several years prior for burials in the Kathmandu Valley under the names of individual church members. According to the churches, local communities continued to oppose burial by groups perceived to be outsiders but were more open to burials conducted by Christian members of their own communities. As a result, they reported, some Protestants in the Kathmandu Valley continued to travel to the countryside to conduct burials in unpopulated areas.

Catholic leaders reported that despite their general preference for burials, almost all Catholic parishioners continued to choose cremation due to past difficulties with burials. Many Christian communities outside the Kathmandu Valley said they continued to be able to buy land for cemeteries, conduct burials in public forests, or use land belonging to indigenous communities for burials. They also said they continued to be able to use public land for this purpose.

Muslim groups stated Muslim individuals in the Kathmandu Valley continued to be able to buy land for cemeteries but said they sometimes faced opposition from local communities.

According to Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim groups, the government continued to permit them to establish and operate their own community schools. The government provided the same level of funding for both registered religious schools and public schools, but private Christian schools were not legally able to register as community schools. Although religious education is not part of the curriculum in public schools, some public schools displayed a statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, on their grounds.

According to the Center for Education and Human Resource Development (previously the Department of Education), which is under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, the number of *gumbas* (Buddhist centers of learning) registered rose from 111 in 2019 to 114. The department had 104 *gurukhuls* (Hindu centers of learning) registered during the year, up one from 2019.

According to the Center for Education and Human Resource Development, 911 madrassahs were registered with district education offices, representing an increase of four from the previous year. Some Muslim leaders stated that as many as 2,500 to 3,000 full-time madrassahs continued to be unregistered. They again expressed apprehension that some unregistered madrassahs were promoting the spread of less tolerant interpretations of Islam. According to religious leaders, many madrassahs, as well as full-time Buddhist and Hindu schools, continued to operate as unregistered entities because school operators hoped to avoid government auditing and having to use the Center for Education and Human Resource Development's established curriculum. They said some school operators also wished to avoid the registration process, which they characterized as cumbersome.

Many foreign Christian organizations had direct ties to local churches and continued to sponsor clergy for religious training abroad.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 19, assailants shot and killed a 65-year-old Hindu priest on the premises of Hanuman Temple, located in Rautahat District in the southern part of the country. The police arrested two individuals and registered charges against them on August 23. At year's end, the case was pending in district court and three additional suspects remained at large. Prior to investigation, the attack was portrayed on social media as religiously motivated, with commenters accusing Muslims, although the individuals later arrested were not Muslim. Comments on social media criticized the Chief Minister of Province 2, who is Muslim, and Mohna Ansari of the National Human Rights Commission for failing to speak publicly about the incident.

Authorities reported no change in the 2016 case in which Banke District police filed charges against 29 individuals accused of participating in Hindu-Muslim clashes that led to the killing of two Muslims. The suspects were later released on bail and the District Administration Office provided each victim's family

1,000,000 rupees (\$8,500) in compensation in 2017. The case remained pending in the Banke district court, but a leader from the Muslim community stated he did not expect justice for the victims' families.

A violent clash erupted in Sarlahi District in the south when a Hindu procession carrying an idol of the god Bishwakarma passed through a Muslim community on September 18, which some Muslim commenters said they believed was a deliberate provocation – an allegation the Hindu community denied. According to media reports, the procession planned to immerse the idol in a lake located near a mosque. Members of the Muslim community tried to stop the procession, which was accompanied by a tractor and DJ playing music. The dispute escalated and people began throwing stones at one another, leaving over a dozen injured. Police used tear gas to regain control of the situation, and the district administration office imposed an 18-hour curfew to prevent further clashes.

Some leaders of religious minority groups stated that some converts to other religions, including Hindus who had converted to Christianity, remained willing and able to state publicly their new religious affiliation. Some Christian leaders, however, reported that some converts to Christianity tried to conceal their faith from their families and local communities, mainly in areas outside Kathmandu. Christian leaders said Manoj Sapkota, a Hindu activist affiliated with Shiva Sena, openly threatened Christians on a television interview in January. They also stated that Hindu activist Abhishek Joshi openly threatened the Christian community in several television interviews.

According to Catholic and Protestant sources, social media was increasingly used to spread threats of violence against Christians. Several sources noted a rise in anti-Christian propaganda and divisive religious content on social media due to the COVID-19 lockdown. When a song against Bahun and Chettri (two “high” Hindu castes) was placed on social media, Christians were blamed. Some civil society organizations stated that Pastor Sukdev Giri of the Trinity Fellowship Church in Chitwan District continued to receive insults and threatening messages through social media.

Some Muslim leaders continued not to accept converts to Islam, saying it would violate the law according to their interpretation. Instead, they continued to recommend that individuals who sought to convert travel to India to do so.

Local media again published occasional reports of alleged harmful practices by religious minorities that were disputed by local authorities, witnesses, and media.

After a disproportionate number of Muslims were among the first to test positive for COVID-19, Muslim leaders stated that some journalists and media outlets tried to use COVID-19 fears to fuel anti-Muslim sentiment and communal unrest. These included allegations that Tablighi Jamaat missionaries and other members of the Muslim community were deliberately spreading COVID-19. The Ministry of Health tested members of the Muslim community for COVID-19, and the government worked with Muslim leaders to curb the spread of misinformation.

A Christian religious leader said there were no news reports of social disturbances in rural areas caused by the spread of Christianity, as there had been in previous years. Multiple Christian sources said that inflammatory material migrated to social media, since there were very few public activities that could trigger disturbances due to COVID-19 restrictions.

According to NGOs, Hindu priests and “high-caste” residents continued to prevent Dalits, as members of a “lower” caste, from entering temples and sometimes prevented them from performing religious rites and participating in religious festivals. A provincial assembly member and local residents of Pokhara in Gandaki Province denied mourning rituals to Dalits in a public facility. The court case against perpetrators of the 2017 attack on a Dalit man for entering a temple in Saptari District remained pending as of December. A representative from a Dalit rights organization stated that the Dalit community did not expect justice to be served in this case, as impunity continued in many cases of Dalit rights violations.

Christian sources reported one incident of vandalism against a church in Dhading District in August. The incident was minor, according to the sources, and was quickly mediated at the local level. In October, Madani Mosque in Sundhara, Kathmandu, was vandalized with a bulldozer in a land dispute. Police arrested and later released the bulldozer driver and the individual claiming ownership of the land (which sources stated is owned by the government) but investigated the incident. The government determined that the land claim was fraudulent and as of the end of the year was in the process of returning it to the mosque. Madina Mosque in Bhairahawa, Rupandehi District, was also vandalized in October. Individuals on a motorbike threw a stone at a window, causing minor damage. Police promised the local community that they would investigate.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, the Ambassador, embassy officers, and visiting U.S. government representatives expressed concerns to senior government officials and

political leaders about restrictions on freedom of religion, including the rights to convert and to proselytize, posed by provisions in the constitution and the criminal code. They repeatedly emphasized to government officials working in law enforcement, immigration, and foreign affairs the importance of bringing legislation and practice into concordance with the country's constitutional and international obligations. Embassy officers worked with legal advocates and rights groups to ensure the safety of U.S. citizens threatened by the criminal code and continued to highlight how anticonversion laws could be used to arbitrarily restrict the right to the freedoms of religion and expression. Following the arrests of U.S. citizens on proselytizing charges, embassy officers spoke with the detainees, their lawyers, and police to ensure they were being treated fairly and in accordance with the law. Embassy officers and visiting senior U.S. government officials raised concerns with government officials about the government's restrictions on Tibetan Buddhists conducting peaceful religious activities, including celebrations of Losar (Tibetan New Year), the Dalai Lama's birthday, and World Peace Day.

The Charge d'Affaires and a senior embassy officer led a group of 10 embassy participants to the February 26 Tibetan Losar celebration hosted by the Tibetan Refugee Welfare Office at the Boudha Settlement Community Hall in Kathmandu. The Ambassadors from Australia, the European Union, and Switzerland and officials from the French and German embassies also joined. For the first time since 2008, the event was held outdoors. Plainclothes police were present and attendance was lower than in prior years.

Throughout the year, embassy officers and other U.S. government representatives discussed with civil society members and religious groups their concerns about arrests, access to burial grounds, public celebration of religious holidays, the prohibition against religious conversion, and verbal attacks on Christian communities by Hindu politicians.

The embassy used social media to communicate religious freedom messages, highlight the country's religious diversity, and promote respect and tolerance. Although COVID-19 restricted the ability to attend many religious events in person, the Ambassador used social media to highlight and revisit past engagements in order to communicate U.S. continued support for religious freedom. Embassy officers frequently addressed religious diversity and tolerance using virtual platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

The embassy continued to provide financial assistance for the preservation and restoration of religious sites, including Buddhist *stupas* (shrines) and monasteries

as well as several Hindu temples, and continued to promote religious tolerance in a program for underprivileged youth, including Muslim and Tibetan refugees, in Kathmandu.