

Press Releases: Interview With Andrew West of ABC Radio Australia

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Via Telephone
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QUESTION: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, welcome to the ABC. Thank you for your time.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Great. It's good to be with you this morning, Andrew.

QUESTION: Yes. You are holding a ministerial summit, and I want to ask you about some of the challenges to religious freedom that your own department has identified. Your administration has reached out to North Korea. Your own department has identified shocking violations of religious freedom there. Will any further rapprochement with North Korea depend on North Korea opening up to religious freedom and human rights?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, thanks for the question. We have a first-ever religious freedom ministerial here at the State Department. We're going to have over 80 delegations from all across the world, 40 at the foreign minister level. Religious freedom is something that's very important to me personally; it's very important to President Trump. And the State Department is going to lead the world in opening up religious freedom to every citizen. That would certainly include places like North Korea. Well, that will be a real priority for our administration as well. We believe every human being ought to have the right to worship in the way that they prefer, or to choose not to if that's their preference as well. All faiths.

QUESTION: Yeah. Mr. Secretary, you have met Kim Jong-un. Have you raised directly with him the questions of religious freedom in his country?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I've not talked about the details of my conversation with Chairman Kim. The world should know, and your listeners should know, that in every place I go, whether they're countries with strong values of religious freedom or those that do not, we place this as a real priority and we raise this issue in countries that are difficult and challenging every time we confront them. We believe that religious freedom for every citizen of the world is something that's very important.

QUESTION: The religious – the Commission on Religious Freedom report that your department publishes has also accused Russia uniquely of repressing religious rights through the invasion of another country – that's Crimea. It says Russia should be criticized in multilateral settings. Can the world rely on President Trump to publicly raise religious repression in Russia with President Putin in future?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Look, there are a lot of issues that we have with Russia, and the President just returned from Helsinki, where they discussed a broad range of issues and, frankly, broke some ground across a broad range of them. And our mission, Andrew, with this ministerial meeting is to re-force this set of issues. We're going to have countries here that aren't perfect, that are on the cusp of religious freedom. And we want to push them all in the right direction. And that's our mission statement. We're welcoming Christians and Muslims and Jews and people of diverse faiths from all across the world to become part of this. We believe this is a central pillar of American foreign policy, to have religious freedom at the front. We bring up these issues privately, and we bring them up publicly.

QUESTION: Is Russia going to be at the ministerial meeting?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I haven't seen the full list. We've invited countries from all around the world.

QUESTION: Another area which is difficult for the United States is the question of Saudi Arabia. Ever since this religious freedom report has existed, Saudi Arabia has always gotten among the worst results. Why does the U.S. continue, however, to give Saudi Arabia a waiver or an exemption from sanctions even though the report recommends it?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Andrew, you have to remember the purpose of the gathering here for the next couple days. The mission is very clear. It's to take each country and help make the case for them why it's in the best interest of their citizenry and their country to grant rights of religious freedom. Not every country is in the same place. We recognize that; we are eyes-wide-open. But make no mistake about it, unlike previous administrations, we have raised this to every one of our foreign partners and friends, and they know it's a priority for the United States and for this administration. We believe deeply in this and we're working in every one of those countries to improve religious freedom for their citizens.

QUESTION: But Mr. Secretary, you yourself are a very sincere Evangelical Christian. You know that in Saudi Arabia, you would not be permitted to worship in your faith. Why does the United States continue this strategic partnership with a country that is so repressive against other religions?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Andrew, look, thanks for the question. I've got to run off now. But make no mistake about it, religious freedom is not the only issue that America faces with any one of our partners. It won't be the only and sole focus. Our relationships are broad. They're diverse; they cover lots of various issues. And we are acting to make sure that our relationships are in America's best interest, and religious freedom is a central part of each one

of those.

Thanks, Andrew, for your time this morning.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you. So long.

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