

Press Releases: Interview With Nike Ching of VOA

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Treaty Room
Washington, DC
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QUESTION: Secretary Pompeo, thank you very much for talking to Voice of America.

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's great to be with you on Voice of America. Thank you. Thank you for having me on today.

QUESTION: On the ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya Muslims, with the Buddhists being the majority in Myanmar, the purge against Rohingya is sometimes characterized by some as religious cleansing. At the same time, killing is the worst crime for Buddhism and for many religion. Would you go further to identify the Rohingya crisis as the religious cleansing?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, the State Department made a decision at the end of last year to make the important statement about ethnic cleansing, and we know that there is a religious connection there. It's incredibly important that we're careful in the language that we use, and so we'll continue to review it. But as you well know, the State Department considers religious freedom at the center of its activity. We make that a priority in all of the work that we do, and in places in Asia, that is absolutely no exception.

QUESTION: Would you consider a comprehensive arms embargo and more targeted financial sanctions against tough Burmese military leaders for their involvement of the Rohingya purge?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't want to get out ahead of the President on this, but you should know we take these issues incredibly seriously and your viewers should know that as well. There are many things that are under consideration by this administration. We want to see the course changing; we want to see the directional change here. We have not seen that yet, and so there are many things that are being considered by the United States Government to ensure that everyone understands that their behavior is not acceptable.

QUESTION: In China, the State Department's International Religious Freedom Report documented the repression against the Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists. First of all, would you – how would you respond to the assertion from the Chinese Government that some of the groups are separatist? And secondly, would you consider a travel ban or working with the Treasury Department to freeze the U.S. assets of those Chinese officials who are involved in such repression?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So the State Department has made clear that with respect to this issue, we think they're on the wrong side of religious freedom, that they're a country of concern connected to that. We understand that religious freedom is at risk in many places in the world, and yet the United States has complex, broad relationships with many countries, including China, across economic and military and political sets of issues.

Your viewers should know the United States also puts religious freedom, this fundamental human right, at the very center of our discussions with every country with whom we interact.

QUESTION: Religious freedom is a universal value, as you mentioned. How would you respond to the Chinese assertion that some of the surveillance program is to prevent a terrorist attack?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Well, I don't want to comment. Every country does work to make sure that their citizens are safe, but we should never – no country should ever use that effort, the guise of a counterterrorism investigation, to persecute religious freedom. Religious freedom is separate and apart from that. Every human, by nature of their dignity as a human being, deserves the capacity to worship in the way that they want to worship, or if they choose not to – to worship at all, so be it. No one should be punished by their government for their religious beliefs or the religious activities connected to those beliefs.

QUESTION: We – while we are sitting here, critics, including State Department's own report, said that in eastern Ukraine, Russia-led forces continue to occupy religious buildings of religious minority groups for the use of – for the military facilities. You were at Helsinki. Was that a good meeting, and how has Russia's activities in eastern Ukraine been discussed?

SECRETARY POMPEO: So I've seen those reports about the Russians' use of religious facilities. That's never acceptable. It violates all sorts of central premises of how nations ought to be able to use religious facilities to protect your forces, creates real challenges.

With respect to Helsinki, President Trump made clear to Vladimir Putin that their activities in eastern Ukraine weren't in Russia's best interest. This administration's been incredibly tough. We've provided support to the Ukrainian forces there in southeast Ukraine that the previous administration repeatedly refused to do. We think this creates a space for the Ukrainian people to have a successful election come 2019, and we are very, very hopeful that that situation will resolve itself as America has made its continued commitment to support the Ukrainian people's desires.

QUESTION: The time is running out, so for the last question, you mentioned Russia. So there has been a lot of concern over Russia proposal to question former Ambassador McFaul. Do you have any –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, let me just stop you. It's not going to happen. The Russians made a proposal about a number of things during the course of the conversations between President Trump and President Putin. There were suggestions, comments, thoughts by President Putin with respect to that inquiry. President Trump was very clear we're not going to force Americans to go to Russia to be interrogated by the Russians. There's been a lot of noise about that; I don't know why. Just – the American people should rest assured.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for talking to VOA.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Great, thank you. It was wonderful to be with you.

QUESTION: Sure.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, ma'am.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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