

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 14, 2010

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) yesterday sent the following letter to President Obama regarding his upcoming trips to India and Indonesia.

October 13, 2010

The President

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in anticipation of your upcoming trip to Asia, and, in particular, your visits to Indonesia and India. Both countries are on USCIRF's Watch List due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom these two governments either engage in or tolerate. Your trip presents an opportunity to highlight the importance of religious freedom in strengthening and sustaining the growing partnerships between our democracies.

Indonesia's stability and its related commitment to religious pluralism and human rights are key U.S. interests within Asia and among other Muslim majority countries. Your visit offers a crucial opportunity to discuss ongoing religious freedom problems that weaken Indonesia's democratic foundations and undermine its reputation for religious tolerance and pluralism.

We hope you will raise issues of impunity and societal violence with Indonesia's political leaders and representatives of civil society groups. In 2002, the Commission placed Indonesia on its Watch List after sectarian violence in Central Sulawesi and the Malukues claimed thousands of lives and displaced tens of thousands of others. USCIRF remains concerned about the potential for renewed sectarian tensions in these regions, but notes that religiously-motivated violence has declined sharply and police have arrested or killed – and local courts have sentenced or executed – dozens of individuals, Muslims and Christians, responsible for past acts of violence. USCIRF also continues to monitor the implementation of sharia in Aceh.

In our visit earlier this year, USCIRF was impressed by the commitments made by officials from different levels of government to advance religious freedom and related human rights as

essential to Indonesia's democratic future. However, strong political forces, terrorist networks, and extremist groups continue to challenge Indonesia's democratic trajectory and are a source of ongoing, serious violations of religious freedom and related human rights. For instance, under intense pressure from extremist groups, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Home Ministry issued a Joint Ministerial Letter on the Restriction of Ahmadiyya in June 2008. While not an outright ban, the decree "froze" Ahmadiyya activities to private worship and prohibited Ahmadiyyas from proselytizing, although it also outlawed vigilantism against them.

We urge you to speak out publicly about why religious freedom protections, particularly as they relate to the rule of law and the full protection of religious minorities, are critical to U.S.-Indonesia bilateral relations and the development of free, prosperous, and peaceful societies. We believe that the vast majority of Indonesians will warmly receive this message.

We also urge you to reach out directly to Indonesia's growing civil society and religious communities as critical actors in the continued development of democracy and the protection of human rights. From our meetings with these groups while we were in Indonesia, we believe that they would welcome building partnerships with the United States. These partnerships would help them counter religious extremism, strengthen legal institutions needed to protect religious minorities, end discrimination based on religious affiliation, and provide training to end human rights and religious freedom abuses by police and local officials.

India is also ripe for a thorough exchange on issues of religious freedom. It is not only the world's largest democracy and occupies a key and rising geopolitical position, but it has the distinction of having within its borders a multitude of religious communities that have historically coexisted peacefully. A country with a Hindu majority, India has one of the world's largest Muslim populations, the current Prime Minister is Sikh, the past president is Muslim, and the head of the national governing alliance is Catholic. India's democracy, religious pluralism, and tradition of religious tolerance are truly noteworthy.

Despite this history of tolerance and the current national government's commitment to sustaining it, unfortunately episodic communal violence continues to occur. The governmental response, particularly at the state and local levels, has not been adequate, and justice for victims, such as those in Gujarat and Orissa, often has been slow and ineffective. This reality fosters a climate of impunity, and under such conditions members of vulnerable minority religious communities have few assurances of their safety and little hope of perpetrator accountability.

While more needs to be done, the Indian government at various levels has, to its credit, begun to confront the problem and created some structures to address these issues. For example, we welcomed the absence of sectarian violence after the recent court decision on the Ayodhya religious site, largely the result of proactive steps the Indian government took. The government has also worked to create fast-track judicial mechanisms to hasten the pace of justice in relation to sectarian clashes, such as in Orissa and Gujarat.

Considering the shared commitment of the United States and India to democracy and religious pluralism, USCIRF asks that during your trip you raise concerns about communal violence and related human rights abuses. There is much that can be shared between our two countries – one ancient and one young – about how to grapple with these challenges. Your raising these issues can be done through the lens of our own experiences dealing with minorities, as well as with reference to the international human rights standards that both our countries willingly embrace, in a way that encourages increased Indian government action to prevent violence and to bring perpetrators to justice. We also urge you to ensure that religious freedom and related human rights are included in the broader bilateral agenda, so that discussion of these issues will continue after your visit.

In closing Mr. President, raising religious freedom and related human rights during your visits to Indonesia and India will reflect the centrality of these issues in democracies and will further cement the growing bonds between our countries. We wish you much success during your trip.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo

Chair

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USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257