

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 1, 2001

Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency advising the executive branch and Congress, October 30 wrote Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, urging the Administration "to promote ... the idea of a future Afghan political system that practices religious tolerance and respects the basic human rights of all, including religious minorities and women."

The full text of the letter follows:

Dear Secretary Powell:

The members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom applaud your efforts to marshal support from the international community in our nation's campaign against terrorism. We are heartened by your statements that show a deep appreciation of the need to work with the international community following the current military campaign in Afghanistan "to create hopeful conditions within the country so that they (i.e., the Afghans) are not vulnerable to this kind of a threat again in the future." At the same time, we urge you, as we did President Bush in our letter to him of October 5, to continue to uphold, in all your efforts, our nation's firm commitment to protection of human rights, including religious freedom, for all.

The Commission believes strongly that the United States needs to be laying the groundwork now for a future Afghanistan that respects the rights of all persons, including the right to freedom of religion and belief, and strengthens elements of religious tolerance.

The U.S. cannot and indeed should not act alone in reconstructing a post-war Afghanistan. Without strong U.S. leadership to ensure the protection of religious freedom and tolerance, we fear that egregious persecution will soon again be the norm.

Many Afghans' experience of society, politics, and religion has been marred by the intolerant and harsh example of the Taliban who have violently coerced those under their control to follow a radically narrow interpretation of Islam in all aspects of life. Muslim Afghan women and girls have suffered in particular, at tremendous cost to the future of Afghan society.

Recognizing that the future form of Afghanistan's government is for the Afghans themselves to decide, the Commission urges the Administration to promote, in all of its programs for Afghanistan and contacts with the Afghans, with interested governments, and with the United Nations, the idea of a future Afghan political system that practices religious tolerance and respects the basic human rights of all, including religious minorities and women. Afghanistan's new political system should be committed to ensuring that religious belief and practice are based on conscience and personal values, rather than imposed by coercion and violence. It should uphold the international human rights norms guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the other international covenants to which Afghanistan is a party.

The Commission recognizes that political reconstruction in Afghanistan will be a tremendously complex and difficult task. We appreciate the fact that balanced ethnic representation has been publicly stressed by the Administration as a necessity for the stability of a post-Taliban government. But a commitment of such a future government to religious tolerance and pluralism, also central to stability, has not been so openly recognized as a U.S. policy priority. The Commission believes that it should be.

Thank you for considering the Commission's recommendations.

Respectfully,

Michael K. Young

Chairman

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael K. Young

- Felice D. Gaer Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya