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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has written to President Bush urging him to remain firm in his commitment to ensure freedom, including religious freedom, for all Iraqis. For four years, the U.S. government has identified Iraq as a "country of particular concern" for religious freedom violations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Now that Saddam Hussein's regime has been ousted, the USCIRF believes strongly it is essential to ensure that the Iraqi people can exercise their religious freedom in full accordance with international human rights standards and the human rights treaties to which Iraq is a party.

"The Administration should promote, in all of its reconstruction programs for Iraq and in its contacts with Iraqis, with coalition partners, and with other potential donors, including the United Nations, the idea of a future Iraqi political system that practices religious tolerance and respects the universal human rights of all Iraqis, including religious minorities and women," said USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer. "The Commission urges President Bush to ensure that this aspect of the reconstruction of Iraq has a prominent place in the next phase of U.S. policy towards that country, notably in U.S. actions, any UN mandates, and any ongoing judicial, legal, and democratic reform."

The text of the letter follows:

Dear Mr. President:

For four years, the U.S. government has identified Iraq as a "country of particular concern" for religious freedom violations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Under the Saddam Hussein regime, the Shi'a Muslim community was subjected to a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, arbitrary arrest, and imprisonment of its religious leaders. The Kurds similarly suffered harshly at the hands of the authorities. The regime sought to undermine the identity of non-Muslim minority groups, including Chaldean and Assyrian Christians and the Yazidi and Sabean Mandaean faith communities. The regime also completely repressed the Baha'i community and made all Baha'i activity punishable by death.

Now that Saddam Hussein has been ousted, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom believes strongly it is essential to ensure that the Iraqi people can exercise their religious freedom in full accordance with international human rights standards and the human rights treaties to which Iraq is a party. The United States can help this become a reality.

Some segments of the Shi'ite community have been vociferously demanding the implementation of Islamic law in a manner that may preclude respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Demands for an extreme version of Islam unfortunately find resonance elsewhere in the region. However, as Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl of the UCLA School of Law stated in the Wall Street Journal: "A dual commitment to Islamic law and democracy is possible, but only if Muslims understand Islamic law to reinforce the same commitments made by democracy to individual human rights and dignities."

In your State of the Union Address in January, you committed the United States to bringing to "the Iraqi people food and medicine and supplies - and freedom." Moreover, in your April 10 address to the Iraqi people, you pledged our government to helping Iraqis "build a peaceful and representative government that protects the rights of all citizens." The fall of Saddam Hussein brings with it the hope that all Iraqis may begin to enjoy the freedoms to which all people are entitled.

Mr. President, this Commission is concerned that, barring strong U.S. leadership to ensure the protection of religious freedom and the promotion of tolerance in Iraq, the horrific repression of the previous regime could be replaced by ethnic and sectarian violence and by egregious violations of religious freedom and other human rights against members of Iraq's diverse religious communities. The recent murders of Shi'ite clerics could be the harbinger of further violence within and between religious groups. Now is the time to act to prevent such an outcome.

The Commission therefore urges the Administration to remain firm in its commitment to ensure freedom, including religious freedom, for all Iraqis. The Administration should also promote, in all of its reconstruction programs for Iraq and in its contacts with Iraqis, with coalition partners, and with other potential donors, including the United Nations, the idea of a future Iraqi political system that practices religious tolerance and respects the universal human rights of all Iraqis, including religious minorities and women.

The Commission urges you to ensure that this aspect of the reconstruction of Iraq has a prominent place in the next phase of U.S. policy towards that country, notably in U.S. actions, any UN mandates, and any ongoing judicial, legal, and democratic reform.

Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's views.

Sincerely yours,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair

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.

Felice D. Gaer ,

- Dean Michael K. Young ,