

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON -- The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, wrote to President Bush asking him to raise with President Musharraf, during their June 24 meeting, U.S. concerns about forces of intolerance that have gained ground in Pakistan. The legislature in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, which is dominated by a coalition of Islamist political parties, recently passed legislation imposing social controls reminiscent of the former Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan. National discriminatory legislation such as the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws also create an atmosphere of religious intolerance and hatred throughout.

USCIRF Chair Felice Gaer said, "The right to freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right that must be protected in order to facilitate the political and economic development that will blunt the appeal of extremists who incite religious hatred and foment international terrorism. Successive governments of Pakistan have seriously violated the religious freedom of Pakistani citizens, and measures taken by the government of Pakistan to protect non-Muslims from violence or to bring attackers to justice have proven wholly inadequate. The United States must, in discussions with the Musharraf government, promote those elements in Pakistan which are under increasing pressure from the forces of intolerance and violence." The text of the letter follows.

Dear Mr. President:

Despite the closer cooperation established between our two governments following the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Pakistani government's finding and capturing al-Qaeda leaders, the forces of intolerance have gained ground in Pakistan. Islamist political parties made strong gains in Pakistan's national and provincial legislative elections last October. The legislature in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, dominated by a coalition of these parties, recently passed legislation imposing social controls reminiscent of the Taliban

regime in neighboring Afghanistan. Pending provincial legislation would establish religious police and enforcement mechanisms unaccountable to the courts. The potentially negative implications for freedom of expression and for the rights of women are obvious. Moreover, the strength of pro-Taliban Islamists in Pakistan threatens U.S. efforts to promote Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is a foundational human right that must be protected in order to facilitate the political and economic development that will blunt the appeal of extremists who incite religious hatred and foment international terrorism. We believe that it is in the U.S. national interest to promote those elements in Pakistan, including within the government of President Musharraf, which are under increasing pressure from the forces of intolerance and violence.

Successive governments of Pakistan have seriously violated the religious freedom of Pakistani citizens. Allegations, often false, under Pakistan's blasphemy laws result in lengthy detention of and sometimes violence against individuals because of their religious affiliation or beliefs. Ahmadis are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith and face criminal penalties for "posing" as Muslims. Ahmadis who refuse to disavow their claim to being Muslims are also disenfranchised.

Discriminatory national legislation such as the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws help create an atmosphere of religious intolerance and hatred in Pakistan. Since U.S. military action began in Afghanistan, Christian institutions in Pakistan repeatedly have been targeted by religious extremists, resulting in over 50 deaths. American journalist Daniel Pearl was murdered after having been forced to "confess" his religion as Jewish. Measures taken by the government of Pakistan to protect non-Muslims from violence or to bring attackers to justice have proven wholly inadequate.

The Commission therefore recommends that you urge President Musharraf to:

-- work toward the abolishment or reform of discriminatory or abusive legislation such as the blasphemy laws and the anti-Ahmadi legislation;

-- protect all of Pakistan's citizens and lawful institutions, including places of worship and

religiously-affiliated schools, hospitals, and civic organizations, from sectarian or religiously-motivated violence;

-- bring to justice the perpetrators of violent attacks and their backers;

-- ensure that legislation in the North West Frontier Province does not violate international standards of human rights, including religious freedom;

-- remove legal impediments to Ahmadis exercising their right to vote on an equal basis with other Pakistani citizens;

-- discourage the use of "jihadist" or similar political rhetoric inciting hatred against any religious group;

-- oppose attempts, undertaken ostensibly to protect religion, to stifle public debate or the right to freedom of expression;

-- lend his personal prestige to interfaith dialogue and inter-communal harmony by bringing Muslim and non-Muslim spiritual leaders and religious scholars together to promote religious tolerance and respect for human rights; and

-- intensify his government's efforts to improve the quality of public education and to ensure that religious schools are not used as training grounds for terrorism and sectarian violence.

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 ,