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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today announced its 2005 recommendations to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on ["countries of particular concern,"](#)

or CPCs. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) requires that the United States designate as CPCs those countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. The Commission's recommendations for 2005 include, for the first time,

Uzbekistan

. In addition, the Commission reaffirmed its 2004 recommendations that the Secretary of State designate the following countries as CPCs:

Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan,

and

Vietnam. India

was removed from the Commission's recommended list of CPC countries.

The Commission also has established a [Watch List](#) of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level requiring CPC designation but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments.

Indonesia,

remain on the Commission's Watch List, and

Bangladesh

has been added this year.

Laos

and

Georgia

were removed from the Watch List, although concerns about religious freedom in both these countries persist and the Commission continues to monitor them closely. In addition, the Commission is closely monitoring the situations in

Afghanistan, India, Iraq,

and

**Belarus, Cuba, Egypt,
and Nigeria**

□ **Russia**

Today the Commission is also releasing its [2005 Annual Report](#) with recommendations on U.S. policy for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress with regard to CPC countries, as well as other countries where the United States can help to promote freedom of religion or belief.

“Promoting religious freedom and related human rights abroad is vital to U.S. foreign policy and to our strategic, as well as humanitarian, interests,” said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. “It is only in protecting the universal human rights of each individual that all individuals and all communities around the world will be secure. In calling attention to these egregious religious freedom violators, the Commission seeks to focus U.S. policy on advancing a universal freedom treasured globally and enshrined in international documents.”

The *2005 Annual Report* may be found on the Commission's web site at www.uscirf.gov and may also be obtained by contacting the Commission's Communications Department at communications@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3240, ext. 24.

The following is the text of the **Commission's letter to Secretary Rice with 2005 CPC recommendations** :

Dear Secretary Rice:

In his second inaugural address, President Bush championed the value of promoting freedom and democracy around the world. “We are led,” he said, “by events and common sense to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom around the world.” Among the universal freedoms treasured by Americans and the international community, enshrined in our Constitution as well as international documents, is the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. During your trip to Asia last March, you yourself noted that freedom of conscience and freedom of religious conviction are the core values of democracy. Freedom of religion or belief is critical because, as you said, “people will

never be truly free if this most personal of decisions is imposed on them."

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by Congress to promote religious freedom and other freedoms throughout the world. In passing the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), Congress not only recognized the critical importance globally of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, but also made the promotion of this freedom a matter of U.S. law, thereby mandating that advancing international religious freedom is an integral part of the U.S. government's foreign policy agenda.

One of the Commission's chief responsibilities in this process, and one required by IRFA, is to draw your attention to those countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom and recommend that they be designated as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs. The designation of CPCs not only brings into the spotlight those countries where the most severe violations take place, but also guides important decisions in U.S. relations with these countries.

In compliance with IRFA, the Commission has assessed the facts and circumstances, including those in the State Department's 2004 *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*, regarding violations of religious freedom around the world. In furtherance of our statutory responsibility, for the 2005 CPC designation cycle, we recommend that you designate the following 11 countries as CPCs: **Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,** and **Vietnam**

As we have previously met with Secretaries of State to discuss these matters, the Commission respectfully requests a meeting with you prior to your CPC determinations for 2005 to discuss the Commission's full findings and recommendations on its proposed CPC designations.

Recommended Re-Designations

In September 2004, Secretary Powell re-designated **Burma, China, Iran, North Korea, and Sudan**

as CPCs. It is the opinion of the Commission that there have been no changes with regard to freedom of religion or belief to warrant the removal of these five countries from the list of CPC designations.

- The military junta that governs **Burma** uses a pervasive internal security apparatus to monitor the activities of all religious organizations. The government imposes restrictions on many religious practices, controls and censors all religious publications, and, in some areas of the country, forcefully promotes the majority religion over other religions. Members of minority religious groups, especially Muslims and Christians, are subjected to serious abuses of religious freedom and other human rights; in some areas, children are taken from parents and forcibly converted to Buddhism. Military commanders have conscripted religious minority members by force as porters, killing some who have refused.

- In **China**, the government continues to be responsible for pervasive and severe violations of religious freedom and related human rights. Every religious community in China is subject to restrictions, discrimination, and state control. The most serious religious freedom abuses are experienced by Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Roman Catholics, house church and unregistered Protestants, and spiritual groups such as the Falun Gong, abuses involving imprisonment, torture, and other forms of ill treatment. Though the Chinese government issued a new Ordinance on Religion in March 2005, its provisions in fact restrict rather than protect religious freedom, offering Party leaders more extensive control over all religious groups and their activities.

- The government of **Iran** engages in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and execution of persons based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Over the past year, the Iranian government's poor religious freedom record has deteriorated, particularly for Muslims who oppose the regime's interpretation of Islam, Baha'is, and Christians, all of whom have faced intensified harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. Just last month, a Christian man faced a second trial before an Islamic court on charges of apostasy, which carries a death sentence in Iran. For the first time in many years, the government has confiscated or destroyed Baha'i community property, including holy sites.

- There are no personal freedoms of any kind in **North Korea** and no protection for human rights. In pursuit of absolute control of all facets of politics and society, the government under dictator Kim Jong Il has created an environment of fear in which dissent of any kind is not tolerated. Freedom of religion or belief is essentially non-existent, as the government severely represses public and private religious activities and has a policy of actively discriminating against religious believers. In addition, North Korean refugees report that any unauthorized religious activity inside North Korea is met with arrest, imprisonment, torture, and sometimes execution by order of the government. The massive human rights abuses of the government constitute an enduring security threat on the Korean peninsula.

- The government of **Sudan** commits egregious and systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief against Christians, Muslims who do not follow the government's extremist

interpretation of Islam, and followers of traditional African religions, and has been recommended for CPC designation since the Commission's founding. As a result of the government's policies of Islamization and Arabization, two million people, mostly non-Muslim Africans in southern and central Sudan, died in the now-concluded North-South civil war, a conflict in which the Commission identified religious persecution by the government to be a major factor. Many of the Commission's recommendations on U.S. policy toward Sudan were taken up by the Bush Administration, including the Administration's decision to give peace in Sudan a higher priority on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. With the signing of comprehensive North-South peace accords during the past year, the conditions for religious freedom in certain parts of the country have changed significantly from previous years. The Commission's ongoing concerns are the egregious violations being committed by the Sudanese government in the North, and also in the western region of Darfur, where the government has exploited ethnic and religious differences in committing abuses against African Muslim civilians that the State Department has found to be genocide.

The Commission continues to seek a visit to China. We have, for the first time, recently received a formal invitation from the Chinese government. However, as you know, we attempted to travel to China twice in the past, but were thwarted both times by unacceptable limits imposed by the Chinese government. We hope to work with you and your staff as we negotiate a Commission visit to China this year.

Also in September 2004, Secretary Powell for the first time designated as CPCs **Saudi Arabia, Vietnam**

, and

Eritrea

. The Department of State's designation of these three new countries followed the Commission's own recommendations. The Commission believes that each of these three newly listed countries continues to warrant CPC designation. In the case of all three countries, it is important that the U.S. government not erroneously construe certain actions on their part, such as releasing a few prisoners while arresting others, issuing ambiguous decrees that are applied restrictively, and making as yet unfulfilled promises to the U.S. government, as genuine progress. For example, despite the Department's contention in the 2004 religious freedom report that there were slight improvements in Saudi government efforts to foster religious tolerance in Saudi society, the report again concluded that freedom of religion "does not exist" in

Saudi Arabia

. The Commission concurs, and finds that the government of Saudi Arabia not only persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam, but also continues to be involved in financing activities throughout the world that support extreme religious intolerance, hatred, and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. The government of

Vietnam

continues to harass, detain, imprison, and discriminate against leaders and practitioners of all religious communities. There is particular concern about ongoing pressure on the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam and on Montagnard and Hmong Christians, involving harassment, fines, and physical abuse to gain renunciations of faith. The government of

Eritrea

continues to ban the activities of all unregistered religious groups and closed their places of worship. It has arrested participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings, and detained members of unregistered churches and other religious activists for long periods and without charge.

Madame Secretary, the deadline has passed for the United States to take action on the CPC designation of these three countries. IRFA requires that the President not only name those countries that are the most egregious violators of religious freedom, as occurred last September, but also take specific policy actions within 180 days. When that deadline was reached on March 15, the State Department announced that it had asked Congress for "a little extra time," noting that there had been "real engagement" with Saudi Arabia. However, the Commission has seen no evidence of genuine progress with regard to freedom of religion or belief in any of these countries. By taking action on Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea, the U.S. government has an opportunity, in one small but critical way, to make President Bush's words about promoting peace through spreading freedom a reality.

Delays in the process serve only to signal that we do not take seriously our stated-and mandated-commitments to promote religious freedom and other human rights throughout the world.

Recommendations for New Designations

In addition to the eight countries previously designated last year by Secretary Powell as CPCs, the Commission finds that the governments of **Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan** have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and recommends that they be designated as CPCs this year.

- In **Pakistan**, the government does not provide an adequate response to vigilante violence frequently perpetrated by Sunni Muslim militants against Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians. Discriminatory legislation effectively bans many of the activities of the Ahmadi community. Blasphemy allegations, routinely false, result in the lengthy detention, imprisonment of, and sometimes violence against Ahmadis and Christians as well as Muslims, some of whom have been sentenced to death. Belated efforts to curb extremism through reform of Pakistan's thousands of Islamic religious schools appear to have had little effect thus

far, and many of these schools continue to provide ideological training and motivation to those who take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and abroad.

- President Saparmurat Niyazov's monopoly of power and absolute control over Turkmen society render any independent religious activity impossible in **Turkmenistan**. The president is also imposing an increasingly oppressive personality cult that impinges on all aspects of public life in the country. It is regrettable that a few insignificant developments which in no way change the fundamental absence of religious freedom in Turkmenistan repeatedly enable that country to evade the CPC designation it so unequivocally deserves. The decree on registration cited in the 2004 religious freedom report as evidence of "improvement"; in fact resulted in the registration of only four small groups and even they report continued difficulties. It is thus not clear what practical benefits registration provides.

- In addition to a restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function in **Uzbekistan**, which the Commission visited in October 2004, the Uzbek government continues to exercise a high degree of control over the manner in which the Islamic faith is practiced. Government authorities also continue to crack down harshly on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons in recent years, many of whom are denied the right to due process, and there are credible reports that many of those arrested continue to be tortured or beaten in detention. Though security threats do exist in Uzbekistan, including from members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and other groups that claim a religious linkage, these threats do not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill treatment of religious believers. The Commission's CPC recommendation for Uzbekistan should not in any way be construed as a defense of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*

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□
an extremist and highly intolerant organization that promotes hatred against moderate Muslims, the West, Jews, and others.

Commission Watch List

In addition to its CPC recommendations, the Commission has established a Watch List of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level requiring CPC designation but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments. **Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia,**□ and □ **Nigeria** remain on the Commission's Watch List, and **Bangladesh**

has been added this year. The Commission is concerned about the serious abuses in these

countries, and that the governments have either not halted repression and/or violence against persons amounting to severe violations of freedom of religion, or failed to punish those responsible for perpetrating those acts.

Government authorities in **Belarus** persist in enforcing the harsh 2002 law on religion, resulting in calculated and serious regulatory obstacles and bureaucratic and legal restrictions on the activities of many religious communities. The Commission will continue to monitor conditions in Belarus closely to determine if the situation rises to a level warranting CPC designation. Religious belief and practice continue to be tightly controlled in

Cuba

, where religious freedom conditions have been affected in part by the ongoing government crackdown on democracy and free speech activists, resulting in a generally deteriorating situation. The Commission traveled to

Egypt

last year and found that serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, including non-conforming Muslims, remain widespread. In

Indonesia

, though the situation has improved since 2002, the Commission continues to be concerned about ongoing sectarian violence and the Indonesian government's inability or unwillingness to hold those responsible to account. The response of the government of

Nigeria

to persistent religious freedom concerns continues to be inadequate, particularly to an ongoing series of violent communal conflicts along religious lines; the controversy over the expansion of sharia (Islamic law) into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states; and discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims. Finally, in

Bangladesh

, the Commission is concerned that democratic institutions and constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion are threatened by religious extremism and by the country's chronic political strife. Islamic militants have been implicated in violent attacks on politicians, members of religious minorities, particularly Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians, authors who promote different interpretations of Islam, and non-governmental institutions. The perpetrators of these crimes have largely gone unpunished.

Other Concerns

Though not currently on the Commission's Watch List, the Commission would like to draw attention to the troubling situation in **Russia**, where the Commission and the State Department agree that conditions for religious freedom have deteriorated in recent years. The Commission has long been concerned about the growing authoritarianism in Russia and the

unofficial favored status of the Russian Orthodox Church that have increasingly affected the right to freedom of religion or belief, including such developments as the law on religious organizations that has effectively prevented some religious groups from registering and thus practicing freely; continued acts of anti-Semitism, including the recent promulgation of two letters signed by prominent parliamentarians and others demanding the closure of all Jewish organizations and promoting classic anti-Semitic stereotypes; and an alarming increase in the number of attacks on Muslims, Muslim-appearing persons, and other religious and ethnic minorities. Last year, the Russian Supreme Court upheld a Moscow court decision banning the Jehovah's Witnesses in that city, making that group the first national religious organization to have a local branch banned under the country's religion law.

In addition, we would like to point to the situations in **Iraq** and **Afghanistan**, two countries that, while not on the Commission's CPC or Watch Lists, have been an extremely important part of our work. The United States continues to have a profound and critical role in these countries, which are emerging from decades of severe conflict and despotism where religious freedom was severely repressed by the state or where religion was manipulated as an instrument of the state. Advancing the right of all individuals in these countries to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief is indispensable to promoting stability and development toward pluralistic, democratic societies. Protecting this freedom will help safeguard open debate regarding religion in the state and in society, and permit alternative voices to emerge by allowing a right of dissent from state-imposed or prevailing orthodoxies.

The Commission especially urges the U.S. government to remain highly engaged in the process of restoring freedom and building democracy in **Iraq**, a key element of which is the development of a new permanent constitution for that country that will guarantee every Iraqi citizen's right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in accordance with Iraq's international commitments. Such efforts would not represent the imposition of American values and culture on others but instead reflect a determination to see that individuals from every religious tradition, including those from within the majority community, are able to enjoy the rights and freedoms enshrined in international treaties and instruments to which both countries are parties.

Changes in Recommended Status

Significant developments affecting freedom of religion or belief have taken place in **India** in the past year, and the Commission no longer recommends that it be designated a CPC. The May 2004 parliamentary elections resulted in a defeat for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, a political party associated with a group of Hindu extremist nationalist organizations that

had been implicated in growing violence against religious minorities in the country and the killing of as many as 2,000 Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002. The Supreme Court has taken significant steps designed to bring to justice those responsible for the violence in Gujarat. The new government has pledged to reject any kind of religious intolerance and return the country to its pluralistic traditions; proposed a law to halt and criminalize inter-religious violence; and taken immediate steps to remove the religiously intolerant portions of school textbooks issued by the BJP government. Despite these improvements, concerns about religious freedom in India remain, particularly indications that attacks on Christian churches and individuals persist, without adequate prosecution. The Commission will continue to monitor the situation in India to determine if the new government carries out its efforts to counteract the lately prevailing climate of hostility against religious minorities.

Finally, in light of recent developments, the Commission is removing Laos and Georgia from its Watch List. The government of **Laos**, responding to the concerns of the international community as well as of the Commission, has taken a number of steps in the past 18 months to address religious freedom abuses, including the re-opening of most of its closed churches, a public denunciation of official campaigns of forced renunciation of faith, and the release of almost all religious prisoners. In **Georgia**, the number of reported incidents of violence against minority religious communities has markedly decreased since the fall of the Shevardnadze government in late 2003. In addition, the sentencing in January 2005 of two of the leaders of this vigilante violence indicates that the current government has begun to hold the perpetrators to account. Nonetheless, concerns about religious freedom in both of these countries persist. Previous restrictions on religious practice put in place by the Lao government could easily reemerge, and the Georgian government's determination to pursue the perpetrators of vigilante violence could fade. The Commission will thus maintain its scrutiny of the situation in both these countries to determine whether developments continue to move in a positive direction or if a return to the Watch List is warranted.

Summaries of conditions in all of the countries discussed in this letter can be found in the Commission's Annual Report, which we have enclosed and which will be released concurrently with this letter. The Commission has made specific policy recommendations on most of these countries, and we encourage you to give special attention to those recommendations, which can also be found in our report.

Madame Secretary, in passing the International Religious Freedom Act, the U.S. Congress made a firm declaration that Americans care deeply about the right to freedom of religion or belief for all persons. Moreover, the events of the past several years have shown that supporting the cause of religious freedom is vital to our strategic, as well as our humanitarian, interests. Clearly, the policy of the United States must be to oppose particularly severe

violations of religious freedom throughout the world. The designation of CPCs and actions taken in response to such designations are among the most significant responsibilities conferred under IRFA.

The Commission looks forward to meeting with you to discuss its 2005 CPC recommendations.

Respectfully yours,

Preeta D. Bansal
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.

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- Felice D. Gaer