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RABBI DAVID SAPERSTEIN: Good morning – (off mike, technical difficulty) – press conference. I’m Rabbi David Saperstein and I’m honored to serve as a chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Before we launch into our topic this morning, let me take just a minute to introduce those of my colleagues in the Commission who were able to be with us here today. The first, immediately on my left, is Dean Michael Young of George Washington University Law School, the Vice Chair of the Commission. And Dean Young will have some comments on China when I’m finished.

Also here are Elliott Abrams, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center; John Bolton, senior vice president of the American Enterprise Institute; Nina Shea, director of the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House; and Firuz Kazemzadeh, secretary for external affairs of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States.

There are a few who are either not able to be here or not here yet. Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom; Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark who is in the midst of meetings at the Vatican; Dr. Laila Al-Marayati, past president of the Muslim Women’s League who recently had a child and has not yet begun to travel back and forth; and Justice Charles Smith of the Washington State Supreme Court, who is giving a speech today in Los Angeles.

I’d also like to introduce the Commission’s executive director, Steve McFarland. Is Steve in the room? Steve is holding his hand up in the back, and I hope you’ll take the opportunity to introduce yourselves to him. And I want to acknowledge the extraordinary work of the Commission staff, many of whom are here with us today.

Today is really a milestone event -- the issuance of the first Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom as foreseen under the International Religious Freedom Act or IRFA, which was passed in October 1998. Division of the IRFA process is this: The founders of our nation understood that the words, “we are endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights” put freedom of religion at the center of those fundamental rights. It is the first of the enumerated rights in our Bill of Rights; it is central to the human condition and to what we have striven for during so many decades of the 200-plus-year history of this country to ensure that the religious life of the individual and of religious communities could flourish without government restraining or interfering with that freedom. And this is part of the vision of human rights that cuts across the global community and as such, it ought to be a centerpiece of American foreign policy.

As we look around the world, however, we find that this fundamental liberty is under serious threat. In Sudan, the Islamist-extremist government is bombing Christian churches, church-run schools and hospitals. In China, we see mass arrests of Falun Gong practitioners, the harassment and arrests of leaders of the Muslim Uighur community, the continued systematic infringement on the Tibetan Buddhist religious freedom, the arrest

of leaders of the underground Catholic and Protestant churches in China. In Iran, Jewish activists who try to live freely as Jews today go on trial charged with espionage, and Baha'is have been sentenced to death simply for the act of trying to live out their lives as Baha'is. All these things testify that the work of this Commission is urgent work – work of fundamental liberty and of priority importance to this nation.

The IRFA process created an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom at the State Department and mandated a State report on religious persecution and religious rights once a year. That report, which you may have read, marked a significant change in the way business is done in the American foreign policy establishment. Over an extended period of time, there were foreign service officers in Embassies all across the globe and in regional bureaus here at the State Department who are focused on what to say about religious liberty, how to deal with it, how to express it, how to define it, how to describe what is happening on the ground, and what America's interests are regarding this vital issue.

More difficult decisions required the attention and involvement of high-ranking State Department officials. That alone marked an important structural change. As our Commissioners traveled to other countries this year, they met with and worked with foreign service officers who are now knowledgeable about issues of religious liberty in those countries and are involved in diplomatic efforts to combat religious persecution.

It is the role of this Commission, on an ongoing basis and then summarized once a year in the annual report on May 1 – the first of which you have in your hands – to make recommendations to the president of the United States and Secretary of State, and the Congress of the United States on how to address policy related to combating religious persecution and enhancing religious freedom.

Because of the delay in appointments of members of this Commission and in Congressional funding for its work, we have only been at full strength for six months and decided, as a result, to focus on three priority countries. Two are nations designated by the State Department in the IRFA process as quote, “countries of particular concern.” These are countries in which there are systematic, egregious, ongoing manifestations of religious persecution. Those two countries are China and Sudan.

At the same, we also selected another country, Russia, which reflected a completely different dynamic – a country that allowed much more religious freedom. There was not the same manifestation of religious persecution, but there were growing problems. And this was a country with which the United States has quote, “close relations,” and the ability to make its voice heard more effectively. And it is a country that has enormous influence in the newly independent states surrounding it. For all these reasons, we focused on Russia because there are so many religious groups in that nation, and in many ways it is a litmus test for what will happen in those states – (off mike, technical difficulty) – the collapse of the Soviet Empire.

The report we release today is the culmination of our works since the Commission first met late last June. We've held day-long hearings on Sudan here in Washington – on China in Los Angeles. Commissioner Elliott Abrams traveled to southern Sudan; other Commissioners have visited a number of other countries. We've reviewed the State Department reports and met with human rights and church groups, experts on economic sanctions and on war crimes, others with first-hand information about the situation of religious freedom in various countries. We tried to visit China, but the Chinese authorities have yet to respond to our request for visas.

We held meetings at least twice a month, one in person lasting one or two days; another by conference call. In addition, over the past months we've spent at least 25 additional hours in conference calls going over every word in our recommendations and text for the Annual Report.

To me, one of the most extraordinary results of the work of this religiously and politically diverse Commission is that both throughout the year and in this report, every recommendation and action was approved by consensus or often by unanimity.

Bonded by a deep and profound commitment to addressing religious persecution for all religious groups and furthering religious freedom for all, these Commissioners' openness to diverse views, new ideas, and different approaches, combined with the respect we had for one another's expertise, allowed us to present this report with the same overwhelming support as we have manifested in our recommendations during the year.

Lest there be any confusion, our formal report is the document so named. The second document is the staff report for the Chair, drawing on our work during the year. It provides helpful background particularly for those who were not familiar with the details of religious life in these countries. While I think you will find it a compelling indictment of religious freedom abuses in China and Sudan, we did not feel it necessary to resolve outstanding differences, nor to adopt it formally.

The Annual Report contains a host of recommendations. I want to focus on a few; you may ask about others in the Q and A. In Sudan, we confront a situation in which the government in Khartoum has conducted a 17-year civil war – a tragic, genocidal civil war that has taken some 2 million lives and displaced 4 to 5 million more, mostly among the African Christians and traditional animists in the south. Religious factors play a major role in this war. The Arab-Islamist extremist government is trying to extend Islamic law to the south, and it's trying to impose its extremist interpretation of Islam on all other Muslims.

In the last year in particular, the government has escalated its appalling policy of deliberately bombing civilian facilities in the south. It has repeatedly hit churches, schools, hospitals, and facilities of aid organizations – once or twice might be considered a tragic error, but this pattern represents no mistake. Dozens and dozens of such buildings have been targeted. Scores have been killed. These are clearly crimes against

humanity. This war must be brought to an end and the United States government must act more effectively to end it.

Now, we make our recommendations clearly acknowledging that the U.S. has done more than any other country to address the crisis in Sudan. The Administration should be commended for its efforts. But with the human rights situation in Sudan worsening, attacks on civilian targets escalating, and the prospect of new oil revenues fueling an intensification of the war efforts of the Sudanese government, more needs to be done now as urgently as possible. And so among our recommendations today is that the United States should increase the amount of food aid it ships into Sudan outside the United Nations Operation Lifeline Sudan program in order to get around Khartoum's unconscionable flight bans in areas whose populations it is trying to starve into submission.

We also urge the United States to begin a 12-month plan to pressure Sudan to end human rights violations. If it does, closer relations with the U.S. should follow; if it does not, the United States should make it clear that at the end of that 12-month period, it would begin providing non-lethal aid to appropriate opposition groups that adhere to specified human rights standards. And if the human rights situation in Sudan deteriorates markedly before that, the United States should act sooner.

We're also asking the United States government to earmark more humanitarian aid to the south for building roads and bridges to help get food to the hungry and to work peacefully as well towards establishment of a military no-fly zone over Sudan for the same purpose. And we strongly recommend to the Administration that it urge Egypt to play a constructive, assertive, and helpful role here to join and play a leadership role in the IGAD peace process.

The Commission discovered a serious loophole in the United States sanctions vis-à-vis Sudan. While it is illegal for companies to do business with firms subject to the sanctions, it is still possible for firms doing business in Sudan to raise money in United States capital markets. We saw that last month with the PetroChina initial public offering and IPO. PetroChina's parent, the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation owns 40 percent of the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, the Sudanese project that is providing Khartoum with huge new revenues to step up the war.

So we're recommending that steps be taken to prevent United States investors from inadvertently helping to fund crimes against humanity. We're urging the government to prohibit any foreign corporation from obtaining capital in the United States markets as long as it is participating in Sudanese oil field development. We also want Treasury's Office of Foreign and Asset Control, which is responsible for sanctions enforcement, to investigate, first, how much of the debt that comes from Sudanese operations China National Petroleum Corporation is going to retire using the IPO proceeds. And secondly, whether the United States underwriters should have known the CNPC would use proceeds from the IPO to retire Sudan-related debt.

Let's leave Sudan for a moment; we can return to it during the question period. I'd now like to ask our distinguished Vice Chair to walk us through the Commission's policy recommendations on China.

MICHAEL YOUNG: David, thank you.

It's impossible to ignore the serious deterioration in religious freedom during the past year in Chinese. Rabbi Saperstein has already given an outline of the problems. And we are not just talking about people being harassed or arrested, or fined for trying to live out their religious lives; we're talking about three-year labor camp sentences without trial, about multi-year prison terms, about people, including women, beaten to death by the police. The question the Commission faced was this: With China trying to join the World Trade Organization and obtain permanent normal trade relations status from the United States, how should this egregious, systematic persecution of religious people of practically every major faith be factored into the American response?

We thought long and hard about this. Many – and I am one – believe in free trade and that engaging China is far more likely to benefit everyone than trying to isolate Beijing. But we were convinced that for Congress to simply grant China PNTR at this moment, with no significant improvement in the state of religious freedom, would be to send Beijing a signal that these awful, inexcusable, inhumane policies did not require a more immediate response. And this we could not recommend. So we are recommending to Congress that it should grant China PNTR only if Beijing makes substantial improvements in religious freedom.

In deciding how such improvements should be measured, we urge Congress to look for improvements in the following five areas: China should agree to open a high-level dialogue with the United States on religious freedom issues; it should ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it has signed; it should permit this commission and other international human rights entities unhindered access to Chinese religious leaders, including those imprisoned, detained, or under house arrest; it should respond to inquiries about those detained for reasons of religion or belief, and about those who are missing, but were last seen in the hands of Chinese authorities; it should release from prison all religious prisoners.

Let me be clear: Our recommendation does not require that every one of these be met or that each be fully met. There may be other ways we have not mentioned in which China could act to improve its religious freedom. We chose these because we believe that progress in whole or in part in these areas would, first, make a real difference, and second, would reflect steps China could actually take in a relatively short time. The Congress must decide in the aggregate whether adequate improvements have taken place. We also think Congress should announce it will hold annual hearings on human rights and religious freedom in China, and should extend an invitation to the Dalai Lama to address it before granting PNTR.

I would like to emphasize that we have not said China should not be granted PNTR. We have said that it should make substantial improvements in religious freedom before Congress votes to do so or before PNTR takes effect. We are not looking to isolate or punish China, or obstruct bilateral trade, but it is our recommendation that requiring certain more immediate changes in Chinese policy is appropriate in the face of this alarming deterioration in the area of human rights about which this Commission has been charged to make recommendations and to strengthen as a factor in U.S. policy.

We have several other more technical recommendations regarding China but I'd like to highlight just one: that the U.S. use its influence to ensure China is not selected as a site for the Olympic Games until it makes significant improvements in human rights, including religious freedom.

Thank you.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Let me make one observation about our recommendations on Russia. We are particularly concerned about President Putin's recent proclamation that all religious groups not registered by the end of this year would be liquidated. This decree was little noted by the media and deserves significant attention both by the media and from the United States government. We urge that the United States make reversal of this decree an urgent priority in its discussions with the Russian government and that the president should raise this in his upcoming meeting with President Putin.

I would now like to open the conference for questions from members of the press about the issues we've raised in our remarks or about the more extensive recommendations that you see in the report, or about any other issues raised in the report from our description of our work in the first year to our plans for the coming year, as well as our evaluation and recommendations regarding the State Department's annual Human Rights and Religious Rights Report.

I'm going to ask my fellow Commissioners to join me in responding. We're going to try to be restrained -- one person take a crack at each of the questions here. And since Dean Young must leave, let me begin by asking for questions regarding China and then we move on to other subjects. Let me ask that the questions come from members of the media. We have a crowded room here. We want to give the media the opportunity to ask questions here. And let me ask people to identify themselves also as they are asking their questions.

Yes.

Q: My name is -- (inaudible). Does the report call for any action that would put the United States in the position of supporting the overflow of the government -- of the member states of the United Nations such as Sudan, for example.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: The answer is no. There is no call for that nor does anything suggested in the report I think remotely come under that description.

Q: (Off mike) – for undermining the government.

MR. ABRAMS: No. The purpose of that – what that recommendation says is that if in the coming 12 months there is no progress, with respect to the human rights abuses, particularly regarding religious freedom, that the people of southern Sudan are now suffering. The United States should be giving the groups that are protecting them some non-lethal, some humanitarian assistance. The purpose of it is to help the people of the south defend themselves and I remind you that we are also recommending a great invigoration with American diplomatic support of the IGAD peace process, the purpose of which is to reach a negotiated settlement between the government in Khartoum and the people of the south.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yes. Again, if people have China questions before Dean Young has to leave.

Yes.

Q: Kenny Bird (ph), Associated Press. I know you all had – with the vote coming up pretty soon on the World Trade Organization and China, is this kind – I mean is there any possible way you see that China could do anything before that vote? Isn't this just – just be perceived as kind of throwing this report out right in the middle of that vote as more of a political reason?

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Well, first of all, we're mandated by law to issue the report by May 1st – this is not an arbitrary decision that we made here. We actually tried to choose things that were doable. Again, it might not be possible to actually have a vote ratifying ICCPR, but the Chinese government could announce it will hold one when the People's Congress resumes and it will make the argument that ICCPR should be ratified. It may not be able to release all religious prisoners but it could begin with the ill and with children who are being held.

We chose things that really were doable in a fairly short period of time knowing they might not be completed but that in the aggregate, significant progress on the religious freedom front could be made. It is our genuine hope – our genuine hope that that kind of progress takes place and that the Congress therefore be able to grant PNTR. The clear majority of people on the Commission are either free traders and/or are people who can be instructive engaginists (ph) who really believe in the long-run that kind of engagement will be helpful, but the situation is so dire in the immediate context that we needed to see more immediate steps taken to address this issue.

Mike, did you want to add anything?

MR. YOUNG: (Off mike.)

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yes.

Q: My name is – (inaudible) – BBC Arabic Service in Washington. My question is concerning the Sudan – why the State Department Human Rights Report particularly mentions and talks about the human rights violations of the part of the rebels in south Sudan and the Sudanese Liberation Army. There is no mention at all your part of any kind of violations from the Sudanese rebels in your report. I wonder why we don't have it – why we have it in the State Department Human Rights Report – look to be more balance.

And also, why you are failing to identify or -- maybe not failing but within I think -- by not identifying the government of China of any ideologic and religious affiliation, you made it a point to identify the religious affiliation of the government of Sudan at the Arab Islamist many times reminding us of the Arab Islamist government of Sudan. Would that actually create more problems for people of faith?

Thank you.

NINA SHEA: Well, starting with your last question. The government itself is called the National Islamic front, so it identifies itself and the whole reason – one of the main reasons that we took up Sudan was because the government by its own description was trying to impose an Islamization/Arabization of the southern portion of the country so that and north as well. So that is one of the main reasons for the conflict. Our focus here is about – and China, by the way, is very hostile to religion across the board. We talk about that in our report as well – that it's an atheistic government – it's a communist atheistic government.

Our focus here is religious persecution – religious freedom. We have concentrated on that in this report. We don't get into a big in-depth description of the rebel movement because religious persecution is not at issue. However, in our background materials, there is a summary and a criticism of the human rights violations of the rebels.

And what was the first part of your question?

Q: The first part – I want to mention that I think – I wonder whether in – (inaudible) – that the Human Rights Report – (inaudible).

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Well, we evaluated the Human Rights Report and the Religion Reports of the State Department as you see from the chapter devoted to that at great length and made a number of recommendations on this.

Let me also out of fairness here point out that this was one of the few areas related to some of these questions that we had to dissent from Laila Al-Marayati who could not

be here. I think that dissent very eloquently speaks for itself and would refer you to it in the report.

Yes?

Q: I'm from Voice of China – (inaudible). Sir, your report, you had recommended that the – (inaudible) – joint session of the Congress before the United States because PNTR. So what significance do you attach to it? (Inaudible.)

MR. ABRAMS: I believe we actually said in the recommendations that simply that the Dalai Lama is an internationally recognized symbol of religious freedom and non-violence and that it would be very timely for Congress to recognize him for those roles by inviting him to address a joint session in the near future.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: In addition, let me just add that part of our responsibility is to try and raise the profile of international religious freedom issues in the work of the Congress and the work of the Administration. Obviously, inviting the Dalai Lama does that in a very demonstrable and significant way. So, you know, this is also a fulfillment of our general responsibility under the act.

Yes, sir.

Q: Al Millican with the Washington Independent Writers. In China this past year, the issues of forced slave labor and forced abortion – are they tied in with religious persecution at all?

MR. YOUNG: They may be on certain occasions. People may certainly have religiously-based objections to abortion. To the extent that there is a forced abortion policy, it will impact somebody who has those kinds of moral objections as well. It does not appear generally, at least from what we can tell that they are targeting religious groups in particular for those policies and so that has not played a major role in describing our conclusions in the report.

With respect to slave labor, the same is true. There certainly may be people who have been targeted. We are concerned about the people who are picked up, who are arrested, detained, beaten, disappear while in custody because of their religious beliefs and the religious activities in which they're engaged. If they are forced into slave labor or they are detained, in both cases that is a serious violation of religious liberties and we are deeply concerned about it.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: And quite obviously, compared to the State Department Report, that is a reporting report; ours is focused on policy recommendations.

Yes.

Q: Dave Risoph (ph) from Associated Press. Chairman, I wonder if the Commission and to what you are sensitive to the idea that you might be walking kind of a fine line in the – being a government advisory commission in a country that requires separation of church and state if in terms of the balance of the kind of criticism you offer in terms of whether or not you are in effect advocating religion in protection it.

JOHN BOLTON: I don't think advocating religious freedom, which is a basis of freedom of conscious generally is the same as advocating religion, but I think that everybody on the Commission is entirely conscious of the Constitutional restraints that we operate under and it's one of the reasons why we have deliberated so carefully on all of our policy recommendations.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yes, sir.

Q: Two questions. Do you have a money amount that U.S. investors have possibly sent to Sudan to support the – (inaudible) – government because this new poll you found of something. The second thing is this Commission was somewhat reluctantly created by the Administration to come up with some recommendations. When countered some of the Administrations policies, how seriously do you expect the Administration to take to support –

MS. SHEA: Well, regarding the capital markets question, the IPO of PetroChina is about \$3 billion. So it was offered this month – or this past month, April. So we don't know how much is going to Sudan – that's the whole point – that they were not asked to disclose that. That is not disclosed in the prospectus that they filed registered with the SCC. So that is part of the problem.

I'll let our Chairman answer the second part.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yeah, I want to invite – your second question is a very important question. I want to invite others to comment if I leave something out on this.

The Administration in the end supported this legislation with the changes that were made and it passed the Congress unanimously. This was a significant affirmation of the concern of the legislative branch of government and through its support by the Administration for this work – for focusing in our foreign policy on religious freedom issues.

On many levels over the past year, the Administration has been extraordinarily cooperative with us. We've had meetings with high-ranking officials in the State Department and at the White House when we have asked for them. We have made a number of recommendations of things we wanted done. It is hard for us to know since there were many other people speaking as well what the decisive factor was but in a number of cases, designating China as a "country of particular concern," raising the issue of the Copts in Egypt – there were a number of times that we made recommendations to the Administration that the Administration followed.

It is clear: They will have significant differences on some of our policy recommendations. I would hope that they would be relatively few, albeit important ones, to the Administration. I think that in this report is an analysis and affirmation of the importance of religious freedom in our foreign policy that this Administration has been comfortable with, has affirmed in the way the State Department has done its work here, as I indicated in the beginning.

I've personally traveled to countries and have been – you know, told by the foreign service officers there that this was an issue not on radar screen before and now they're meeting regularly with religious leaders and state officials dealing with these issues, and raising these issues. We can give a number of cases where this has really had an impact in a positive way in countries across the globe.

I would hope on the whole this Administration would find a great deal of agreement with us in the analysis that we offer and in many of the recommendations that we make. Where we feel they have not yet done enough here or where we differ on the best way to approach the same goal, I know that will be a respectful difference and I hope the dialogue that's existed with us over the last year that it's going to continue and I'm sure after this report, will be even more intensified – will be a constructive dialogue.

Finally, let me just make a point about Congress. Our recommendations are not just to the Administration; they are to Congress. And we hope that Congress will play its role assertively in furthering the goals of this legislation and the recommendations that we have made in the report as well. So these are recommendations that go to the entirety of the United States government here and we are confident that they will be well received in the main.

MR. BOLTON: Could I just one – (inaudible) – to that.

RABBI SPERSTEIN: Please, please.

MR. BOLTON: Several of us on this Commission are alumni of the State Department and are very well aware of – (off mike, technical difficulties) – gets formulated in the State Department where there are competing interests, legitimate interests that are argued out and a policy arrives there and in any Administration as a whole based on the relative merits and strengths of interests and values involved.

What Congress did in creating this Commission was to say it wanted a body which focused solely on religious freedom and developed policy recommendations that flowed from that so that what we do is intended to be part of the policy process, as David said, both within the executive branch and in Congress. And I think it's fair to say on behalf of all the Commissioners, we didn't formulate these policy recommendations with an eye to this Administration or to whether we were agreeing or disagreeing; we were trying to fill our responsibility as a Commission to come up with what we thought were the best policy alternatives and that would be true not just in this report but in subsequent

reports because these debates are not going to be resolved in one year -- they're ongoing debates and this is our first contribution to that.

MR. RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yes.

Q: Tom Ferry – (off mike). Tell me about the recommendations on the capital markets on Sudan – how if anything would it affect Talisman Energy in Canada if it doesn't do any further financing in the U.S. market?

MR. ABRAMS: Well, correct me if I'm wrong, Mike. The recommendations involve U.S. capital markets, therefore they would not involve Talisman if it did not choose to do any additional financing in the U.S. market. They would involve Talisman or any company that was actively involved in developing oil for the government of Sudan – filling oil fields for the government of Sudan and simultaneously trying to raise money in the U.S. market. We would have that kind of arrangement covered by the sanctions regime.

Q: But they're listing – they're still listed on the U.S. capital markets – their shares of the trade.

MR. ABRAMS: Sure.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Nina?

MS. SHEA: Our first recommendation under the capital markets calls for the government to make a complete change in its policy on those engaged in the designated national entities in Sudan, designated by the Treasury Department as sanctioned – that being Greater Nile oil project -- and asking for the United States to band those companies that are doing business with it in Sudan from U.S. capital markets. And so that – if that were to be adopted, that would have an effect on Talisman.

Q: It would be illegal to list their shares in South Africa?

MS. SHEA: Yes. That they could not –

Q: So they would have to de-their shares from the – (inaudible).

MS SHEA: Well, they would not have access to – they would not be able to list an IPO. They would not be able to offer an IPO.

MR. ABRAMS: And let me just add, I think they could not share additional shares on it. That is, they could not bring any kind of new or additional listing on any American capital market. Americans would be free to trade shares that are already deemed trade, but there would be no new shares.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: The major part of our recommendations here really want the government to play a more assertive role in evaluating exactly how these IPO offerings will be used and not to hold with its standard that if a majority of this money is not or their business does not occur in a sanctioned country, be it 48 percent or 30 percent, or 20 percent, that somehow they should be exempt from sanctions. That seems to be an arbitrary interpretation of the rules and regulations at play here and we're looking for the government to play more assertive role in making sure that companies that are benefiting the Sudanese oil effort are not able to benefit from U.S. markets.

Yes, sir.

Q: (Off mike) – International News Magazine. Just wanted to ask why weren't the issues about the religious freedom in Turkey about address where they were in – (inaudible) – in parliament. It's a question – you might want to dwell with that addressed in their court.

MR. BOLTON: As Rabbi Saperstien said at the beginning, we've decided to focus on three countries of our principal areas of investigation in the first year. And one of the reasons for that was because we wanted to come up with important policy recommendations for American foreign policy. And we specifically and consciously did not want to repeat the work of Ambassador-at-large, Robert Seiple who has issued a several-hundred-page report on religious freedom issues around the world. It was very clear that Congress' intent was not to have yet another report that runs through all of those issues. This is not to say that by not including a specific issue, we didn't think that it was worth addressing at some point. We have limited resources, we have a limited focus, we have clear objectives, and we focused on them as Chairman Saperstein indicated.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Does anyone else have China questions before Dean Young has to leave? You've had your hand up.

Q: Sort of related – (inaudible).

RABBI SAPERSTIEN: Great. Go. Go ahead.

Q: Why did the Commission stop short of proposing – (inaudible) – given the dire state of human rights?

MR. ABRAMS: Our job is really to improve the – try to figure out recommendations which would serve to improve respect for religious freedom. In the Sudan, there is a negotiation process underway, the IGAD process, which has that as one of its goals in which a number of countries have made significant – including the U.S. – significant diplomatic investments to which in theory the United States, the government of Sudan, a number of neighboring African governments are committed. And that seemed to us to be the way to proceed toward peace in Sudan and toward bringing more pressure.

We did take the step of saying that if none of it works after a year, the United States should be prepared to give some form of humanitarian assistance to rebels in the south who can serve the purpose of protecting the people of the south from the regime in Khartoum, helping to guarantee their religious liberty, and putting more pressure on the regime to grant more liberty.

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. ABRAMS: We considered questions such as those and I think it's probably fair to say that we want to start with diplomacy before we do anything with respect to supporting the southern rebel groups and we did not think that that was a – let me put it this way, we didn't want to get into a debate that was really about the nature of American aid and the nature of the rebel groups rather than focusing on what the international community and the U.S. government should be focusing on, which is human rights violations by the government in Khartoum and how to stop them.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yes. This is going to be the last question and then informally, we'll be delighted to talk with you afterwards.

Q: Could you elaborate, Chairman Saperstein, on the point about why the Commission is so concerned about Putin's proclamation about nonreligious or religious groups. Are there particular groups that you're specifically worried about?

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yeah, I'm going to ask Firuz Kazemzadeh to comment on this also. But let me begin here. In 1997, a registration law was passed. We have been successful in encouraging governments, particularly in the last year as part of the whole IRFA effort not to pass in certain circumstances – to withdraw restrictive registration laws. But this law did pass in 1997. It called for all groups to be registered, it allowed for a lot of investigation as to what those groups were about – a lot of interference with them in order to allow the government to evaluate this and it offered the possibility that groups could be liquidated if they were not registered by the end of the process envisioned by the bill.

Our Senate then passed the – our Congress then passed the Smith amendment – Senator Gordon Smith – that would have taken steps if this had been implemented here. The national government has been fairly good on this. There have been problems at the local level. We wish the national government would set tighter guidelines, but then in March of this year, President Putin issued a decree on the one hand extending the deadline for re-registration till the end of this year, but saying that those groups that did not – that were not registered would be liquidated. I mean that's not something the United States can stand idly by and what – that groups that don't meet – religious groups – groups that are clearly religious groups are going to be dismantled as a result of government action.

Firuz, did I get that right?

FIRUZ KAZEMZADEH: You certainly got that right. The entire question of registration is very touchy and it was bad to start with. But what Putin now has done – he has drawn or created a deadline and the word liquidation is used, which means as of next January 1st, all those groups become illegal – their activity becomes illegal, and that is a very heavy thing to put on literally thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of groups including some of the Russian orthodox groups that are dissenters from the official church such as the Old Believers, for instance.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: I want to express my appreciation to all of you and your interest in this issue. Please feel free to talk with us.

Let must just say one closing word. Congress in its wisdom decreed that this would be a four-year effort. It understood that change would not happen over night. But already, we are seeing change on the ground, affecting the lives of people. We're seeing it in the way the State Department does its work, we're seeing it in the impact our diplomatic efforts had in persuading countries, let's say, in Romania to withdraw harshly restrictive laws. Just two days ago in Egypt, President Mubarak issued a decree indicating he would no longer require the very cumbersome approval of church building – of new church construction in building and renovation that almost made the building of new churches impossible. He has removed those requirements. I believe in part this is because of more assertive efforts in our diplomatic relations with these countries.

This is a process of which the United States should be proud. One of the things that has particularly encouraged us is the number of countries that have approached Ambassador Seiple and said we are thinking of setting up a system like yours. Or we want to work cooperatively with you. I traveled with Ambassador Seiple to Europe. Last month we had meetings with government officials who said we want to also raise this as a priority issue on our concern. We want to look for opportunities to work together. We're going to be sending out your report for each country to our staff people – our foreign service officers and ask them to work with your people on this issue.

On that level, this is exceeding beyond – and more quickly – beyond what would have been our reasonable expectations. So this really is a process of which the United States should be immensely proud and we look forward to working with the Congress and the administration in realizing its full potential over the coming years.

Thank you very much.

(END)