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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

2005 CPC RECOMMENDATIONS AND ANNUAL REPORT

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*Transcript by:
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MS. BANSAL: Good morning. Thank you for coming. I'm Preeta Bansal and I'm chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. And I'm joined here today with three of my fellow commissioners: Nina Shea, who's also Vice Chair of the Commission, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou from Boston University and Michael Cromartie.

And we're here to talk today about the new recommendations for countries of particular concern that the commission has put out in our sec -- in our letter to Secretary Rice that has been released this morning and also the annual report with our policy recommendations. That is also being released today.

Just to give you a little bit of background, our commission was created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act which passed by a bi-partisan, almost unanimous vote of both houses of Congress. And the idea behind the International Religious Freedom Act was to enshrine and to make an element of United States foreign policy the encouragement of religious freedom, as those rights are defined in international instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

And so with the guidelines and the guideposts of those international covenants, we make recommendations to Congress, to the White House and to the secretary of State about policy recommendations about how best to promote religious freedom abroad. We also, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act, annually recommend certain countries that should be designated countries of particular concern or CPCs. And those are countries which according to the statute and as designed by the statute, have engaged in particularly egregious, systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom.

So I'd like, right now, just to tell you -- briefly list for you the countries that this year the commission has recommended to Secretary Rice should be designated countries of particular concern. We have, in addition to the -- we have the same eight countries that have been previously designated. We reaffirm our recommendations for re-designation of those, and that includes Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Vietnam. We also recommend three additional countries for CPC status which have not yet been designated by the State Department: Pakistan and Turkmenistan, which -- both of which have been recommended in previous years by the commission. And this year, as well, the commission for the first time recommends that Uzbekistan be named a country of particular concern.

The commission has also -- we also have established our own watch list which is a list of countries that we think merit heightened scrutiny and that we are very particularly and closely watching. Those countries include Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria. Additional countries that we are closely monitoring but that we don't, at this point, believe should be either CPCs or on the watch list, include Afghanistan, Georgia. Georgia is a country which we previously had on our commission's watch list and that we currently have moved down a bit but we're still continuing to closely monitor.

Also, India, which was previously a recommended CPC country by the commission, and now is a country that we are also going to continue to very closely scrutinize and monitor; Iraq, Laos and Russia. I would also add that Laos was a country that was previously on the watch list. But again we have taken it off for now, but we will closely monitor that.

So those are the 2005 recommendations in terms of the categories to the secretary of State. In -- let me just add that the commission is operating now in its sixth year of operation, and we've been drawing attention to policymakers about the growing importance and the strategic importance as well as the human rights importance, of protecting religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign policy, as an element of global security, as an element of national and global interest. We've been working with members of Congress and the administration in a truly bi-partisan effort to promote religious freedom abroad.

The annual report that we're releasing today provides a comprehensive review of our activities over the course of the past year: Our findings, our recommendations, our achievements and some of our specific policy concerns. The report also describes conditions of religious freedom in each of the countries I've outlined and specifically details some of the concerns within each of the countries.

In the past six years of our operation, the commission's recommendations concerning many areas in countries around the world have been implemented by the president, the State Department and Congress; and have had a significant protection in many regions -- significant impact in many regions of the world in terms of protecting this internationally recognized right of freedom of thought, conscious, religion and belief. The commission has always emphasized that CPC designation is not an end in itself but really only the beginning of a focused, diplomatic effort to promote freedom of religion and belief in the countries that are designated or recommended for designation.

Until 2004, the State Department limited itself -- the way it worked out was that the only countries that were named CPCs by the State Department were those that were already subject to presidential sanctions or actions in other areas. And so the countries that the State Department had designated as CPCs until 2004 did not require additional measures pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act. In September 2004 for the first time though, the State Department -- this is last year's cycle -- the State Department designated three new CPCs. Those were Saudi Arabia, Eritrea and Vietnam.

And those three countries, for the first time, were countries that had -- that were named as CPCs but that were not subject to already existing presidential actions or sanctions. So now that 2004 cycle is continuing, in the sense that the State Department is now determining what actions to take in response to those new designations. The commission has been working with the State Department, and we're all facing kind of new challenges in encouraging the full panoply of statutory mechanisms that are included in the International Religious Freedom Act -- because as I mentioned, that haven't been needed to be used previously. But in this last cycle, and we think in our new recommendations, they will be -- need to be fully explored.

Let me turn -- we're going to talk about each of the countries briefly -- or many of the countries that we specifically have recommended action on. But let me begin with just a few of them. And I want to begin with Iraq.

Iraq -- the commission has been very focused on trying to make sure that freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief is enshrined in the constitution and in the permanent documents and in the human rights policies of the new, reconstructed Iraq. We believe that the right is one that is central to any long-term democracy building strategy in Iraq and it's (in?) the region at large. The right is one that needs to be secured for every individual Iraqi. It strengthens the right of dissent, the right of -- from dissent from prevailing orthodoxy, and it's a right that is not -- it's not one that is limited just to religious minorities or should be limited just to religious minorities -- although it's very important for religious minorities. But it's a right for individual Muslims as well to dissent and debate within their prevailing tradition.

In the face of continuing violence in Iraq, particularly violence against religious minorities, the most urgent task faced by Iraq's transitional national assembly is in drafting a permanent constitution. And we gather that the initial stages of that in terms of the drafting committee have just been laid in the last 24 hours. The content of the permanent constitution will demonstrate that country's desire to join the international community and to abide by the international instruments to which Iraq is already a party.

The commission this past year, and it's -- in the annual report, there's a summary of it -- surveyed the constitutions of the predominantly Muslim countries in the world. And the dominant conclusion that emerged from that is that protecting freedom of religion or belief is not un-Islamic. The commission's survey of those countries, revealed a number of very interesting findings. First is that statements affirming the respect for freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief is -- it's an affirmation of human rights standards that have been recognized by many of the predominantly Muslim countries.

For example, more than half of the world's Muslims -- the Muslim population lives in countries that are not Islamic states and that do not have Islam as the state religion. For more than half of the world's population -- Muslim population lives in those kinds of countries. For those countries -- the constitutions of several countries that are predominantly Muslim, including many countries where Islam is the state religion, contain religious freedom guarantees that compare favorably to international religious -- human rights standards.

So again, this is not something that's -- you know, trying to promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief in Muslim countries is not something in Iraq or elsewhere -- is not something that's un-Islamic. Many of these countries themselves have provisions that favorably compare with the international standards.

Several of these countries that are predominantly Muslim also have constitutional provisions that protect the freedom of expression, association and assembly or the rights of equality and non-discrimination with regard to religion and gender, which compare favorably with international standards. So again, our survey of these constitutions of predominantly Muslim countries shows that the kinds of human rights, international human rights standards that we're

talking about and that have been enshrined in the international instruments, are often found within those countries.

And a summary of our report is actually within the annual report in one of the chapters. So, again, I would just emphasize that in trying to emphasize the importance of making sure that freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief is enshrined in the Iraqi constitution. It's important to bear in mind that this is not about trying to impose American values. This is about recognizing international standards that many Muslim countries themselves have recognized.

We also would emphasize with respect to Iraq, in addition to the permanent constitution, that there is a need to ensure security for all individual Iraqis. Iraqis are being forced -- there's an ongoing violence there as we all know. But this is having a particular affect on minority populations within Iraq. There's been an escalation of attacks on religious figures and places of worship that's had a particularly devastating effect on non-Muslim minorities including the Chaldo-Assyrians, the Mandaeans and the Yezidis. And Iraqis are being forced to contend with unlawful and sometimes violent imposition of extremist Islamic law by grassroots, vigilante groups and extra-judicial Islamic courts.

And so among our recommendations are that, one, we take steps -- the United States takes steps to work with other international actors to ensure that freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief is made part of the Iraqi constitution; that a high-level human rights monitor or a human rights official be stationed in Embassy Baghdad to engage Iraqis at the senior level on human rights issues in the permanent constitution; that Iraqi leaders be encouraged to include under-represented minorities such as Sunni Muslims and Christians in the constitutional drafting body; and that the United States support efforts to establish official Iraqi human rights institutions; and finally, a proportional allocation of funds to Chaldo-Assyrian communities be declared and that we ensure that use of these funds is determined by independent Chaldo-Assyrian representative. So those are some of our recommendations for Iraq.

I want to turn briefly to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well. Uzbekistan is a country that is -- that the commission is recommending for the first time this year be named a country of particular concern. And the commission actually traveled to Uzbekistan back in October 2004, and had a series of high-level meetings with government officials, all kinds of human rights groups, religious communities and with other civil society members. And what we have found is that because the government of Uzbekistan has engaged in what we considered to be systematic and egregious violations of religious freedoms that it rises -- that the activity rises to the level of the CPC status.

Since Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1992, fundamental human rights, including the right of religion has not been respected. Uzbekistan has a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function. And the Uzbek government continues to exercise a very -- (audio break) -- by degree of control over the manner in which Islamic religion is practiced. So, for example, the government has closed about 3,000 of the 5,000 mosques that were opened in 1998. Uzbek authorities have also continue to harshly crack down on Muslim groups, individuals and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that the government contends are associated with extreme political programs. This has resulted

in imprisonment of hundreds and even thousands of persons in recent years, many of whom can be subject to torture, denied rights to due process, and they're, as I said, tortured and beaten in detention.

The commission recognizes there are security threats and terror threats in Uzbekistan, including by members of a group called Hizb ut-Tahrir and other groups that claim a religious linkage. And this security -- we do believe that this security threat does not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill treatment of religious believers, especially of particular Muslims in that country.

By speaking out against Uzbekistan, the commission's actions and recommendations should not in any way be construed as a defense of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is an extremist and highly intolerant organization that promotes hatred against moderate Muslims, the West, Jews and others.

Some of the recommendations -- among the recommendations that we have for Uzbekistan are, one, the U.S. government really needs to speak in a unified voice in regards to its relationship with the Uzbek government. Last year, when we were visiting in October 2004, we heard from several relatively high-level Uzbek officials some confusion over the fact that on the one hand the United States had passed legislation slapping them on their human rights record and withdrawing/withholding certain funding, and, you know, a few weeks later they get more funding through the military. So, you know, there's a little bit of a disconnect obviously in the way in which we deal with Uzbekistan, and we would recommend that the United States really coordinate its message and try and speak with one voice.

So that's the basis on which this year the commission has recommended that Uzbekistan be added to the list of CPC countries.

Turkmenistan also, which is Uzbekistan's neighbor, is one of the countries that we would reaffirm our recommendation from past years that be named a CPC. The State Department has not yet named Turkmenistan a CPC, despite our past recommendations, and we encourage that they do so.

Turkmenistan is among the most repressive states in the world today, and the government engages in systematic and egregious violations of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Although there's scant evidence that the condition has improved in the past year, since our last year's recommendation, the secretary of State has not named Turkmenistan, and we continue to recommend that it be a CPC.

President Niyazov's all-pervasive authoritarian rule in Turkmenistan, an escalating personality cult, prevents any independent religious activity. He has amplified his personality cult with a book, which must be given equal prominence with the Koran and the Bible in places of worship. This is just kind of megalomania just gone wild.

In March 2004, the country's former chief mufti, who had opposed the elevation of this book, the "Rukhnama," was sentenced in a closed trial to 22 years in prison. In the same month, the president proclaimed that no new mosques should be built, and seven mosques were reportedly

destroyed in 2004. The 1997 Law on Religion effectively banned all religious groups except the state-controlled Sunni Muslim board and the Russian Orthodox Church. Security officials break up religious meetings in private homes, search homes without warrants, confiscate religious literature, and detain and threaten congregants with criminal prosecution and deportation. Changes in the law have resulted in the registration of four small groups; yet these groups still complain of restrictions imposed by the state.

So based on the fact that the record has not improved in 2004 and there are signs that it's actually gotten worse, we continue to recommend that Turkmenistan be named a CPC, and we sincerely hope that the State Department acts on this recommendation this year.

So with that, I will turn this over to my fellow commissioner, Shea, who will discuss some of our other recommendations.

MS. SHEA: Good morning.

I'd like to start with Saudi Arabia. The commission has recommended once again that Saudi Arabia be designated a country of particular concern. And last September, for the first time, the State Department agreed with U.S. and followed our recommendations and designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC.

The government of Saudi Arabia continues to enforce vigorously its ban on all forms of public religious expression other than the government's own extreme interpretation of a form of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. So this policy violates the rights of the large communities of non-Muslims: the foreign workers and its own nationals, who are required by law to be Muslims and are expected to be followers of this extreme interpretation.

Among those who are repressed are the Shi'a, who make up between 8 and 10 percent of the Saudi population. There's a continuing pattern of punishment and abuse of non-Muslim foreigners for private religious expression and practice in Saudi Arabia. In March, the religious police razed a Hindu temple near Riyadh and deported three foreign guest workers worshipping at the site. In the last month, a hundred Christians have been detained, some for several hours or days -- some are reported to be still detained -- for holding a religious worship service in a private home in Riyadh.

And despite the claims by the Saudi government that it has made limited revisions to the intolerant and inflammatory content in the state school curriculum textbooks, several groups continue to report highly intolerant and extreme language, particularly against Jews, Christians and Shi'a Muslims. Moreover, the past year there were frequent reports of violently anti-Semitic and anti-Christian sentiments expressed in the media and in sermons delivered by clerics who are under the authority of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

In addition to the repression and extremism inside the country, the Saudi government violates religious freedom outside its borders. Evidence has mounted that funding originating in Saudi Arabia is being exported to sustain an infrastructure for the propagation of extreme ideology around the world. It is financing and supporting religious schools and other activities that support religious intolerance, in some cases violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims.

In the past year, both the Dutch Interior Ministry and a German state government entity have publicly issued reports presenting evidence that Saudi-funded activities in their countries have promoted radicalization of the Muslim communities and hatred against non-Muslims. And Freedom House Center for Religious Freedom -- which I direct in my other life -- has also issued a report documenting extremist Saudi publications in the United States.

We are recommending -- that is, the commission is recommending -- that the United States stop approving the export to Saudi Arabia of items such as thumb cuffs, leg irons and shackles, which could be used by some of the Saudi agencies to perpetrate human rights violations, including torture, and to bar Saudi government officials from entry into the U.S. who are responsible for severe religious freedom violations or for propagating a religiously intolerant, hate-filled ideology throughout the world.

Next, another one of our CPC recommendations, one that has been on our list since the first year of the commission, is the government of Sudan, who continues to commit egregious and systematic violations of freedom of religion and belief. As a result of the Khartoum government's policies of Islamization and Arabization, 2 million people, mostly Christians and traditional African believers in southern and central Sudan, died in the now concluded north-south civil war. This was a conflict that the commission determined that religious persecution by the government was a major factor.

Many of the commission's recommendations in prior years on U.S. policies towards Sudan were taken up by the Bush administration, including the administration's decision to give peace in Sudan -- the peace negotiations -- a higher priority on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. With the signing of the comprehensive north-south peace accord during the last year, the conditions for religious freedom in parts of the country have changed significantly from previous years. Nevertheless, severe problems remain.

We're particularly focused on the Darfur region, where government soldiers and government-backed militias have employed some of the same abusive tactics and brutal violence that was used in the south now against the African Muslim civilians, including aerial bombardment, forced starvation as a result of deliberate denial of international humanitarian assistance and forcible displacement. These abuses have been condemned by the U.S. government as genocide. The government has exploited ethnic and religious differences in the Darfur region, consistent with its continuing coercive policies of Arabization and Islamization.

And separate from Darfur, the commission is also very concerned about the systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom by the government in the north of the country against Christians, against followers of traditional African religions and against dissident Muslims.

And among our many detailed policy recommendations for Sudan -- I would just like to highlight a few -- we have called for a stronger international presence -- for the U.S. to support a stronger international presence to protect civilians in Darfur, and for the U.S. to monitor closely the compliance with the north-south peace accords and the Security Council resolutions on Darfur, and to maintain existing U.S. sanctions until the Darfur situation is resolved and all religious freedom

violations end, and to ensure that the right of every Sudanese to religious freedom be guaranteed in the new constitution.

Finally, turning to Vietnam, the commission has recommended for the past four years that Vietnam be a CPC, and since the passage of the Bilateral Trade Act in 2001, human rights conditions in Vietnam have deteriorated. Over the past five years, 100 Vietnamese religious leaders have been imprisoned, over a thousand churches and meeting points have been closed, and the government has continued to crack down on ethnic and religious minorities.

These problems have not been addressed. In fact, in some areas, such as Vietnam's central highlands and northwest provinces, religious freedom conditions have deteriorated. The government continues to restrict the activities of organized religious groups, particularly those deemed to be seen as, quote, "disrupting national unity," such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the Protestant "house church" movement, the ethnic Montagnard among Christian groups, and the Hoa Haos. Gestures taken by Vietnam in recent months offer some promise of future legal change, but there has been little measurable progress.

We -- the commission is recommending that the U.S. government, consistent with its requirements under the CPC designation process, take some targeted action against Vietnam government, such as denying entry into the U.S. of any Vietnamese government official who is responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations, and to target any additional foreign aid money for Vietnam toward new human rights programs and economic development projects in areas with the most religious freedom problems.

And I will now turn it over to Elizabeth.

MS. PRODROMOU: Okay, I'm going to say a little bit about three watch list countries, and then one country that is not on the watch list but has been a country of consistent focus for the commission since the commission's inception.

Let me start with Bangladesh, recently added to the watch list. The decision to add Bangladesh to the watch list stems from the commission's concern with evidence of growing religious militancy, and also with chronic political violence. And these kinds of developments really threaten to undermine the institutions and the individuals that protect religious freedom in Bangladesh, and that are also committed to religious tolerance and moderation.

More specifically, the high levels of political violence and instability have really provided opportunities for Muslim extremists to expand their influence. There are also signs that -- there's also evidence that perpetrators of violence against religious minorities -- in particular, Hindus, Ahmadis and Christians -- have really acted with a good degree of impunity and have not been held accountable, and this speaks to problems in the justice system in Bangladesh as well. And there's real concern that this trend towards intolerance and violent vigilantism could increase and really negatively impact the religious freedom of all Bangladeshis, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

So as a consequence, we placed the country on the watch list. And we will continue to monitor the country and look for evidence of either improvement or, alternatively, for decline and the possibility of moving the country to the CPC list.

Okay. The second country, which is also a watch list country with which the commission is very concerned, is Belarus. We decided to place Belarus on the watch list for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the political authoritarianism in Belarus has really created constraints on religious freedom; as well, more generally, on human rights, the practice of human rights.

In particular, the government of Belarus has a very close relationship with the Orthodox Church, the Belarussian Orthodox Church, and this has resulted in a kind of de facto privilege position for the Belarus Orthodox Church in relationship to other religious communities.

And this kind of privilege is also informed into the 2002 Religion Law that was passed. It is considered one of the most repressive, in fact, in all of Europe, and it creates a host of direct and indirect impediments to the freedom of practice and belief that we associate with religious freedom; makes it very difficult through a series of registration criteria and re-registration criteria for non-Belarus Orthodox Church groups to practice with freedom -- for example, the Greek Catholic Church, the Belarus Orthodox Autocephalous Church, and also religious communities such as evangelical Protestants and Hare Krishnas, amongst others.

And then finally, our decision to move Belarus -- to put Belarus on the watch list stems from concern over anti-Semitism in society and, in particular, with some state officials in Belarus. And the government in Belarus really refuses to acknowledge the degree of anti-Semitism that is prevalent and demonstrated in society, so this has been a concern of the commission. And we certainly are encouraging the United States government to continue to support those persons and groups that really are engaged in the overall struggle against religious repression in Belarus.

Now turning to third country that I want to say a bit about on the watch list, Egypt, the commission traveled to Egypt in the summer of 2004, and on the basis of that visit, as well as continued monitoring, we have made a decision to keep Egypt on the watch list and continue very close monitoring. The government in Egypt has really not taken adequate steps, we feel, to halt repression and discrimination against both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, believers and non-believers alike. And in particular, issues of failure to hold accountable those individuals and groups who have carried out acts of violence against religious minorities, there has been a real problem with this as well.

Now there's a growing sense that Islamic extremism is also advancing in Egypt, with detrimental effects, obviously, for democratic reform. They are also members of the Muslim Brotherhood who are in the Egyptian Parliament, and this is a piece of the concern about the expansion and the growth of Muslim extremism.

Similarly, members of the countries minorities -- particularly Christians, Jews, Baha'is -- have reported repeated acts of discrimination, interference, harassment, direct and indirect forms of harassment, by the state security forces in Egypt.

So all of these taken together, along with demonstrated acts of anti-Semitism, have underscored our concerns with Egypt and the decision to keep the country on the watch list.

The president has repeatedly urged the Egyptian government to actually show the way towards democracy in the Middle East. And the commission, as part of that encouragement, recommends that the U.S. government establish a timetable for improvements in religious freedom and human rights activities in Egypt.

And then finally, turning to a country that's not on the watch list but that has been a concern of the commission, consistent concern of the commission from the IRFA legislation in 1998, Russia. Now Russia has been a concern to the commission not so much because of severe violations of religious freedom, but because of religious freedom as part of the overall fragile human rights situation and conditions in Russia. And in particular, we're concerned that progress on the rule of law, protection of human rights, and overall democratic freedom has been slow, especially slow in 2005.

We acknowledge, of course, that the practice of religious freedom in Russia is certainly freer now than in the Soviet period. But in 1997 a religious freedom law was passed -- a religious law -- a law on religion was passed in Russia. And again, this law on religion, along with an especially close relationship of many Russian officials with the Russian Orthodox Church, has resulted in preferential treatment for the Russian Orthodox Church vis-a-vis other religious groups -- for example, Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Salvation Army, amongst others.

Also the commission is very concerned with growing evidence of rising anti-Semitism. This was particularly acute in 2005, with anti-Semitic articles appearing in the media, and also with acts of vandalism and physical attacks on Jews and Jewish property on the rise during 2005.

So one last point as well -- the decade-long conflict in Chechnya has had implications for religious freedom in Russia as well, and this is something that the commission has dedicated a lot of attention to. Muslims throughout Russia report a rise in discrimination and violence against them due to the perceived link between Muslims and the conflict in Chechnya, and there are reports that Russian authorities have taken steps -- including arrests, et cetera -- against Muslims. Muslim human rights organizations and activists report these events.

So taken as a whole, Russia remains a country on which the commission focuses a good deal of attention, and we have recommended the U.S. government support, of course, Russian democrats in the government and civil society, as well as all of those voices, individuals and groups that are committed to international standards of freedom of religion and human rights.

Okay, I think I will turn this over to Michael, and he can conclude.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you. I'm going to talk about India and China and Pakistan, and then finally North Korea.

I begin with India, which was a country of particular concern to the commission, but is now a country on the watch list. Why is this? Well, there's significant developments affecting --

(Off mike.)

-- well, actually, it's being scrutinized, it's not on the watch list. And let me tell you why. There's significant developments affecting freedom of religion and belief taking place in India in the past year. In May 2004, the elections resulted in a defeat for the ruling BJP, which was a political party associated with a group of Hindu extremists and nationalist organizations implicated in the growing of violence against religious minorities and the killing of as many as 2,000 Muslims.

Following the 2004 elections, the new prime minister stated the government should reject any kind of religious intolerance and turn the country to its pluralistic traditions. One of the new government's first actions was appointing a committee of historians to remove the changes to school textbooks introduced in 2002, promoting views of Hindu extremist organizations.

Now another positive step was the rapid repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which many had charged with unfairly targeting Muslims. The new government also indicated that it will be proposing a law to halt and penalize inter-religious violence, a bill that will reportedly include swifter investigations to identify perpetrators, attacks on places of worship, and individuals on count of their religion.

So as a result of these dramatic changes taking place in India, particularly since the 2004 elections, the commission no longer recommends that India be designated a CPC, in fact no longer recommends that it be designated on the watch list.

However, I just want to conclude on India that despite these improvements, concerns about religious freedom do remain in India. Attacks on Christian churches and individuals, largely perpetrated by members of Hindu extremist groups, continue to occur, and these people rarely held to account by the state legal apparatus. In conclusion, the commission will continue to monitor the situation in India to determine if the new government carries out its stated efforts, which we applaud, but see if it carries out its stated efforts to counter-act the largely prevailing climate of hostility against religious minorities, and to bring perpetrators of religious violence to justice.

Now, China. The commission has recommended that China be designated a country of particular concern since 1999. The State Department has followed the commission's recommendation and has named China a CPC. Religious freedom conditions in China continue to be poor; prominent religious leaders and lay-persons alike continue to be confined, tortured, imprisoned, and subjected to other forms of ill-treatment on account of their religion and their beliefs.

Over the past 15 years, the Chinese government has slowly carved out a notable zone of toleration for government-approved and managed religious practice. However, at the same time, it has actively repressed and targeted as subversive unauthorized religious activities. It's important to note that Chinese authorities issued new regulations on religious affairs in March 2005, which they held as advancing religious freedom in China. However, legal and human rights experts agree that

the purpose of these regulations is not to extend protection for the rights of religious believers, but in fact to regularize the management of religious affairs, offering party leaders even more extensive control over religious activities.

Now I would note that the commission has tried to travel to China over the past two years, and past commission attempts to travel to mainland China have been canceled when the Chinese government placed unacceptable conditions on the commission's travel. In March of this year, the commission was again invited to China, and we hope our attempts to reach an agreement with the Chinese government will be acceptable when the itinerary is reviewed.

Now, Pakistan. The commission continues to recommend that Pakistan be designated a country of particular concern. However, to date the State Department has not designated Pakistan a CPC. It is important to note that sectarian and religiously motivated violence, much of it committed against Shi'a Muslims by Sunni militants, is chronic in Pakistan. The Ahmadis, the Christians, the Hindus have also been targeted by extremist groups. And police protection from these attacks appear to be ineffective. The Ahmadis who had numbered 3 to 4 million in Pakistan, are severely discriminated against and prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith, and also Pakistan's blasphemy laws continue to be abused.

Finally let me just say this about North Korea. As you may already know, in pursuit of absolute control of all facets of politics and society, the North Korean government of Kim Jong Il has created an environment of fear, where dissent of any kind is not tolerated, and where there are no -- simply no human rights protections. North Korea's become a human rights and humanitarian disaster. Over 100,000 North Koreans have fled into China. Severe human rights abuses inside the country are consistent source of friction with neighboring countries and contribute to regional instability.

The North Korean government severely violates, severely and violently represses all public -- all public -- and private worship activities and has a policy of actively discriminating against all religious believers.

Because it is so difficult to obtain -- and this is an important point -- because it's so difficult to obtain religious freedom -- to obtain information on religious freedom conditions in North Korea, the commission has begun an important study to document those conditions and the policies used by the regime to suppress religious practice. The study draws on interviews with former North Koreans who are now residing in South Korea. And I just want to call your attention to the fact that the study will be released later this summer, and all of you should plan to come to that press conference also.

David Hawk has done impressive research in the repression of religious belief and religious believers in North Korea. It's original research. He's talked to a lot of people who witnessed firsthand the abuses I've just cited.

Now you'll notice in the annual report several recommendations the commission has for North Korea. However, let me just highlight one of them. We recommend that as soon as possible, President Bush appoint a special envoy on human rights in North Korea, as mandated in the North

Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, and that he give the special envoy full authority to move forward on assistance to North Korean refugees and to new human rights and democracy programming, and expanded public diplomacy programs.

So I do want to highlight that the commission recommends that President Bush appoint a special envoy on human rights in North Korea ASAP. Thank you.

MS. BANSAL: Thank you. With that, we're happy to take questions on any of the things we've mentioned.

I would like to just acknowledge and mention that in the audience here today we have Rebiya Kadeer, who was a Uighur political prisoner and has recently been released by the Chinese, after international pressure, including by the U.S. government and by our commission. And we'd like to thank her for being here and acknowledge her courage. And welcome.

Okay. Let's start here.

Q: (Off mike) -- embassy of Bangladesh. And first -- (off mike) -- Bangladesh, being a country of religious harmony, historically, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is doing a magnificent job around the world protecting the human rights and -- (off mike). And having said that, the interesting thing would be now that we are on --

MS. BANSAL: I'm sorry. Do you want to stand at the microphone, so others --

Q: My name is Arshad, and I'm the press adviser to the embassy of Bangladesh here in Washington.

Firstly, I thank Madame Chairman for this wonderful panel that we have. And Bangladesh, as is known, historically is a national of communal harmony, and we can assure this distinguished audience, including Madame Chairman, that Bangladesh would definitely live up to its expectations and standards. But having said that, we are in dialogue with your commission, distinguished members of the commission, regarding how we can best serve and protect the rights and privileges of the minorities.

You have mentioned about the Hindus, you have mentioned about the Christians, you have mentioned about the Ahmadis. Any government of the day has a concern about it. Even this coalition government is carefully looking into this situation. And to the best of the ability, we would like to have the government being advised and prescribed of the best that we can do in order to contain it. But still, it is not out of hand. I can assure this audience it's not out of hand. There are sporadic incidents here and there, but we hope and pray that with the help of the commission and the advice of the commission, we could do our best.

My question to Madame Chairman is that, you know, South Asia has been a focal point, a flash point for all other international ramifications, political ramifications. And the Bush administration has deliberated the process of an engagement, a complete engagement. I use that word with confidence. Having said that, Madame Chairman, how would you envision the Bush

administration would partake of extending your commission's mission to help South Asia in containing the rise or threat of radicalism, human rights violation? That would be my question to you and to this distinguished panel.

Thank you very much.

MS. BANSAL: I would just say that the purpose of this commission is to shine a spotlight on action and inaction by governments where we perceive that's contributing to grave violations of religious freedom. And that was certainly the determination of the commission with regard to Bangladesh. And the rising extremism, as you say -- we have monitored Bangladesh now for the past couple years, and we look forward to engaging more with it.

Yes?

Q: Has anyone noticed any problem with Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army? I've heard that as many as 20,000 children have been kidnapped. And I believe this has been going on for -- I'm not sure the number of years it's been going on. But there have been a lot of efforts on the part of organizations there also to draw attention to this, to say this has been going on, and there doesn't seem to be any end in sight.

MS. SHEA: Yes. Thank you for bringing that up. It is a tragic, very serious issue of human rights. The concern that we have is government support for that -- of course, the Lord's Resistance Army is targeted at civilians and trying to overthrow the government of Uganda. The support, in the past, has been coming from the government of Sudan, and that is one of our considerations in keeping Sudan on the CPC list. So we really try to look at government's either tolerance or support or giving a safe haven to groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army.

MS. BANSAL: Yes, over here.

Q: A question for Mr. Cromartie.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, sir.

Q: If I could get you to the microphone, I'd appreciate it.

MS. BANSAL: Can you use this or do you need the other one?

Q: No, if Mr. Cromartie can use the microphone.

MS. JOHNSON: Can you identify yourself please?

Q: Yes, Steve Coleman with Associated Press. The question would deal with peoples -- does religious freedom include the right to change one's faith, to proselytize? And how does that affect missionary groups, say, for example, American missionary groups that may go in and try to evangelize?

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, that's a very nice question.

And the commission has consistently opposed and spoken out against countries that persecute people who do change from one religion to the other. Now the effect it has on missionaries is very important because what you have is a lot of missionaries who are very courageous, who at the risk of their own life and limb, do proselytize in situations that put their own lives in danger because of those -- because of laws that are condemning such evangelism. The other people that are courageous in this equation, of course, are the people who, upon reflection, actually do change religions and do so at the risk, as you just suggested, of their own lives.

Do you have a follow-up question?

Q: Yes.

MR. CROMARTIE: Go ahead.

Q: And is it not true that many countries define religious freedom as merely to practice the faith that one was born in, and no more?

MR. CROMARTIE: Well, no, that's true.

MS. BANSAL: Under the international instruments, the right to change one's faith is protected. And so the commission supports that right. We support -- we condemn restrictions upon that right. We also have spoken out where there have been forced conversions and forced renunciations of faith. So we are concerned with the right of individuals to both maintain their faith and to be restricted in their ability to change their faith.

Yes?

Q: Yes, I'm Al Milliken, affiliated with Washington Independent Writers. Isn't there a serious inconsistency with United States words and actions? Specifically, have U.S. actions in the Sudan matched the words of genocide? If what is going on in the Sudan is truly genocide, isn't the United States government response totally inadequate, insufficient to change what's going on, and perhaps giving other nations, most notably the Sudan itself, the idea that you can get away with not only murder, but genocide, and then become an ally rather than an enemy in the war on terror? And what does our U.S. trade deficit with China say about our concern with what you have stated in this report is China's pervasive and severe violations of religious freedom and related human rights?

MS. SHEA: The U.S. government determined that there was genocide in Darfur and has tried to -- has sanction regime on, including oil, on Sudan -- and has tried to get international support for that. We recommend that the U.S. go further now, and try to get more protection to the civilians. And to support that, we do not recommend unilateral occupation or invasion.

And the problem, you know, with declaring -- this is my personal observation -- the problem when you declare genocide; unless you go and invade the next day, you're not doing

enough. Because if it continues, you have a problem. And it is continuing. I personally think the United States has done more than other governments, but obviously it's -- people are still dying. The numbers are up to as many as 400,000 now. This is a serious, one of the most serious ongoing situations in the world, and the United States needs to get other countries to join with it to put an end to it. But it is a difficult situation and ultimately it's the responsibility of the government of Khartoum to stop it because they are supporting the area bombardments; they're preventing relief aid. The U.S. has given, I think, 50 percent of all international food aid, as I recall to Darfur in the last year. Fifty percent of its food aid is going to Dafur. We call on the government of Sudan to cooperate with the international criminal court now, which has a list of wanted perpetrators for this violence.

Did you have another question about China in there?

MR. YANG (Radio Free Asia): (Off mike.) I want to know have there been any ongoing -- (inaudible) -- with China in the coming months or years. And what are the main obstacles for your mission too -- (inaudible) -- to China, and are there any improvement from the China government's side -- (inaudible) --

MS. BANSAL: Well, we're hopeful. We have an invitation -- a recent invitation, a renewed invitation to come to China and we're working with the Chinese government and hopefully we'll be able to agree upon an itinerary.

In the past, there were restrictions. We had two cancelled visits that were literally the eve of the visit or the day of the visit were cancelled. And those had to deal with sudden last minute changes and restrictions and where we could go and with whom could meet.

MR. YANG: So -- (inaudible) --

MS. BANSAL: I'm sorry.

MR. YANG: When is the coming visit?

MS. BANSAL: We hope sometime this year. We hope in the next six to eight months.

Let me go here and then --

MR. PARASURAM: Parasuram (ph) from Agence France Press. Two quick questions. One is, you mentioned the fact that Vietnam remains a concern -- a country of particular concern and we just saw the U.S. government signing an agreement with the Vietnamese authorities on various provisions. One of which also announced that the Vietnamese prime minister would be visiting the country, first in 30 years since the Vietnam war. And you also mentioned that officials in Vietnam who are behind efforts to suppress freedom of religion should be barred from entering the United States. So, does this also cover the Vietnamese prime minister?

The second question is in relation to the commission's work basically -- I mean, projecting the image of the United States in trying to defend freedom of religion. But on the other hand you

hear of reports that the U.S. officers in Guantanamo Bay had desecrated the Koran, which basically had given rise to criticism from many Muslim countries. How would the commission regard this?

MS. BANSAL: With regard to the -- let me start with Vietnam, I think we should clarify that the recent agreement that we negotiated between the United States and Vietnam was in response to the CPC designation of Vietnam in 2004. So it was kind of the continuation of the cycle. Our recommendations that we're announcing today are for recommendations for the coming year and whether -- what the State Department does with our recommendations is something that they will decide kind of from here on out.

So, the Commission, as we put out the statement a few days ago, we continue to have some concerns that the accord doesn't cover all of the areas of religious freedom concern within Vietnam. And they are -- there are promises by the government of Vietnam which we have yet -- which we will have to monitor to see if there's actual real progress on the ground.

That being said, the accord and the negotiation of the accord recently, shows how valuable the CPC tools can be in terms of encouraging the United States government and other governments to engage on religious freedom issues. It was because of the CPC designation that the two governments got involved in those negotiations.

As far as the forthcoming prime minister's visit, I think if there are -- I think you asked whether or not the recommendation that high level officials be excluded would cover the prime minister. I think it would depend a lot upon what specific connection there is between particular officials and the acts of religious freedom -- the violation of religious freedom. I don't -- it's probably not enough for somebody just to be a head of a country in which religious freedom violations occur for our commission to want to recommend that they be excluded, but that there's specific direct evidence tying them to those violations.

And then, I'm sorry --

MS. BANSAL: Desecration of the Koran.

MR. (inaudible): Koran.

MS. BANSAL: In Guantanamo -- go ahead.

MS. SHEA: Well, we obviously oppose any desecration of the Koran by government officials and that is not U.S. policy and if that's happened we would be opposed to it.

MS. BANSAL: Yes.

Q: My names is Ali -- (inaudible) -- and -- (inaudible) -- and also -- (inaudible) --

MS. BANSAL: Yes.

Q: -- and actually she has a question -- (inaudible) -- I'll ask for her.

MS. BANSAL: Okay.

Q: And her question is about your --

MS. BANSAL: Yes. Could you come to the microphone?

Q: Okay. My name is Ali Saytoff (ph) and I'm from the Uighur American Association, and currently I'm assisting Miss Rabia Khadir and she has a question so I'm going to ask for her. And her question is about your upcoming trip to China. She is just wondering whether you are going to East Turkestan or Shinjan (ph) China -- (inaudible) -- because as you know, China has been using the war -- global war on terrorism to justify it's crackdown on the Uighur people.

China has been using it as cover because Uighurs are Muslim, the persecution is so bad. And she has just been released from prison like a month and a-half ago and she witnessed a lot of tortures and persecutions and a lot like prisoners in prisons. Uighur prisoners were there simply because they did something like illegal like religious practices according to what China says. So she was wondering, are you planning of going to East Turkestan? Thank you.

MS. BANSAL: Well first, again, we congratulate her on her bravery and thank her for being here. The commission has spoken out several times and repeatedly about the Uighur situation in China and that is certainly an area which we would like to visit and which we hope to visit as part of our trip.

Yes.

Q: I'm Dana Miles (ph) from Christian World News and I just had a question about the media advisory. You had said in that that the recommendations that you had sent to Secretary Rice for Saudi Arabia and Eritrea, they haven't been -- no action has been taken. Is it because there's progress in these countries that you've seen? That's the question.

MS. BANSAL: Again, this is for the 2004 cycle where Saudi Arabia and Eritrea were names CPCs by the State Department. They -- the State Department is -- had told us that they are working with the governments of those countries -- as it was working with the government of Vietnam. We, the commission, have not seen progress in those countries and we -- and that's why we continue to recommend that they be named countries of particular concern.

Q: And what progress do you have to see for them to be off the list -- for them to be taken of the CPC list?

MS. BANSAL: Again, we're different from the State Department but in terms of our recommendations, the progress we have to see is -- we have to see an on the ground change in the situation, not just promises of future change.

Yeah.

Q: (Off mike.)

MS. BANSAL: I think it would be better if you --

Q: My name is Sahi (ph). I'm from the Eritrea industry and we've been working with the commission and members of the commission have visited Eritrea. But I'd like to address my question or my comments to the media anyway.

MS. BANSAL: I think we're trying to keep this limited to questions.

Q: Okay. Well, I'll speak to you and then you can pick up and it would be a question then. If you look at the history of Eritrea with no issue of religious persecution of -- (inaudible) -- until 1998. And so this designation of Eritrea in the CPC is not acceptable because I don't think you have looked into the -- all the aspects that happen in Eritrea.

Eritrea is at war. The boarder has not be demobilized -- I mean demarked yet, and the issue now in Eritrea is that every able-bodied person should serve in the military and that religion cannot used -- be used as means to avoid that. But I'm willing to dialogue with you or with the media but I think we need to look into the entirety of the issue before classifying in Eritrea and the CPC category because Eritrea cannot be the same as -- cannot be on the same table as Saudi Arabia, Sudan or Vietnam. I think, we need to look into the issue of this. Thank you.

MS. BANSAL: Thank you. Any other questions?

Q: Is there anyone who can repeat that answer that I asked you, because our tape ran out -- (off mike) -- what progress needs to be taken in the country for the list -- for them to be taken off the CRC (sic) list.

MS. BANSAL: The CPC list.

Q: The CPC list.

MS. BANSAL: Well, for the commission, we're different from the State Department. Before our recommendations, we need to see real on the ground progress and changes in the situation, not just promises of future progress.

Q: This is Al Milliken again. I was just curious, particularly with a country like Cuba where we have such restrictions on interaction and travel there. Did anyone from the commission visit Cuba in the last year? Or how did you make your determination on a country like that? And also, I was just curious about -- I see that you mentioned that the Russian Supreme Court upheld a Moscow court decision banning the Jehovah's Witness in that city, making that group the first national religious organization to have a local branch banned under the country's religion law. And I'm wondering if anyone had studied extensively that supreme court decision, and was there any rationale beyond Jehovah's Witness belief system or, you know, I guess their obviously very active proselytizers?

MS. BANSAL: Well, I think -- the first part of yours was Cuba. Yeah, we have not traveled to Cuba, but we have heard concerns about it, and it was part of our ongoing monitoring. We added them last year to our watch list, and we continue to watch them.

With regard to the Russian court decision, it was the first time that a group has been banned altogether from its activities in Russia. So that's what raised our concern. And, you know, as we talked about earlier, the right to propagate one's faith, and the right to change one's faith are part of the internationally protected instruments -- internationally protected rights under the international instruments. And so, it raised concerns for us.

Any other questions?

Thank you very much.

(END)