

**THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**PRESS CONFERENCE  
ON THE RELEASE OF  
THE COMMISSION'S ANNUAL REPORT  
AND THE CPC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2007**

**WEDNESDAY, MAY 2, 2007**

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FELICE GAER: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Felice Gaer. I'm chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and thank you for joining us this morning. This press conference was called for the release of the commission's annual report and each year the Commission on International Religious Freedom proposes to the Secretary of State a list of countries that should be designated as 'Countries of Particular Concern'. These are countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom. It is our statutory responsibility to provide this information to the secretary.

The designation 'countries of particular concern' not only highlights countries with the most severe violations; it also lays the groundwork for U.S. policy options towards those countries. This year the United States Commission recommends to the secretary of State that the following countries be designated as countries of particular concern: Burma, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

My fellow commissioners will talk later in a little more detail about some of these countries. And all of them are included in the Annual Report, which I'm pleased to present today.

In addition to the CPC recommendations, the commission has established a Watch List. These are countries that do not rise to the level of a 'Country of Particular Concern' designation, but which require close monitoring. The countries so designated this year are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Iraq.

The commission is convinced that the governments in these countries either have not halted repression and or violence against persons amounting to severe violations of freedom of religion or have failed to punish those who are responsible for perpetrating these acts.

I'd like to take a moment right here to talk about a country that is neither on the 'Country of Particular Concern' list nor on the Watch List but is very much in the Annual Report of the commission this year and is very much in the news. It is the country Turkey, which the commission visited in November of last year to learn more about conditions of religious freedom and related human rights and the relationship of religion and the state.

The commission's delegation looked into the wider issues that affect religious freedom, including the country's model of secularism, democracy, rule of law, civil liberties, and the relevance of the European Union accession negotiations. Throughout the commission's visit, the commission noted the extent to which people of almost every tradition in Turkey confirmed that they were free to gather for worship as provided for in the country's constitution.

But for religious minority communities in Turkey, there are state policies and actions that effectively prevent them from sustaining themselves, denying them the right to own property as a community, to maintain the property, to train religious clergy, and to offer religious education above high school. This has led to the decline and, in some cases, the virtual disappearance of some of these religious minorities on lands that they have inhabited for millennia.

In addition to these difficulties, the members of some minority groups, particularly the members of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities, are sometimes subject to societal attacks, physical attacks, usually by nationalists or religious extremists. Regarding the situation for Jews in Turkey, concerns have arisen about attacks on synagogues in recent years and increasingly vocal anti-Semitism in some of the media.

Without exception, everyone the delegation met in Turkey, including those from the religious communities, stressed that European Union membership is the most promising means to advance religious freedom and other human rights protections and to drive democracy forward in Turkey.

In the past few years, in response to the European Union's Commission's reports regarding a start date for the Turkey accession negotiations, Ankara took important legal changes that have included a very wide series of domestic reforms and human rights matters.

Nevertheless, the commission found that religious freedom problems remain and we recommend that the United States government urge the government of Turkey to continue with legal reforms so that they will ensure full exercise of all human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief by all individuals and all religious communities in Turkey.

Now, the commission also concluded that the obligations under the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 for the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish communities in Turkey should be implemented and treated as minimum obligations for all individuals and all Turkish citizens.

Another country that is in the news and that the commission has watched very closely is Iraq. This year the commission has chosen to put Iraq onto its watch list for the first time since it was taken off after the change of government and we did so because of the deteriorating situation for religious freedom and belief. Despite ongoing efforts to stabilize the country, successive Iraqi governments have not adequately curbed abuses and the growing scope and severity of those abuses.

Now, although the Sunni dominated insurgency and other non-state actors are responsible for a substantial proportion of the sectarian violence and associated human rights violations, the Iraqi government also bears responsibility by engaging in human

rights violations through its state security forces and in tolerating, and in some cases even facilitating, religiously-based attacks and other religious freedom abuses carried out by armed Shi'a militias that have ties to the government itself.

The commission also notes the grave conditions for non-Muslims and other minorities in Iraq who continue to suffer pervasive and severe violence and discrimination at the hands of both the state and of non-state actors. Much of the violence against these minorities is committed by Sunni insurgents as well as by Shi'a militias. Nonetheless, the national and regional governments in Iraq, including the Kurdish regional government, are responsible for discrimination, social and political marginalization, and, in some cases, egregious human rights violations.

We have put Iraq on the Watch List this year with the understanding that unless improvements are made, the commission may designate it a CPC next year. Now, the commission has a long list of recommendations concerning Iraq; they are in the report. I'll highlight just a few. First, the United States government should urge the Iraqi government at the highest levels to undertake transparent and effective investigations of human rights abuses, including those stemming from sectarian, religiously-motivated, or other violence by Iraqi security forces, political factions, militias, or any other para-state actors affiliated or otherwise linked with the Iraqi government and it should bring the perpetrators of those attacks to justice.

Secondly, our government should also ensure that the U.S. foreign assistance and security assistance programs do not directly or indirectly provide financial, material, or other benefits to government security units or para-governmental militias responsible for human rights abuses or otherwise engaged in sectarian violence or Iraqi political parties or other organizations that advocate or condone policies at odds with Iraq's own international human rights obligations and, similarly, against those whose aims include the destruction of such international human rights guarantees.

Our government should also appoint and immediately dispatch a senior Foreign Service Officer to Embassy Baghdad to report directly to the ambassador and to serve as the United States' leading human rights official in Iraq, as repeatedly endorsed by the United States Congress.

Now, the commission has been very concerned that since 2003 more than – well, almost two million Iraqis have fled their country and a similar number are displaced within the country. This is a massive flight of more than one in 10 members of Iraq's pre-war population. Our commission has played a leading role in the efforts to encourage the U.S. government to increase resettlement options for members of vulnerable groups fleeing religious repression.

In November, the commission urged the State Department to allow members of particularly vulnerable groups to be given direct access to the U.S. refugee program. We've urged the State Department to develop strategies for protecting vulnerable religious minorities inside Iraq, including working with U.S. embassy in Baghdad to

begin conducting in-country processing for vulnerable Iraqis who are unable to leave the country safely. We're pleased to see that there is growing attention to this issue and we had a meeting yesterday, in fact, with Secretary Chertoff.

We have also put Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Cuba, Indonesia, and Nigeria on the Watch List, as I mentioned. You can read about our assessment of the policy – and our policy recommendations in the Annual Report. You'll also find in the report a detailed chapter on Russia, which the commission visited last year, in part due to our concern over the impact of new legislation restricting non-governmental organizations, including religious ones. Again, a negative trend that we saw there and that's outlined in the report.

In order to save time for questions, I'm going to ask each of my colleagues on the commission to highlight religious freedom issues in just one country of concern to the commission, but our report contains something on the order of 25 different countries that are addressed and, as I've indicated to you, 11 countries of particular concern along with another eight on the watch list.

The commissioners – as you may know, there are nine commissioners and we are very pleased that six of them could join us here today. I would like to turn the floor over to Vice-Chair of the commission, Nina Shea, who is going to speak about the situation in Saudi Arabia. Thank you.

NINA SHEA: Good morning. The commission has, since its inception, recommended that Saudi Arabia be designated a 'Country of Particular Concern' and recommends that the State Department continue to designate it as such. Criminal charges of apostasy, blasphemy, and criticizing the nature of the regime are used by the Saudi government to suppress discussion and debate and silence dissidents.

Public worship by non-Muslims is not allowed in Saudi Arabia. Many non-Muslims worshipping privately continue to be harassed, arrested, imprisoned and then tortured and deported. And it's one of the only countries in the world where you cannot find a church, a temple, or a synagogue. The Mutaween religious police conduct raids on worship services, including in private homes, and mete out extrajudicial punishments to individuals deemed to have strayed from appropriate dress and/or behavior.

An Egyptian Muslim guest worker last month reportedly was sentenced to death in the town of Arar for allegedly desecrating the Koran and renouncing Islam. According to media reports, a court found him guilty of no longer being a Muslim for violating the boundaries set by God.

Spurious charges of sorcery and witchcraft continue to be used by Saudi authorities against non-conforming Muslims. Members of the Ismaili Shi'a sect continue to suffer severe discrimination abuse by Saudi authorities. Some Ismailis are currently religious prisoners in Saudi jails.

Highly intolerant and discriminatory language and instructions for violence, particularly against Jews, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims, continues to be found in educational materials published by the Saudi Ministry of Education, despite the Ministry's stated efforts that it has revised and improved its curriculum. There have been frequent reports in the past year including by the State Department of virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Christian sentiments expressed in the official media and in sermons delivered by clerics under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

And you can find our many recommendations on Saudi Arabia to the United States Government on page 223 of our report. Many of them focus on the fact that there needs to be greater transparency and greater reporting requirements by the State Department to monitor progress including – progress on the promises that the government of Saudi Arabia has made. In particular, I want to highlight one and that is to create a formal mechanism to monitor implementation of the July 2006 confirmation of policies as part of every ministerial meeting of the United States and Saudi Arabia's strategic dialogue, which is co-chaired by Secretary Rice and foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Saud al Faisal.

So I'm not going to go into all the recommendations, which are extensive, but basically it is to communicate, to share information, and to continue pressing for greater improvements. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much, Commissioner Shea. We now ask Vice-Chair Michael Cromartie to speak about Sudan.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you. In Sudan, as you know, an authoritarian government has pursued coercive policies of Arabization and Islamization, resulting in genocide. The Sudanese security forces have not been held to account for the human rights abuses committed during Sudan's North-South civil war, most of the victims of which were Christians or followers of traditional African religions.

With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the CPA, in January 2005, religious freedom conditions have improved somewhat in southern and central Sudan. However, there are serious problems with implementing this CPA and the agreement has not yet resulted in significant changes in practice in government-controlled areas of the North.

The government's actions with regard to the continuing genocide in Darfur, as well as its failure to cooperate with the Security Council-mandated investigation by the International Criminal Court of alleged war crimes, impugn the commitment of Sudanese leaders to support human rights guarantees. The commission has called on President Bush to lend his personal prestige to enlist international support, including from the European Union, Sudan's neighbors, and nations such as China and India that have major economic investments in Sudan to press Khartoum to end its delaying tactics on CPA implementation.

The U.S. government should continue to press hard for the complete and timely implementation of the CPA's human rights, power sharing, revenue sharing, and security arrangements. And our government should consider new sanctions as needed to respond to non-compliance with the terms of the CPA, including targeted sanctions such as asset freezes and travel bans against individuals and institutions – for instance, the National Congress Party – identified as responsible for serious human rights abuses or for impeding CPA implementation.

Now, the report in our report on Sudan can be found on page 102 of the report. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Vice-Chair Elizabeth Prodromou will speak about the situation in China, page 120 of the annual report.

ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: China is designated this year a 'Country of Particular Concern' by the commission and, in fact, every year since 1999, the commission has recommended a CPC designation and the State Department has concurred with our recommendation for CPC designation.

Now, let me say a bit about the basis for this designation. Every religious community in China continues to be subject to serious restrictions, state control, and repression. This means that prominent religious leaders and others have continued to be confined over the last year's reporting period; they've been imprisoned, tortured, disappeared, and subjected to a range of other forms of ill treatment on account of their religious belief and practice – all of this, despite the fact that religious communities are growing rapidly in China and the freedom to participate in officially sanctioned religious activity increased in many areas in the country over the past year. Nonetheless, as I said, this is against the backdrop of continuing restrictions, state control, and repression.

Furthermore, over the same reporting period last year, conditions deteriorated for particular communities that are not affiliated with any of the seven government-approved religious organizations, according to the National Regulations on Religious Affairs. Especially acute are the conditions for religious communities such as Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Roman Catholics, House Church Protestants, and various spiritual movements including the Falun Gong.

Now, with next year's Olympics approaching in Beijing, the United States government – we've made recommendations that the U.S. government emphasize to Beijing that progress on human rights and religious freedom is certainly essential to maintaining healthy U.S.-China relations.

If you look at the annual report, you'll see the China report on page 120. It's the first country in the East Asia section of the report that begins on page 115. And you'll see that the commission has recommended that several mechanisms be implemented to strengthen U.S. diplomacy on human rights in China, in particular focusing on rights

defenders and legal activists, public diplomacy, and outreach programs that affect ethnic minority populations and overall human rights diplomacy.

In terms of the Sino-U.S. senior dialogue, the recommendations also include the point that China should halt its collaboration with the policies of its allies whether that's by denying protection to North Koreans who seek refugee status in China or also by extending economic and military assistance to the Sudanese government, which by extension shores up a genocidal regime. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. We've asked commissioner Preeta Bansal to speak about Bangladesh, a country that is on the Watch List and that the commission visited last year.

PREETA BANSAL: For the second year, the commission recommends that Bangladesh be placed on the Watch List. Bangladesh in the last several months has been in the throes of a major political and constitutional crisis. How it is resolved will determine the future, in terms of whether religious freedom and other human rights will be protected by democratic institutions and the rule of law or whether the country will continue on a downward spiral toward authoritarianism and intolerance.

The commission originally placed Bangladesh on its Watch List in 2005 due to a number of concerns. First there was concern of Islamist radicalism and violence as well as the then-government's initial downplaying of the problem. There was concern about anti-minority, particularly anti-Hindu violence that occurred following the last general election in 2001 and the failure by the government to hold perpetrators to account for that violence and other instances of violence against members of minority religious communities.

In particular, there was inadequate police response to a sometimes violent campaign against the minority Ahmadi religious community. There's also widespread discrimination against members of religious minority communities in public employment and access to government services.

And finally, we were concerned about the repeated and sometimes fatal attacks against journalists, authors, and academics for debating sensitive social and political issues, or otherwise expressing opinions deemed by militants to be offensive to the country's majority religion.

We visited Bangladesh in February and March 2006 last year and heard ongoing concern and new concerns about the upcoming elections then scheduled. In particular, members of religious minority communities expressed significant concerns about being excluded from voter rolls. The persons responsible for assembling the voter rolls were told to often bypass areas where people with surnames commonly associated with minority religious communities were living so that those communities were not registered. We heard concerns about minority religious communities and members of those communities being intimidated from voting in the forthcoming national election or

being targeted by anti-minority violence, as had occurred following the last national election in October 2001.

Based on these concerns and the concerns of a number of international NGOs, the commission joined the calls by a number of NGOs around the world in urging that Bangladesh postpone its general election originally scheduled for January 2007 because there was no indication that the elections could be free and fair. Those elections were, in fact, postponed and there was an installation of a new caretaker government and that has given the military a very high-profile role in domestic law enforcement. Since the installation of this military-backed caretaker government, there have been numerous reports of serious human rights abuses, including suspected extrajudicial killings by the security forces, arbitrary detentions, torture, and curbs on press freedom.

The new caretaker government has not yet announced a new general election date and there are concerns that the military-backed caretaker government may try to prolong its tenure beyond what is needed to prepare for a free and fair election. A prolonged suspension of democracy in Bangladesh would be detrimental to democratic institutions and the rule of law which the country has enjoyed for a number of decades.

We make a number of recommendations in our Annual Report. The chapter on Bangladesh in the Annual Report is at page 232. But foremost among our concerns given the current situation with the suspension of elections is that Bangladesh should return to democratic procedures and that the U.S. government should encourage that.

Bangladeshi authorities must uphold guarantees to protect religious freedom and equal treatment of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation or belief and set and adhere strictly to a publicly announced timetable for holding free and fair elections at the earliest practical date. And foremost among that concern is that members of all religious minority communities should be ensured access to the voting rolls and access to the democratic procedures.

MS. GAER: And finally, I would like to introduce Commissioner Richard Land, who will speak about the commission's designation of Vietnam.

RICHARD LAND: Thank you. Good morning. Thank you for being here. The commission's complete report on Vietnam is found on pages 152 through 164. We have numerous recommendations to make.

The State Department took Vietnam off the CPC list last year. The government has released some prominent religious prisoners, introduced some legal reforms, facilitated the legal recognition of some religious communities and individual meeting points, and except for isolated cases ended large-scale forced renunciations of faith. Despite some positive developments, the commission thinks the State Department's decision was not fully supported by the facts on the ground and prematurely ended a diplomatic mechanism that has produced positive results.

To paraphrase President Reagan, the commission believes that we should verify and then trust. As the last several months have shown, legal protections remain tenuous and the promise of broader human rights improvements have not lasted beyond Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization. Furthermore, since the CPC designation was lifted and Vietnam joined the WTO, positive religious freedom trends have, for the most part, stalled and Vietnam has initiated a severe crackdown on human rights defenders and advocates for the freedoms of speech, association, and assembly, including many religious leaders who previously were the leading advocates for religious freedom in that country.

Along with recommending that Vietnam be named a CPC, the commission has recommended that the U.S. government should fully implement the fund created last year, the Montagnard Development Program, to provide targeted humanitarian and development funds to ethnic minorities whose demands for land rights and religious freedom are closely connected.

We also believe the U.S. government should reallocate foreign assistance funds that formerly supported a trade program to new projects in human rights training, civil society capacity building, rule of law programs, education, and exchange programs.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. Before we move to your questions which can cover any of the countries that have been discussed this morning as well as those in the report, I wanted to highlight one more aspect of the commission's work and that is that two years ago, the commission conducted a study – a congressionally-mandated study – on the implementation of the expedited removal system, a process used to deport aliens from the United States.

The commission this year issued a report card and update on the U.S. government's implementation of the recommendations of that study; that, too, is covered in a chapter in the report. In essence, we found no significant difference between the situation two years ago and today, with the exception, ironically, that expedited removal was expanded after the report, rather than diminished.

We're ready to receive your questions. We would like to ask you to identify yourself and the organization you represent. Yes, sir.

Q: (Off mike) – Associated Press. Does the commission feel that religious freedom includes the right to run for public office? And if so – (off mike) – you'll have an attempt to prevent, to block, a candidate because he's a devout Muslim – (off mike) – has Turkey stepped over the line? Does this threat of action disturb you? (Off mike.)

MS. GAER: You're welcome to come back with that later. Let's just say on the situation in Turkey: it is not – the commission has noted with interest that those who are speaking about religion in Turkey and establishing the limits that you're describing are also Muslims. So we have a situation here where there are differences within the interpretation of religion and what is its appropriate place in public life in Turkey, which,

as you know, has been a hallmark issue and a constitutionally defined issue for the modern Turkish state.

The commission doesn't have a point of view on the specific political developments day-to-day that are going on in Turkey. But what I would say is that the commission has noted that secularism as practiced in Turkey is not the same as separation of church and state as we have here in the U.S. It has been a state control of religious practice in the public sphere in order to guard against what they consider the unchecked influence of religion on state policies and institutions, so that this is very much different and it is a matter of contesting about public policy. It is not a matter of contesting about religion per se. Further questions, yes ma'am?

Q: Yes, Richard Finney with Radio Free Asia.

MS. GAER: I called on you. Okay.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry, did I –

MS. GAER: Go ahead and then we'll take her next.

Q: I wanted to ask about Laos and Burma. Laos – their record during the last year seems to be one of a resumption of forced renunciations. Burma is still on the CPC designation list. Can you say something about the record of those two countries during the last year?

MS. GAER: With regard to Laos?

Q: Yes, with regard to Laos.

MS. GAER: Mr. Stahnke.

TAD STAHNKE: The commission has continued to report on the situation in Laos and it has been concerned with increasing reports of religious freedom abuses there. Despite the fact that it's not on our Watch List, we are taking note of that situation and have urged the State Department to investigate those reports.

MS. PRODROMOU: Sure, I can say a bit about Burma. We re-designated Burma a 'Country of Particular Concern' this year primarily because its already extremely poor human rights environment and record worsened over the past year, particularly when it comes to the condition of ethnic minorities, democracy activists, and international agencies trying to work in Burma. As you probably know, Burma is actually governed by a military regime, the State Police and Development Council. And that regime has continued to expand its already pervasive control over all aspects of human rights activity and religious freedom activities in the country.

And, in particular, ethnic minorities and then religious minorities, Christians and Muslims, have been subjected to a wide range of violations and restrictions on their religious freedom rights. And that military regime in many senses has pursued what amounts to an autarchic foreign policy so that Burma has become increasingly isolated over the last year with regard to the international community. So it's a progressive degeneration of the overall human rights situation with particularly acute conditions for Muslim and Christian minorities.

MS. GAER: I promised you the floor.

Q: Jean (ph) San (ph), Voice of America. I'd like to ask about the situation in North Korea. Could someone explain the basis for re-designating North Korea a CPC and also what are some of the key findings since the commission's 2005 report? And what are its recommendations to the State Department and the administration? Thanks.

MS. GAER: I assume when you refer to the 2005 report, you're referring to the report on the interviews with émigrés?

Q: Sure. Since then, or in recent years, what are some of the new findings?

MS. GAER: Good, thank you. Commissioner Cromartie will respond.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, well, North Korea, as you know, has virtually no religious freedoms. It has no religious freedom. There's no evidence that it's gotten better. In fact, there's more evidence that it's gotten worse. I'm not sure – Commissioner Gaer, you could tell me what page our recommendations are for North Korea in the report – (off mike) – but the – (off mike).

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. CROMARTIE: I'm sorry?

Q: Okay, your mike is on now.

MR. CROMARTIE: Okay, okay. Page 141 are the recommendations on North Korea. But I just wanted to say that religious belief of any kind by the government is seen as a potential competitor to the official cult and personality cult of Kim Jong-il and his late father Kim Il-sung. North Korea is a country that we all agree is perhaps the worst violator in the world of human rights abuses of any kind and also religious freedom abuses. It is just – the violations of religious freedom and human rights abuses in North Korea are appalling and no one seems to give us any evidence they're getting any better.

MS. GAER: Yes, ma'am.

Q: I noticed – thank you. What's –

MS. GAER: Could you identify yourself?

Q: Yes. Wiess Dwakve (ph) with Al Jazeera TV. I didn't see Israel on any report. I understand it's a democracy in the Middle East, this is what we hear here. But hundreds of Muslims in the Palestinian territories try to go attend the Friday prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque and they get stopped by Israeli military. What's your take on this?

MS. GAER: Well, the commission has not reported on Israel, finding this not to be a matter of severe violations of religious freedom as defined in the International Religious Freedom Act. I think you'll be familiar with the argument that these are issues of – the point you're making are issues of public order limitations on who can be in a particular area at a particular point in time.

Q: (Off mike.)

MS. GAER: Yes, there's a limitation on ages and a limitation on presence in certain particularly vulnerable holy sites as I understand it. Yes, sir?

Q: Dennis Crowley (sp) with United News and Information. Did your report on Iraq indicate that the violence or any kind of persecution was geared toward minority religions such as Christians or Orthodox Christian Jews or this also targets some Muslims because it seems as though there are mosques that are targeted by these suicide bombers. Is this specifically at the religion or is this a result of the sectarian violence there or just Muslim-on-Muslim violence, which seems to be pretty serious?

MS. GAER: The commission identified several different kinds of problems with religious freedom and violations of religious freedom in Iraq: violent attacks, sectarian you call them, Shi'a – Sunni attacks in which there's a failure to discriminate between people who are militants and people who are just ordinary people and who get attacked simply because of who they are and their religious affiliation.

Secondly, the commission dealt at length with issues of the discrimination, harassment, and other forms of attacks against non-Muslim minorities that includes ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Yezidis, Mandeans. And the commission report also goes into ongoing restrictions on the Baha'i, et cetera, that carries over from the previous regime. Thank you. This gentleman? You, right in the front row. Well, go ahead, we'll take –

Q: Charles O'Toole (sp) with – (off mike) – News Service. I noticed that three commissioners wanted to place Iraq on the CPC list this year and that it's considered for possible addition next year. I just was wondering if it's accurate to say that the commission believes, as a whole, that if the situation is unchanged but not worse in Iraq next year that it would qualify for CPC status.

MS. GAER: Oh now you're taking the terms of the language in our report and turning them around. Let me explain. The commissioners agreed that Iraq should be on

the Watch List. There is a footnote: three commissioners indicated their view that rather than waiting until next year to assess this that that should have taken place this year. I think what you're seeing is a consensus among the commissioners that this situation is very serious, very grave – it involves religious freedom violations – and that these must be addressed and addressed promptly.

As to next year, next year is next year and the understanding is defined in the report. And also I should have said earlier that we – in the press release that you have is the text also of the letter that we have sent to Secretary Rice and we have released that today as well. And you'll see the language quite clearly there as to our recommendation. And it's on page – the pages are not numbered, but it's page five of the press release. Thank you. Commissioner Shea?

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I just want to add to that that we're not going to be sitting on our hands for the next year on Iraq or any of these countries. We continue to take action and make recommendations, policy recommendations, and write about this and go public with different points, and we look forward to meeting with Secretary Rice about Iraq later this month in just the next two weeks about these issues of, the minority issues, the fact that the ChaldoAssyrian Christians and Mandeans and Yezidis, Baha'is and Jews are dwindling down to, the numbers are dwindling down to statistical insignificance.

It's a very, very dire situation, grossly disproportionate numbers of these non-Muslim minorities are in exile, have take refuge outside the country or displaced within the country, and it's – we got a letter from the American Mandaean Association saying that, estimating that 85 percent of their members have now fled the country. These are ancient groups that have lived there for millennia, so it's a very dire situation, we're very concerned with that, as well as the sectarian violence, as well as some of the policies of the government of Iraq that are harshly discriminatory against non-Shi'ites concerning the oil and the provincial elections.

Q: I'm Robert Marus for the Associated Baptist Press, and I want to follow up on that question, but I also want to go back to Turkey in a separate question. On Iraq, could you explain or could anyone on the commission explain what the difference of opinion on immediate CPC recommendation owed to the – owed to unwillingness on some commission members' part to admit that perhaps, or to make it look like you're saying the Iraq war has been a disaster for religious freedom in Iraq, or is it owed to something else, and back to Turkey, besides the conflict over the role of religion and particularly Islam in public society, that seems to threaten religious freedom in a sense that Americans understand it on the one hand, but another threat has sort of been in the news lately with the murders of three Christians in a more rural, more conservative part of the country in eastern Turkey, and what is the bigger threat to religious freedom in Turkey, or has the commission even discussed the various threats, both social and governmental, in Turkey?

MS. GAER: A lot of questions there. Let me take the Turkey question first. The commission – the murder of the three people working for the biblical publishing house,

the Christian publishing house, was a horrific crime. The government has acted to try to apprehend those responsible. That's possibly the only decent thing one can say about the situation, is that the government has acted. Incidents like this are particularly troubling in Turkey, and there have been a series of them over the last year. The commission met with Hrant Dink who, as you know, the journalist who was then murdered. Again, the government acted in that instance to respond to it, but the presence and such activities are of very serious concern in the case of Turkey. You have a complex situation, we have an extensive chapter for you, you write terrific columns about religious freedom all the time and always about our reports as well, so I encourage you to read it because I think I won't do justice to it right now.

(Off mike.)

MS. GAER: Pardon?

(Laughter.)

MS. GAER: On the question of Iraq, what is the significance of our determination? The commissioners and the commission as a whole considers religious freedom conditions in Iraq as truly alarming, and the commissioners said that if conditions do not improve substantially, we would give serious consideration to naming Iraq a CPC next year. As Commissioner Shea has stated, this commission doesn't have to wait until once a year to take action; we can name a CPC at any point in time. We're identifying a problem; we're analyzing that problem. Again, the chapter in the report is quite detailed; I encourage you to look at it with great care, and I think you can understand that this commission's designation of Iraq, which used to be a CPC in the – during the Saddam Hussein era, it was not taken lightly.

MR. LAND: Please, can I follow up on that?

MS. GAER: Yeah, Richard Land.

MR. LAND: You stole my thunder. I was going to remind people that Iraq was a CPC under Saddam Hussein. Religious freedom and every other freedom was a disaster under Saddam Hussein, and I think the commission is unanimously concerned about the situation in Iraq. I think there's a difference of opinion about how much we can know about how much the government is capable of doing and how much is, how much is – these are non-state actors or state actors and to what extent the government has the capacity to control the non-state actors. I mean, we are in the middle of a war, and war is chaos. But I think it would be unfortunate to say that Iraq was not a religious freedom disaster prior to 2003 because it was. It was a CPC, and we took it off the list, as a commission, after 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and I think it's fair to say that there's unanimity in concern, there is a consensus that is flexible on what to do about it this year and what to do about it next year.

MS. GAER: Commissioner Prodromou will speak on Turkey.

MS. PRODROMOU: Yeah, I'd like to follow up on the Turkey question. If you read the report, you'll see that on our visit to Turkey, which was the first-time visit of the commission to Turkey, we went on to learn more about the country, we visited with a range of religious leaders and human rights leaders as well as government officials and political party leaders. And I think what you're seeing in the news these days is exactly what you'll see in our Annual Report, which is that the challenge in Turkey is confronting religious pluralism and whether or not we're talking about Kemalists, that is, so-called secularists, or Islamists, that is the AKP government right now. The challenge is how to deal with religious pluralism, and this challenge has been historically and certainly in very recent times, including last week, especially significant when it comes to religious minorities, whether those are the so-called Lausanne minorities, Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Orthodox or Jews, or whether it's more recent religious minorities – Catholics, Protestants and others – and in addition to the assassination of Hrant Dink earlier this year and the murder of the three Protestants last week, there were two Catholic priests last year who were also killed. And this is part of the larger problematic of addressing religious pluralism in Turkey and how to deal with it in a democratic context.

MR. LAND: And, Commissioner, if I could just say, I didn't get to go on the trip to Turkey, but I want to really commend all of you to read the Turkey section of the report. I think it's – if you're not Turkish or if you're not an expert on Turkey, you will learn a lot about the situation in Turkey. I think the commissioners who went and the commission staff have done a superb job. I think the Turkey report is as good as anything the commission has done in recent years.

MS. GAER: You had a chance before, but we're on Turkey. Was it on Turkey, specific –

Q: On Saudi Arabia.

MS. GAER: It was on Saudi Arabia.

(Off-mike.)

MS. GAER: Go ahead, go ahead. And then I'll come around, I'm sorry. I'll come to you next.

Q: Barry Schweid of AP again. Every now and then, a senior State Department official comes forward publicly and tells the press how Saudi Arabia is cleaning up its act, particularly on textbooks. And I don't recall this being done in reference to other countries of which there is concern. Will you say, currently – this report is cast in terms of recommendations for Secretary of State Rice. Would you say the State Department and this commission see Saudi Arabia's treatment of religious minorities basically the same way, or is there some distinctive difference in perspective?

MS. SHEA: Well, I think that there is – can you hear me? Is this mike on?

Q: Yes.

MS. SHEA: – a distinctive difference with Saudi Arabia. This is not isolated instances of hate speech but it's a whole curriculum that the study group convened by the Crown Prince at the time in 2003 found themselves that it leads the student to think that the only way they can assert their own faith is by physically eliminating the other, and that's almost a direct quote of that study group of experts within Saudi Arabia, so that was their own assessment. So it's a pervasive curriculum that promotes hatred and violence of the other, including other Muslims. Two, Saudi Arabia is propagating this and spreading these textbooks – these are Ministry of Education textbooks, not just a private thing – that are spreading to every continent in the world, and in fact, there's a school outside of Washington called the Saudi-Islamic Academy that also used this curriculum. According to their own website, they claim that.

So it's extremely worrisome, and we've taken note of Muslim leaders like former president of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid, who said we're finding it here, even in our traditionally tolerant culture of Indonesia, and it's making inroads. So because of the pervasiveness of it, both in the curriculum, within the curriculum, and because they are exporting it and asserting themselves as the – the government, that is, asserting themselves now as the authoritative voice within Islam, and of course have the petrodollars to do this with, it's very, very worrisome.

And also, I mean, I think we have to keep in mind as Americans, the majority of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, citizens, and educated and indoctrinated in this material, and the head of Al-Qaeda is Saudi, Osama bin Laden, and so we have to ask questions, why is this happening? We have asked these questions and found that the education is a big, big problem. Thank you.

MS. GAER: I'd like to add, also, just to draw your attention to the chapter, in July 2006, the State Department announced the confirmation of policies by the Saudi government to address religious freedom issues. On page 224 of the report, the commission asks that the United States government ensure that there be regular reporting on a six-month basis on the results of discussions related to these policies and the list of the policies on which – that we believe can be monitored for clear-cut criteria are listed there at the top of page 224, analyzing the content of Saudi textbooks at the beginning of every school year is one of them, retraining teachers and principals to ensure tolerance is another, revising teacher manuals to include promotion of tolerance – these are not things we made up; these are part of those understandings.

I wanted to take this moment, also, to welcome Commission Executive Direction Joseph Crapa, who is here, who has been out ill and who we're all delighted can be here with us today and to whom we dedicated our Annual Report this year and this press conference. Now, gentleman I didn't call on, please.

Q: First, a question –

MS. GAER: And just identify who you are.

Q: Yeah, that's why I'm this is – (unintelligible) – for the press, so I wonder whether the embassies can talk as well, but if –

(Off mike.)

Q: The embassies can talk as well? I mean, this is an event for press –

MS. GAER: Well, we're asking for members of the press. I'm sorry, and you are?

Q: I'm from the Turkish Embassy, so –

MS. GAER: You're from the Turkish Embassy?

Q: Yeah. I don't know.

MS. GAER: Go ahead.

Q: No, I mean, it's a very quick, say, look, as a result of this quick look at the Turkey part, actually it's page 18, I see a reference to the so-called Armenian genocide there, although I don't see the relevance between the religious freedom and the Armenian genocide, the so-called Armenian genocide, but anyway, there is a reference there and that this page Turkey, sorry, 18, it says during the commission's visit, the issue of Armenian genocide was not raised by any interlocutors but the continuing refusal of the Turkish government to recognize the event continues to be a source of controversy in Turkey's relations with other western countries, including the United States.

Although the sentence is not very much clear, but if I conclude right, does it mean that, you know, Turkey's failure to recognize the so-called Armenian genocide creates a controversy between the U.S. government and Turkey? Is that so? I mean, should we conclude that way? Because as far as I know, American president every year makes a statement and he never names the event as Armenian genocide; he names the event as massacre, as you are very well aware. So I just wonder, I mean, out of curiosity, whether you had any other feedbacks from any U.S. government agencies that our failure to recognize to event as Armenian genocide –

MS. GAER: Are you asking if we were asked to use this language or if we chose to use it ourselves?

Q: Oh, no, I mean, this is of course an indirect question that you may pose for yourself, but my question is regarding whether you have any feedbacks from any U.S.

government agencies that this creates a controversy between my government and United States.

MS. GAER: We are an independent, bipartisan commission of nine, appointed by the President, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The report represents the work of the independent commission. It's our views and our findings, and as you know, the issue was cited here as something that was the basis for Hrant Dink's problems with the law, and we indicated here, the sentence that you read, that this issue is a source of controversy. I think anyone in Washington will agree that this has been a source of controversy. Did anyone else want to comment.

MS. PRODROMOU: I'd like to follow up on that. I think I listened carefully to your question, and I think you asked whether or not the Armenian genocide is a source of – the United States considers it a source of controversy in Turkish-American bilateral relations, and I think the answer to the question is that Ankara considers it a source of controversy because each time that there has been an Armenian genocide bill discussed in the United States Congress, that has been met with language that Ankara says is disagreeable, so I think the answer to the question is that Turkey considers it a source of difficulty in U.S.-American relations. U.S.-Turkish relations, excuse me.

MS. GAER: The gentleman in the back.

Q: Yeah, I'm from the Voice of America. My question is that there is a continuous restriction of Tibetan religious practice in Tibet, and then there is what he called the Panchen Lama, the young boy, still missing. And Beijing 2008 Olympics is coming soon, so what is your recommendation to the president about the Panchen Lama and the Tibetan cushion?

MS. GAER: Last week, there was a hearing at the Congressional Human Rights Caucus at which I spoke on this subject and would be happy to provide you with the text of that. Elizabeth, did you want to comment on this question as well? I mean, the answer is, the commission has asked that the Panchen Lama be allowed to be visited. The young boy who was designated by the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama and who disappeared in – 12 years ago, and who was 18 years old last week and therefore is no longer a minor has been a subject of concern of this commission as long as I think the commission has existed, and the answers we've gotten from the Chinese government on his whereabouts are that for privacy reasons that his parents didn't want him to be seen. No one has seen him. He is, in effect, a disappeared person. No one knows if he's alive or dead, well or not well, and we and hundreds of international statesmen, organizations and others have asked that the Chinese government permit him to be visited by impartial international observers. We're ready to go and be those observers.

MS. SHEA: Can I just add to that?

MS. GAER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, we made a recommendation that, regarding the 2008 Olympics, that the United States government provide materials to athletes, visitors, the spectators to the Olympics and security officials about the problems, about the rights, international human rights, their international human rights, but also the problems of recent human rights practices of the Chinese government concerning expression, religion, assembly, association, and this, of course, would include the situation regarding Tibet, as well as other Christians and Uighur Muslims and others – (unintelligible) – who are being repressed and persecuted.

MS. GAER: Are there further questions? Yes, sir?

Q: I'm Tony Czuczka with German Press Agency. I was just interested, how closely are you watching Central and Eastern Europe in terms of religious freedom slash human rights? What is your assessment? Is there a trend that you see in this region toward better or worse?

MS. GAER: The commission has monitored this region, with I would say particular interest, because of the – first of all – (unintelligible) – militantly atheist regimes in the Soviet Union and some of the countries in the region, and then changes in the area, so it's been an area of interest with regard to religious freedom. As far as Central and Eastern Europe, as opposed – I assume you're not including Russia and Central Asia in that – but the commission has a chapter in the report on its visit to Russia, which I think you'll find of interest. We have a chapter on Turkmenistan, which we are recommending for CPC status. In Central and Eastern Europe, if you're not talking – and Belarus, of course, which is on our CPC list – if you're talking about the countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and the Balkans and the Baltics, then I'll tell you, we maintain a review of those countries, and they were part of our annual review. We're aware of ongoing issues in the region, and I think Commissioner Prodromou wanted to add to that. Did you? Nope? And if you had a specific country, we would comment. Oh, and Mr. Stahnke wanted to comment.

MR. STAHNKE Let me just add, specifically with regard to some of the countries in Eastern Europe, the commission has done a lot of work in connection with U.S. participation in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and in that context has noted with some concern a proliferation of new laws regarding religious organizations that would appear to be promoting discriminatory practices, recognizing and in some cases even repressing certain disfavored, newer religious groups in some of these countries, and these laws have been enacted or have been proposed in a variety of countries, including Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and others.

MS. GAER: I realize I misspoke when I said Belarus was a CPC recommendation. I understand it's on the Watch List, so that's my error, but I think you've heard my point of view on that, inadvertently. (Laughter.) Further, on the OSCE points that Mr. Stahnke references, the commission has been a very strong supporter of the creation within the OSCE of three personal representatives on tolerance who deal with issues of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and discrimination

against Christians and other minorities. That involves the East European, the Central and East European states, it involves the western members of the OSCE as well.

MR. STAHNKE: There's no particular country or region right now in that area of the world, and I did mean, the Slav, German, Polish – (inaudible) – there's no particular country or region right now that we have a particular watch on.

MS. GAER: Of the non-FSU states, is that what you're asking about? At this point, we have not designated any such country. We do review them, and we have examined specific situations and concerns and have been concerned about legal questions and a number of other issues in the area.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I don't see any further requests for the floor. We promised we'd be out of here before 11; it's before 11. Thank you very much. Take the extra 15 minutes – read the chapters.

(Laughter.)

Thank you.

(END)