

## October 18, 2000: Commission Urges Sudanese Minister to Improve Religious Freedom

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to the Minister of External Relations of Sudan, Dr. Mustafa Osman Ismail, on October 17 urging that he follow up on his promise to work to improve human rights and religious-freedom conditions in Sudan. The letter follows a meeting in New York between Commissioner Nina Shea and Minister Ismail in which Ms. Shea outlined the Commission's concerns regarding religious persecution in Sudan. The text of the letter follows: Your Excellency: As chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I wish to thank you for meeting with Commissioner Nina Shea to discuss the Commission's concerns regarding religious freedom in Sudan during your recent visit to the United Nations. Commissioner Shea reported that there were many encouraging aspects to the meeting, and we look forward to further developments as a result. The Commission was created by Congress to monitor the facts and circumstances of religious freedom around the world and to make recommendations to the U.S. government as to how U.S. policy can most effectively advance religious freedom. The Commission is an independent advisory body appointed by the President and both Houses of Congress but separate from them. Commissioner Shea told of your interest in keeping Sudan out of the international spotlight. As she described, the Commission will continue to pay particularly close attention to events in Sudan as long as your government continues to engage in or tolerate violent, egregious abuses of religious freedom, including its brutal prosecution of a civil war in which religion is a major factor. The Commission has expressed four basic concerns in regard to the situation in Sudan: the bans on international humanitarian relief deliveries that have caused widespread starvation in many areas of Sudan; the bombing of relief facilities, hospitals, schools, churches and other non-military targets, which have killed and injured innocent civilians and threaten international relief efforts; the abduction of thousands of civilians (particularly women and children) into conditions of slavery and forced labor; the systematic abridgement of religious freedom in Sudan, including forcible Islamization through (a) the imposition of Islamic law on non-Muslims in the north, (b) the forcible Islamic "re-education" of non-Muslim children, and (c) reported manipulation of international aid in "peace" camps and in other government-controlled areas. In addition, the Commission is raising a fifth concern regarding Uganda: the support and sanctuary for the Lord's Resistance Army, which carries out systematic raids, rapes and kidnapping of neighboring Ugandan children. Commissioner Shea reported to us your specific promises to work towards lifting the government bans on international relief flights, to call for an immediate halt to the government's bombing raids, and to cooperate with Uganda and the international community in ending the terror of the Lord's Resistance Army. Such reforms would indeed improve human rights and the humanitarian situation. Commissioner Shea reported that you asked for Commission assistance in helping to bring about such human rights improvements and in reconstructing your country. As explained above, the Commission has advisory powers only and thus cannot intervene in American diplomacy or policy. In our May 1, 2000 Annual Report, the Commission proposed a comprehensive 12-month plan to significantly strengthen the United States' policy regarding the crisis in Sudan. As stated in Commission recommendation 1.2, the Commission would recommend improving diplomatic relations as well as providing humanitarian and other assistance to the extent that the Sudanese government improves its record on human rights and religious freedom. Commissioner Shea also relayed your invitation to the Commission to come to northern Sudan. Until now, because of the security situation in your country, we have not been authorized by the United States to travel in Sudan outside of Khartoum. We hope to be able to do so soon, and the Commission welcomes your invitation. We close by noting again your promises with regard to the international relief flight ban, the bombings of civilian targets, and the Lord's Resistance Army, and hope that the Sudanese government will institute such reforms without delay. We look forward to discussing progress towards resolving these urgent human rights matters both in the United States and Khartoum at your earliest convenience. Sincerely, Elliott Abrams

Chairman

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director