

March 19, 2003: Laos: Cmmn finds severe violations of religious freedom, also opportunity for engagement

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WASHINGTON - In a new report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom concludes that the government of Laos has engaged in particularly severe violations of freedom of religion, and merits designation by the Administration as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Commission draws attention to abuses including arrests, prolonged detention and imprisonment of members of minority religions, forced renunciations of faith of Christians, and extensive governmental interference with and restrictions on all religious communities, including Evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Baha'is, and Buddhists. In July 2002, the Lao government promulgated a new decree on religious affairs that provides a legal basis for control of and interference with religious activities. While some religious detainees have reportedly been released since July 2002, others remain in detention. "The United States has a unique opportunity to engage the government and people of Laos in a process of reform that would end the suppression of religious freedom and other related human rights, and relatively small measures of attention and assistance could accomplish a great deal," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. The Commission notes that "Laos is at an important crossroads" between those who advocate that the country follow the model of China or Vietnam, and those who seek to modernize the country by learning from the United States and other Western democracies that respect human rights. Therefore, as outlined in the new report, the Commission makes the following recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress: President Bush should designate Laos as a "country of particular concern" to make clear U.S. concerns over particularly severe violations of religious freedom in Laos, thus engaging the U.S. government in a process to promote changes that would advance legal as well as practical protections of freedom of religion and related human rights in that country. The U.S. government should urge the government of Laos to take specific steps to improve respect for religious freedom, including ending coercive and abusive practices, and should undertake to establish a bilateral human rights dialogue with measurable goals to eliminate violations. If the Lao government demonstrates a genuine commitment to change, the U.S. government should provide assistance to Laos to take steps to reform its practices, policies, laws, and regulations that contribute to religious freedom violations. This could begin with a State Department assessment of human rights needs in Laos, and assistance could include information, education, legal training, and technical advice. The Commission will discuss its report at a press conference on March 20, 2003, from 2:30 to 3:30 pm in 121 Cannon House Office Building. The report and recommendations may be read in their entirety on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov after the press conference.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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