

June 23, 1999: Inaugural Meeting of U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

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INAUGURAL MEETING ISSUES TIME-URGENT CALLS ON EGYPT, IRAN David Saperstein Elected Chair; Michael K. Young is Vice-Chair WASHINGTON, June 23, 1999 - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a 10-member body charged with advising the President and Congress on strengthening religious freedom and combating religious persecution worldwide, convened its first meeting on June 21, 1999 in Washington, D.C. Established by Congress through a unanimous vote in passing the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the Commission launched its work by setting its first year's priorities and scope and by sending two time-urgent appeals to President Clinton. The bipartisan members of the Commission unanimously elected Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and Michael K. Young, Dean of the George Washington University Law School, as the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Commission, respectively. [see statement by President Clinton] Among the Commissioners, (a diverse group appointed by the President and Republican and Democratic Leadership of the Congress), are prominent leaders of the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Baha'i communities; two former assistant secretaries of state; experts in international law, religious freedom and human rights; a law school dean; a justice of the State of Washington Supreme Court; and (as ex-officio) the former head of World Vision, an international Christian relief agency, who now serves as the United States' first Ambassador for International Religious Freedom. In setting its first year agenda, the Commission, which must make annual recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress on what U.S. policy should be in addressing the most serious abuses of religious freedom across the globe, decided to focus on: 1) Reviewing the facts related to, and U.S. policy regarding, countries evidencing severe and ongoing problems of religious persecution, including China and Sudan; and reviewing the facts related to, and U.S. policy regarding, countries which evidence downward trends in protections of religious freedom including Russia, India, and Pakistan; and 2) Reviewing ways of strengthening training of U.S. Foreign Service officers in recognizing and addressing religious discrimination and persecution as serious human rights violations as well as in developing greater awareness of religious freedom issues relevant to the countries in which they are serving. Over the summer, the Commission will be organizing its office and staff in Washington D.C. The Commission issued appeals to President Clinton on two time-urgent matters. On the occasion of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's impending state visit to the U.S., the Commission urges President Clinton to raise reports of infringements on religious freedom for some Muslims, Christians and others, with a particular focus on the widely reported 1998 arrests and torture of many hundreds of Coptic Christians in the village of Al-Kosheh and the failure of the Egyptian government to investigate these reports adequately. The second communication calls on the administration to continue to work at the highest levels to ensure protection of the rights of the 13 Iranian Jews recently arrested on charges of spying for the U.S. and Israel. *****The text of the Commission statement on President Mubarak's visit; the letter on Iranian Jews; and President Clinton's statement on the election of Chair and Vice-Chair of the Commission on International Religious Freedom follow: Statement of U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom On President Mubarak's Visit to the U.S. June 24, 1999 "This week President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt will be on a state visit to the United States. Egypt has for decades been a close friend of our country, and in this context we urge our government to raise with him the question of religious freedom in Egypt." "We are particularly concerned about the difficult plight of the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt and the reports of false arrest and torture of hundreds of Christians in the village of Al Kosheh last year - acts which have never been investigated adequately or prosecuted by the Government of Egypt. The Coptic community is, according to reliable reporting by human rights groups, finding it increasingly difficult to practice its faith freely." "If the situation of Coptic Christians is raised with him at the highest levels of the U.S. Government, President Mubarak will understand how strongly millions of Americans care about these reported human rights violations and about the future of the largest Christian community in the Middle East. Moreover, other actions by the Government of Egypt, including a pending law (which has already been passed by Parliament but not yet enacted), which would severely curtail action by human rights groups and reporting on violations of freedom of religion, affect Muslim groups as well and broadly inhibit free exercise of religion there. A historic tradition of tolerance among Egypt's religious communities is put at risk by such government actions." ***** Letter to President Clinton on Arrest of Iranian Jews from U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom June 24, 1999 Dear Mr. President: On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, we write to express our urgent concern over reports regarding the plight of the at least 13 Jews arrested this spring in Iran. From all reports, it appears that even after months in custody, they have not even been told of the specific charges against them, and the judicial proceedings to which Iranian authorities refer are yet to even begin. You have already called for the release of the imprisoned Jews. We call on you to continue, both directly and through governments throughout the world, to press the issue of these prisoners, to insure that their rights are fully protected, and to seek a credible affirmation of Iran's commitment to the protection of religious freedom and due process for all, including religious minorities, in Iran. Respectfully, Rabbi David Saperstein Chair, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom - If Michael K. Young Vice-Chair, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ***** Statement of President Clinton on Election of Chair and Vice-Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom "I was very pleased to learn of the selection of Rabbi David Saperstein

and Dean Michael K. Young as Chair and Vice-Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Both individuals are highly respected advocates for religious freedom abroad and I know that they will bring a bipartisan and inter-religious spirit to their leadership of the Commission." "The promotion of religious freedom has been a major priority of my Presidency and is an important part of our foreign policy. I very much look forward to the work of the Commission and congratulate all of the commissioners as they begin this important undertaking." Members of the Commission: Chair: Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; Vice-Chair: Michael K. Young, Dean, George Washington University Law School; Elliott Abrams, President, Ethics and Public Policy Center; Laila Al-Marayati, MD, Past-President, Muslim Women's League; John R. Bolton, Senior Vice President, American Enterprise Institute; Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Secretary of External Affairs, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States; The Most Reverend Theodore McCarrick, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Newark, Chairman, International Policy Committee, United States Catholic Conference; Nina Shea, Director, Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House; Justice Charles Z. Smith, Justice, Washington State Supreme Court; Ex-Officio: Dr. Robert A. Seiple, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom; Biographical material on the members of the Commission can be faxed or e-mailed on request.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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