

August 16, 2001: USCIRF Asks State Dept to Designate 9 Countries As Worst Religious-Freedom Violators

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Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has nominated Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Laos, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Turkmenistan for designation by the State Department as "countries of particular concern" - the world's worst religious-freedom violators, subject to U.S. action under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Commission also urged redesignation of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as a "particularly severe violator" of religious freedom. The action came in an August 16 letter to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. Of the countries nominated, the State Department designated Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan as countries of particular concern in 1999 and 2000. The Taliban regime was designated a particularly severe violator in both years as well. In July 2000, the Commission unsuccessfully recommended to then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright the addition of Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan. In urging the redesignation of China and Sudan, the Commission noted that particularly severe violations of religious freedom have increased in both nations during the past year. "In China, numerous Falun Gong practitioners throughout the country have been subjected to psychiatric detention and abuse, as part of the government's crackdown on that group," the Commission wrote. "More than 35 members of the underground Roman Catholic Church (including two bishops and 23 priests) were arrested in April and July of this year. In Sudan, the Commission found that religion was a major factor in the ongoing civil war, and that religion and religious-freedom violations were intertwined with other human rights and humanitarian abuses there. The Sudanese government is reported in the last month to have escalated its bombing of civilian and humanitarian targets in the south, and continued its campaign forcibly to remove populations from the oil development areas that are providing financial support for its egregious human rights abuses." "In Laos last year," the Commission wrote, "more than 95 Christians and their leaders from several provinces were arrested, detained (at times for months), and in some cases convicted of criminal offenses and imprisoned on account of their faith. Seven Laotian Christian church leaders and one church member were arrested in May 2001 (and subsequently released) for resisting government pressure to renounce their faith." "The government in North Korea suppresses all independent religious activity; persons engaging in public religious expression or other unauthorized religious activities continue to be arrested and imprisoned; and since July 1999, there have been new reports (from escaped refugees and other credible firsthand sources) of ongoing torture and execution of religious believers." "The findings from the Commission's visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2001 confirmed the State Department's conclusion, stated in its own human rights reports, that religious freedom "does not exist" in that country. Serious violations of religious freedom there clearly warrant CPC designation." "The government of Turkmenistan severely restricts religious activity other than that engaged in by the official Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. Members of unrecognized religious communities - - including Baha'is, Baptists, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims operating independently of the Sunni Muslim Board, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists - - have reportedly been arrested, detained (with allegations of torture and other ill-treatment), imprisoned, deported, harassed, fined, and have had their services disrupted, congregations dispersed, religious literature confiscated, and places of worship destroyed. Specific promises made by President Niyazov to senior U.S. officials in 1999 have not been carried out; in fact, the situation continues to deteriorate, eliminating expectations for improvement." In addition, Commissioners noted that grave violations of religious freedom persist in India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam and, as they did a year ago, urged the State Department to monitor closely events in those countries. The Commission noted that the State Department had designated the Milosevic regime in Serbia as a particularly severe violator of religious freedom in 1999 and 2000, but withdrew the designation after the Milosevic regime was removed from power in 2001. While the Commission agreed that the new governments of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and of Serbia have begun to demonstrate their commitment to religious freedom and other human rights, it urged the State Department to keep a close watch on the situation there. "The Commission is troubled, for example, by reports that Serbia is considering a new law on religious associations that may discriminate between so-called Serbian "traditional religions" and other religious communities." The full text of the Commission's letter to the Secretary, with accompanying attachments, is available on its Web site at www.uscirf.gov, or can be obtained by contacting the Commission's communications office at (202) 523-3240, ext. 27.

Felice D. Gaer

- Firuz Kazemzadeh Leila Nadya Sadat Dean Michael K. Young Nina Shea Rev. Charles R. Stith Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director