

August 17, 2004: Russia: Setbacks for Religious Freedom and Other Human Rights

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE August 16, 2004 Contact: Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned about the increasing influence of authoritarian and chauvinistic strains within the Russian government that appear to be directly related to growing religious freedom problems. On June 16, a Moscow court upheld a ban on all activities of the 11,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in that city. In May, a committee in the Russian parliament took up an amendment to the "Law on Traditional Religions" that would grant wide-ranging privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church and three other religious groups deemed "traditional" to Russia—Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam—but not to other religious communities. "Russian authorities are adopting an increasingly restrictive policy towards freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, casting doubt on the Russian government's continued commitment to democratic reform and the protection of religious freedom and contributing to a growing climate of intolerance for religious minorities and those who work to protect their rights," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "The U.S. government should make clear to Russian authorities its concern over the growing authoritarian trends in Russia and to step up its efforts to support and work with the many elements in Russian society who oppose such developments." Jehovah's Witnesses have legal registration on the national level in Russia. The June 16 decision marks a sharp turn away from previous Russian court decisions that have mitigated some of the harsher aspects of Russia's 1997 law on religion, particularly with respect to registration. The decision also calls into question Russia's international obligations, including the European Convention on Human Rights and OSCE commitments on religious freedom and non-discrimination on religious grounds, and comes despite Russian Constitutional references to the primacy of international law. The prosecution successfully called upon the court to reject as irrelevant decisions by the European Court. Other recent developments in Russia contribute to concerns about the influence of authoritarian strains within the Russian government and growing societal intolerance. In June, three people who organized or took part in an art exhibit at Moscow's Sakharov Foundation that was critical of the political and commercial role of the Russian Orthodox Church were criminally charged with "inciting religious hatred." Also in June, Nikolai Girenko, a noted Russian activist against racism and religious extremism, was murdered on his doorstep in St. Petersburg. A Russian extremist nationalist group claimed responsibility, saying it had "sentenced" Girenko to death for combating religious, ethnic and sexual-orientation-based intolerance. "These developments raise the specter of a rollback to Soviet-style control in which dissent is quashed by the Russian Orthodox Church using the machinery of the state. The Russian authorities should live up to their obligations under international law with regard to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief and make greater efforts to counter these authoritarian and intolerant strains," said Bansal. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress. Preeta D. Bansal, Chair • Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair • Nina Shea, Vice Chair • Patti Chang • Archbishop Charles J. Chaput • Khaled Abou El Fadl • Richard Land • Bishop Ricardo Ramirez • Michael K. Young • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio • Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director