

May 16, 2002: President Bush Should Meet With Non-Orthodox Christians During Trip to Russia

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While acknowledging major improvements in the situation of religious freedom in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet regime, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is concerned about numerous unfavorable developments since the passage of the 1997 law on religion that restricts religious activity and grants unfair advantages to so-called "traditional" religions. "Particularly ominous is the role of the Russian federal government in recent official discrimination against religious minorities," said Michael K. Young, Chair of the Commission, a federal agency advising the Administration and Congress. "During his upcoming summit in Moscow, President Bush must meet with non-Orthodox Christian leaders as well as with the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and non-Christian religious groups," said Chairman Young. "Meeting only with Russian Orthodox leaders at this sensitive time for religious freedom in Russia will very much send the wrong signal. The President must also make it clear to Russian President Vladimir Putin that religious freedom has to be fully protected in order to build closer ties between Russia and the United States," Young continued. Last month, Russian officials revoked the visa of Roman Catholic Bishop Jerzy Mazur, one of only four Catholic bishops in the country. Bishop Mazur, who heads the diocese of Irkutsk, was also apparently put on a list of persons permanently barred from entering Russia. The visa of at least one other Catholic priest has also recently been revoked, and Russian officials are reportedly trying to expel another foreign-born priest who resides in Magadan. After decades of repression during the Soviet period, the Catholic Church in Russia is still highly dependent on foreign-born clergy. This pattern of harassment has emerged following a decision by the Church in February to establish formal dioceses in Russia, and has coincided with demonstrations against Catholics, reportedly organized by a coalition of Russian lawmakers and nationalist activists, and proposals in the Duma (lower house of parliament) to favor the Russian Orthodox Church and repress other Christian Churches. Roman Catholics are not the only group experiencing problems in Russia. Some two thousand religious organizations face liquidation under a restrictive 1997 law requiring registration with the state. Dozens of groups have already been liquidated, including several that apparently were functioning actively. Local officials have refused to register several other groups, exposing them to potential liquidation and other forms of harassment. These problems affect Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and others. There has also been a recent upswing in anti-Semitic incidents. The Commission is also concerned that the Russian government continues to attempt to justify its human rights abuses in Chechnya as necessary to combat terrorism, while at the same time it has not taken effective steps to control its security forces or investigate and hold accountable those responsible for past abuses. The Commission welcomes President Bush's upcoming visit to Russia as an opportunity for him to raise these concerns publicly and at the highest levels of the Russian government. The Commission urges the President to meet with representatives from a variety of religious communities in Russia, including those groups that have come under pressure recently. The Commission also urges President Bush to raise these concerns directly with President Putin - concerns that call into question the Russian government's commitment to uphold its international obligations to protect religious freedom and other human rights for all in Russia.

Michael K. Young, Chair

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