

## August 8, 2005: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: Time for Straight Talk

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Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) calls on Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to designate Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, for the severe, systematic, and ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief carried out by their governments. Last September in its Annual Review, the State Department, following the Commission's recommendation, added Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea to its list of CPCs, but notably omitted Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan, among the most repressive states in the world today, allows virtually no independent religious activity. The government of Uzbekistan places strict restrictions on religious practice and continues to crack down harshly on individuals and groups that operate outside of government strictures. "It is time for the U.S. government to tell the truth about the state of religious freedom in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and designate these countries as CPCs, as is clearly warranted," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "In the face of the religious freedom violations persistently perpetrated by the Turkmen and Uzbek governments, the failure to name them CPCs is not only unconscionable, but it violates the spirit and letter of the International Religious Freedom Act," Cromartie said. Since 2001, the Commission has recommended that Turkmenistan be designated a CPC. In addition to the severe government restrictions on religious practice that effectively ban much, if not most, religious activity, Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov's ever-escalating personality cult has become a quasi-religion to which the Turkmen population is forced to adhere. His self-published work of "spiritual thoughts," called "Rukhnama," is required reading in all schools. In addition, copies of Rukhnama must be given equal prominence to the Koran and the Bible in mosques and churches. In the past year, in a move likely aimed at avoiding possible CPC designation, Niyazov passed several decrees that permitted the registration of five very small religious communities. Despite this alleged easing of registration criteria, religious groups must ask permission from the state before holding worship services of any kind. It is unclear what-if any-practical benefits registration actually provides. Moreover, religious groups that do not meet often arbitrary registration rules still face possible criminal penalties due to their unregistered status and even newly registered religious groups have been raided by police. Even the rights of the two largest religious communities, the majority Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox, are seriously circumscribed. Last year, seven mosques were destroyed in the country and Niyazov forbade the construction of any new ones. Turkmenistan's former chief Mufti, Nazrullah ibn Ibadullah, was sentenced to 22 years in prison, because he apparently refused to elevate the Rukhnama to the level of the Koran. Just last month, Niyazov undertook various moves against the country's only Muslim theological faculty. And, according to recent reports, the Russian Orthodox Church has been refused re-registration as part of an effort by Niyazov to pressure Russian Orthodox parishes in Turkmenistan to sever ties with the Tashkent-based Central Asian diocese and to subordinate them to the Moscow Patriarchate. "Turkmenistan is a highly repressive state - where conditions are comparable to those in North Korea -- whose people suffer under the yoke of a personality cult, which allows them few freedoms of any kind, including religious freedom," Cromartie said. "It is extremely troubling that a few superficial decrees regarding religious freedom -- that do little if anything to change the situation on the ground -- have allowed Turkmenistan yet again to escape the CPC designation it so clearly deserves." The Commission also recommends that Uzbekistan, which the Commission visited in the past year, be designated a CPC. The Uzbek government continues to exercise a high degree of control over the practice of the Islamic religion, as well as cracking down harshly on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to state-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons in recent years, many of whom are denied the right to due process. There are credible reports that many of those arrested continue to be tortured or beaten in detention, despite official Uzbek promises to halt this practice. Uzbekistan has a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function, leaving over 100 religious communities of various denominations currently denied registration. Reportedly, all Protestant activity in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan is now banned and several Protestants now allegedly face criminal charges for their religious activities. "The government of Uzbekistan does face threats to its security, including from members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and other political groups that claim a religious linkage, and the Commission's recommendation of CPC status for Uzbekistan should not be construed as a defense of that or any similar organization," Commission Vice Chair Felice Gaer said. "Nevertheless, these threats simply do not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill treatment of religious believers nor the continued practice of torture, which reportedly remains widespread." The shooting by Uzbek troops of hundreds of unarmed protestors in Andijon on May 12-13, provides the most brutal example to date of the Uzbek government's response to real or perceived threats to its security. In Andijon's aftermath, the Uzbek authorities have mounted a repressive campaign against religious believers, particularly Muslims; Andijon residents; journalists, human rights activists and Uzbek employees of Western NGOs. The Uzbek government has refused requests from the U.S. and other Western governments for an independent international investigation, probably by the OSCE, into the Andijon tragedy. Yet, rather than withdrawing U.S. forces from Uzbekistan in protest, the U.S. Department of Defense publicly stated that the decision was up to the Uzbeks. And so on July 29, in response to U.S. assistance in relocating Uzbek refugees from Andijon who had found temporary refuge in Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbek government said that American troops would have to leave Uzbekistan in 180 days. "By leaving the initiative to the Uzbek government about the U.S. use of the Uzbek military base, the U.S. squandered a good opportunity to stand firm on its human rights principles," Cromartie observed. "Without a doubt, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan deserve CPC designation according to the criteria in

the International Religious Freedom Act. The Commission calls on the Department of State to adhere to principles of the Act and state the truth about these countries by naming them in this year's upcoming round as the severe religious freedom violators that they so clearly are," Cromartie said.

Michael Cromartie, Chair

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