

Commission Asks President Bush to Raise Religious-Freedom Issues With Egyptian President Mubarak

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has written to President Bush to ask him to raise religious-freedom issues with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt during the latter's state visit to the United States April 2. The request follows the return of a Commission delegation from a visit to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel and the Occupied Territories during the last two weeks of March. The letter was signed by Commission Chairman Elliott Abrams, Vice Chairman Firuz Kazemzadeh, and Commissioner Laila Al-Marayati; the full text follows: March 28, 2001

The Honorable

George W. Bush

President of the United States of America

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President: As a delegation of members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, we have just completed a fact-finding trip to Egypt. We are writing respectfully to urge you to raise the issue of religious freedom prominently in your upcoming meeting with President Mubarak. Among the problems raised with us by members of religious groups are these: With respect to the Christian community, government permission must still be sought to build or repair a church. Christians are rarely promoted to high levels in the government or military and are frequently discriminated against by private employers in hiring and promotion. Their taxes help pay the salaries of all Muslim, but no Christian, clergy. Baha'is have been arrested and imprisoned because of their religious beliefs, speciously charged with insulting Islam. Muslims whom the government arbitrarily deems to be extremist in viewpoint have been fired as school teachers; and all imams (prayer leaders) are hired, monitored, and can be fired at will solely by the government. Police brutality and torture of detainees continues against certain groups, exacerbating sectarian violence and tension by punishing one group more severely than another. Islamists are tried in military rather than civil court, which allows the government to extend their sentences indefinitely without due process. In fairness we note as well that we were told of some improvements in religious freedom. History textbooks for public school children of all levels have been revised this year to include for the first time discussion of the Coptic Christian period. The government has in recent years granted permission for construction of new churches and repair of older ones far more frequently than was previously the case. And public television is beginning to be more inclusive of non-Muslim themes. The Commission may issue findings and policy recommendations to you, Secretary Powell, and the U.S. Congress after our delegation returns from the Middle East and reports to the rest of the nine commissioners. But we respectfully urge you to express the concern of the United States that progress on religious freedom for all Egyptians accelerate. Respectfully,

Elliott Abrams

Chairman Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh

Vice-Chairman Dr. Laila Al-Marayati

Commissioner

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

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