

April 12, 2004: Egypt: USCIRF letter to President Bush on meeting with President Mubarak

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote to President George Bush last week urging him to impress upon Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak the need for his government to implement directly democratic and human rights reforms, including enhancing protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief and ceasing messages of hatred in the educational curricula and government-controlled media. The Commission continues to include Egypt on its Watch List because the government has failed to take effective steps to halt repression of and violence against religious believers, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for severe violations of religious freedom. The Commission has found that serious problems of discrimination against a number of minority religious groups, particularly Christians, Jews, and Baha'is, and various Muslim groups are widespread in Egypt. The text of the letter follows: Dear Mr. President: On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I urge you to impress upon Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, during your meetings on April 12 in Crawford, Texas, the need for his government to implement directly democratic and human rights reforms. These reforms, some of which President Mubarak's government has already identified, should include enhancing protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief. The government should also cease messages of hatred, intolerance, or incitement to violence against non-Muslim religious groups in the educational curricula and textbooks, as well as in government-controlled media. Mr. President, in your landmark speech in November 2003 commemorating 20 years of the National Endowment for Democracy, you fittingly spoke of the role Egypt can play in the region: "The great and proud nation of Egypt...now should show the way toward democracy in the Middle East." Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, yet the pace of democratic and human rights reforms by President Mubarak's government has been very slow. If reform efforts in Egypt are to make meaningful progress, the U.S. government must continue to press President Mubarak and senior members of his government to uphold Egypt's international human rights commitments to protect the right to freedom of religion and to ensure human rights and the rule of law in criminal proceedings. The Commission continues to include Egypt on its Watch List because the government has failed to take effective steps to halt repression of and violence against religious believers, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for severe violations of religious freedom. The Commission has found that serious problems of discrimination against a number of minority religious groups - particularly Christians, Jews, and Baha'is - and various Muslim groups are widespread in Egypt. Those responsible for the killings of 20 Coptic Christians and one Muslim in Al-Kosheh in December 1999 have not yet been brought to justice. Islamists who believe in or seek to establish an Islamic state in Egypt based on their interpretation of Islamic law, face extra-legal harassment, torture, and prolonged detention. The scope of the Egyptian government's campaign against Islamists sometimes results in the arrests of those not affiliated with any group and not accused of perpetrating violence. Egyptian authorities also have been accused of being lax in protecting Christian lives and property, and permission must still be sought from the government to build or repair a church, which results in a time consuming and inflexible approval process. Members of other religious minorities, including Jews and Baha'is, face discrimination and even violence, as well as material vilifying both groups that appears frequently in the state-controlled and semi-official media. All Baha'i institutions and community activities continue to be banned by the government. We hope that you use this opportunity to engage President Mubarak in serious discussions of religious freedom in Egypt. Thank you, Mr. President, for considering the Commission's views. Sincerely, Michael K. Young

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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