

February 24, 2006: Iran: USCIRF Concerned over Deteriorating Situation for Religious Minorities

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Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply concerned about the worsening situation for religious minorities in Iran. A consistent stream of virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders and an increase of harassment, imprisonment, and physical attacks against these groups is clear evidence of a disturbing, renewed pattern of oppression. The United States must accelerate its efforts to address vigorously the rapidly deteriorating conditions for human rights in Iran, including freedom of religion or belief. With limited policy options available and no direct diplomatic engagement, the Administration's new request for \$75 million to support democracy in Iran must include funding for effective ways to promote human rights and the rule of law inside Iran. "The Commission is alarmed by the growing frequency of inflammatory rhetoric aimed at religious minorities by high-level Iranian government officials and clerics," said USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie. "This pattern unfortunately is reminiscent of language, used by Iranian authorities during the early years of the Iranian Revolution, which preceded the severe atrocities committed against members of all religious minorities, particularly the Baha'i community." Before Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed office in August, conditions for religious minorities already were deteriorating. For years, the government of Iran has engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions, some based primarily or entirely on the religion of the accused. The Baha'i faith, in particular, and its community - the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran - have no legal recognition and are viewed as "heretics" and "infidels" who face repression on the grounds of apostasy, an offense which carries the death penalty in Iran. In recent months, members of the Baha'i community have been harassed, physically attacked, arrested, and detained. Baha'i property, including historic holy sites, has been confiscated or destroyed. In December, a Baha'i who had been jailed for more than 10 years on charges of apostasy died in prison of unknown causes. Several other Baha'is remain in prison. During President Ahmadinejad's first six months in power, a series of ominous developments have unraveled with potentially devastating consequences for religious minorities. He and other top political and clerical leaders have made public remarks denying the existence of the Holocaust and anti-Semitic tracts have increased in the government-controlled media. Moreover, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, referred to non-Muslims as "sinful animals" and "corrupt" and President Ahmadinejad reportedly has called for an end to the development of Christianity in Iran. Further, over the last several weeks, a series of articles in the government-controlled newspaper Kayhan - whose managing editor is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei - vilify and demonize the Baha'i faith and its community in Iran. What is more, the Islamic regime's reinvigorated anti-Israel policy and sentiment that Israel should be "wiped off the map" has created an increased atmosphere of fear and intimidation among Iran's Jewish community. Christians in Iran increasingly have been subject to harassment, arrests, close surveillance, and imprisonment. Over the past year, there have been several incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, detaining worshippers and church leaders, and harassing and threatening church members. As a result of one of these raids last year, an evangelical pastor remains in prison even after being acquitted by an Islamic court on charges of apostasy. Even the small, unrecognized Mandaean religious community is facing intensifying harassment and repression by authorities. This atmosphere of increased intolerance also extends to Muslims. Those Shi'a Muslims in Iran who disagree with the Islamic regime's interpretation of Islam or who do not espouse the ideology of the Islamic Revolution continue to suffer at the hands of Iranian authorities. Hundreds of prominent Muslim activists and dissidents advocating political reform have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms by the Revolutionary Court, ostensibly on charges of seeking to overthrow the Islamic system in Iran. Others have been arrested and detained for alleged blasphemy or for criticizing the nature of the Islamic regime. Reformists and journalists are regularly tried under current press laws and the Penal Code on charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards. Muslim minorities are also facing increasing repression. Just last week, approximately 1,000 Sufi Muslims were arrested after clashes with Iranian authorities following the closing of a Sufi house of worship in the northwestern city of Qom. Sufi and Sunni Muslim leaders regularly are intimidated and harassed by intelligence and security services. "Because of the poor and declining human rights situation, a sizeable portion of the \$75 million supplemental request to promote democracy in Iran should go toward supporting human rights initiatives, including freedom of religion or belief, as well as funding rule of law programs that specifically seek to protect religious minorities in Iran," said Cromartie. "The United States government should continue to speak out publicly, and at the highest levels, about its concerns for religious minorities in Iran as well as ensure that the nuclear issue does not deter the U.S. from more actively engaging the international community on human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief." Since 1999, the State Department, at the urging of the Commission, has designated Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its systematic and egregious violations of freedom of religion and belief. The Commission continues to recommend that Iran remain a CPC. The State Department itself has concluded that, in recent years, human rights conditions have worsened, including for religious minorities.

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