

## September 9, 1999: September Meeting on State Department's Global Report

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 15, 2002 Contact:

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WASHINGTON, September 9, 1999-The Commission on International Religious Freedom welcomes the release of the State Department's first global report on the status of religious freedom. Over one thousand pages in length, the report reflects a renewed recognition of the salience of religious freedom to America foreign policy. We express our appreciation for the diligence of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and Ambassador Robert Seiple and his Office on International Religious Freedom at the Department of State in producing the report. As it carries out its mandate in its first year, the Commission will examine with keen interest the findings and recommendations of the Report. We will pay particular attention to the assessments of China and Sudan, countries that the Commission is now taking under study for what today's Report confirms are their egregious and continuing patterns of religious repression. While the Commission will be studying the Secretary's Report in the ensuing weeks, the Report is significant for at least four reasons, according to Rabbi David Saperstein, chair of the Commission. First, it signals that one of the purposes of last year's International Religious Freedom Act (which created the Commission and mandated the State Department's report) is being fulfilled: "The length of the Report alone reflects that every American embassy in the world is now attuned to the issue of religious liberty," Chairman Saperstein observed. "This nation's 'First Freedom' has assumed its rightful place as a serious consideration in American foreign policy." Second, the Report means that "the Congress and the American people will have more information upon which to order U.S. relations with those nations that mistreat their own religious communities," Saperstein stated. Third, as countries review their own policies as a result of this reporting process, the United States is making a real difference on the ground for real people. One example: the Commission understands that, in order to avoid being designated a "country of particular concern" (CPC), Uzbekistan took public and formal steps to improve religious toleration this year. "Clearly the U.S. can wield significant moral suasion and influence internationally. Because religious freedom abroad is once again important to America, it is becoming important to other nations as well," noted Chairman Saperstein. Finally, the Report corroborates the need for the Commission's annual May 1 report. The Secretary's Report is limited in time to an eighteen month period and in scope to those facts that U.S. embassies can verify. In contrast, the Commission is not limited to assessments based on that time period and the law creating the Commission (IRFA) mandates that it consult non-government organizations (human rights groups, relief agencies, religious ministries in the field) as well as expert consultants to supplement what our government can glean. The Commission looks forward to working cooperatively with Ambassador Seiple both in his capacity as a member of the Commission and as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom in the Department of State. The Commission anticipates issuing its detailed assessment of the Report as part of its ongoing responsibilities throughout the year.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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