

## June 29, 2007: USCIRF Delegation Pays Official Visit to Saudi Arabia

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WASHINGTON-A delegation from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal agency, returned earlier this month from a nine-day official visit to Saudi Arabia. The delegation, led by Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer, raised issues concerning the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in the Kingdom that affect both Saudi citizens and the large population of foreign workers, as well as others overseas. The delegation visited three distinct regions of the country in order to hear differing viewpoints: Riyadh, Jeddah and the Eastern Province. Among the Commission's interlocutors were Saudi government officials including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, the Minister of Culture and Information, and deputy ministers from the Interior and Foreign Affairs Ministries, members of the government's newly established National Human Rights Commission and of the non-governmental National Society for Human Rights, as well as legal experts, educators, community leaders, women's rights advocates, and journalists. The Commission regrets that the Saudi government did not grant requests for meetings with top officials at key agencies such as the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) and the Ministries of Education and Justice. "We appreciated the opportunity to visit different parts of the country and express our concerns. We are disappointed, however, that many officials with whom we sought to meet were not available for discussion," Gaer said. The delegation's discussions focused on: halting the dissemination of intolerance literature and extremist ideology; reform of school textbooks and curricula to remove language encouraging intolerance, hatred, or violence on the basis of religious differences whether dealing with Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus or others; protecting the right of private worship; curbing harassment of religious practice by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice; and empowering the National Human Rights Commission. The delegation also explored: Saudi government efforts to institute political and social reforms, including through the National Dialogue Centers initiated by King Abdullah; the establishment of indigenous human rights institutions; the government's efforts to combat religious extremism; religious freedom restrictions and discrimination affecting followers of different schools of thought within Islam; limitations on the universal human rights of women; and freedom of expression, including on religiously sensitive issues in the press and other media. The Commission was informed of some institutional movement by the Saudi government to address human rights violations. Also, the issue of abuses by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, known as the mutawaa or religious police, received unprecedented exposure in the Saudi media while the delegation was visiting. The government has recently opened multiple investigations into alleged violations by members of the CPVPV, and at least two cases are going to trial. On the eve of the USCIRF visit, the National Society for Human Rights published its first ever report, which calls for wide-ranging improvements in human rights practices in the Kingdom. The Saudi government's Human Rights Commission, which investigates complaints from private citizens and has raised cases with government agencies, has now been operating in earnest for approximately six months. The Human Rights Commission has publicly committed itself to take up the issue of religious discrimination. The delegation voiced many concerns in meetings with Saudi officials. Since 2004, the Secretary of State has designated Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern for its systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom. The Commission's concerns are laid out in the chapter on Saudi Arabia in its most recent Annual Report, which was issued on May 2. Because the delegation could not meet with a number of key government officials and did not receive answers to several of the questions it posed in Saudi Arabia, the Commission has forwarded a list of follow-up queries to the Saudi Embassy in Washington in hopes of receiving further information and continuing to clarify the status of these issues. Later this summer, the Commission plans to issue a detailed report of its findings from the trip. In the meantime, it urges the U.S. government to remain closely and continually engaged in a candid discussion of religious freedom issues with the Saudi government. Felice D. Gaer, Chair &bull; Michael Cromartie, Vice Chair &bull; Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Vice Chair &bull; Nina Shea, Vice Chair &bull; Don Argue &bull; Preeta D. Bansal &bull; Imam Talal Y. Eid &bull; Richard D. Land &bull; Leonard A. Leo &bull; Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio &bull; Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director