

March 10, 2006: U.S. Rights Report Exculpates Saudi Abusive Practices

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE March 10, 2006 Contact: Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - With the expiration later this month of a 180-day waiver of U.S. government action for religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned that the State Department Saudi Arabia Country Report on Human Rights Practices, released this week, exculpates serious human rights abuses in that country. Given that Saudi Arabia is a stated ally of the United States on the war on terror and that the Saudi government and others pay close attention to the State Department human rights report, there is a danger that the U.S. government will be perceived as crediting statements and cosmetic changes by the Saudi government as real human rights improvements. The Commission has not seen significant progress on the ground in Saudi Arabia, and believes the United States must take action in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). While the new format of the human rights report highlights the series of human rights problems that exist in Saudi Arabia, including that there is "no religious freedom," there is an inordinate emphasis on optimistic statements by Saudi leaders; statements that have yet to be followed by action. In some cases, the report even appears to justify serious abuses perpetrated by the Saudi government. For example, in the report under the section on "Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, Degrading Treatment or Punishment," there is a discussion, citing press reports, of government lashing of persons convicted under sharia (Islamic law). In explaining the specifics, the report states, "...lashes were generally administered with a thin reed by a man who must hold a book under his arm to prevent him from lifting the arm too high. The strokes, delivered through a thin shirt, are not supposed to leave permanent damage, but to leave painful welts that bleed and bruise." This gives the impression that this particular act of torture employed by the Saudi government is administered in a humane, and thus permissible, manner. Further, in the "Freedom of Religion" section, there is an inordinate amount of attention to statements by Saudi officials that could be read as improvements, while conditions for religious freedom have, in fact, not improved on the ground. Also, in highlighting the activity of imams in mosques, the report states that "Although to a lesser extent than in the past, mosque preachers, whose salaries are paid by the government, frequently used strong anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic language in their sermons...there continued to be instances in which mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews." The decrease of frequency of these kinds of statements should not be construed as a significant improvement, however, given that these inciteful and inflammatory remarks by imams remain rampant. The Commission acknowledges that there has been increasing public discussion in Saudi Arabia on some human rights issues - although not necessarily freedom of religion or belief - and the report does make reference to extensive ongoing discrimination. In September 2004, the State Department designated Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for its egregious and systematic religious freedom violations in accord with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). One year later, the Secretary of State authorized a 180-day waiver of action on that designation "in order to allow additional time for the continuation of discussions leading to progress on important religious freedom issues." With the expiration of the 180-day waiver later this month, and despite ongoing US-Saudi bilateral discussions, the Commission has not yet seen genuine progress on religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia. This is despite ongoing discussions between the U.S. and Saudi governments. In the time remaining under the 180-day waiver, the U.S. government should vigorously press for concrete commitments that would result in measurable, demonstrated improvements in respect for freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia. In the absence of such improvements, the U.S. government should not hesitate in taking strong action in accord with the IRFA, as has been recommended previously by the Commission. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress. Michael Cromartie, Chair • Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair • Nina Shea, Vice Chair • Preeta D. Bansal • Archbishop Charles J. Chaput • Khaled Abou El Fadl • Richard D. Land • Elizabeth H. Prodromou • Bishop Ricardo Ramirez • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio • Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director