

June 17, 2004: Saudi Arabia: Should be designated a "Country of Particular Concern"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 19, 2004

Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - "The Commission believes that Saudi Arabia should be designated a 'country of particular concern' (CPC) for its continued systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. "While the State Department's 2003 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom again notes that freedom of religion "does not exist" in Saudi Arabia, the country still has not been designated a CPC."

In addition to recommending that Saudi Arabia be designated a CPC, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should press for immediate improvements in respect for religious freedom, including: establishing genuine safeguards for the freedom to worship privately; ending state prosecution of apostasy, blasphemy, and criticizing the government; and ceasing messages of hatred, intolerance, or incitement to violence against non-Wahhabi Muslims and members of non-Muslim religious groups in the educational curricula and textbooks, as well as in government-controlled mosques and media.

In a report released yesterday by an independent task force on terrorist financing of the Council on Foreign Relations, it endorsed another Commission recommendation that the U.S. government should more frequently identify serious human rights violations and publicly acknowledge that they are significant issues in the bilateral relationship. The task force report states "when domestic Saudi problems threaten Americans at home and abroad, a new framework for U.S.-Saudi relations must be struck, one that includes focused and consistent U.S. attention on domestic Saudi issues that previously would have been "off the table..." Consistent U.S. demands for human rights and political and economic freedom...may only have or have had a marginal impact on the course of events, but they are a fundamental expression of U.S. interests and values."

Over the past year, several incidents continue to point to the Saudi government's systematic violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. In September 2003, the mutawaa (religious police) arrested 16 foreign workers for practicing Sufism; their status is unknown. In October 2003, two Egyptian Christians were arrested and jailed on religious grounds and released three weeks later. Also in October, several Protestant foreign workers were arrested by the civil police and released the same day without charge. In December 2003, a foreign worker was arrested and charged with apostasy, a charge that was later reduced to blasphemy resulting in a sentence of two years in jail and 600 lashes. In March 2004, an Indian Christian foreign worker was arrested and tortured for "preaching Christianity," among other charges. He remains in prison.

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