

U.S. Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan Briefing at CSIS

July 27, 2005

Michael Cromartie: I am very pleased to welcome you to "U.S. Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan" which the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is co-hosting with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. We hope that this event will discuss how U.S. policy towards Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan can promote human rights and religious freedom concerns in the context of other American interests in these countries.

I would first like to say a few words about the Commission on which I serve as Chair. The Commission was created by Congress through the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 in order to advocate a prominent place within U.S. foreign policy for the promotion of religious freedom and other freedoms throughout the world. The Commission was mandated both to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief globally and to make recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress as to how the U.S. government can further the protection and promotion of this freedom and related human rights in its relations with other countries.

Before turning to our expert panel, I would like to make a few remarks as to why the Commission has recommended that Turkmenistan be named a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC, due to its serious religious freedom violations. Commissioner Bansal will then discuss why the Commission has recommended that Uzbekistan be designated a CPC, and Commission Vice Chair Gaer will describe the CPC process as it relates to this event.

Turkmenistan is among the most repressive states in the world. It is also a systematic violator of freedom of religion or belief. Turkmen President Niyazov's rule and "personality cult" effectively prevent any independent religious activity within the country. Yet, although religious freedom is severely proscribed in Turkmenistan and there is scant evidence that religious freedom has improved in the past year, the Secretary of State has not named Turkmenistan a CPC.

After Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991, religious groups have been required to register with the government so as to legally engage in religious activities. The 1997 religion law effectively banned all religious groups except the state-controlled Sunni Muslim

Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet Russian Orthodox are banned from receiving the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate. Niyazov has promoted a state-controlled version of Islam as a key component of Turkmen identity, but has allowed only one Islamic school to remain open. Last year, Niyazov proclaimed that no new mosques should be built and seven mosques were reportedly destroyed in 2004. President Niyazov has bolstered his personality cult through the Rukhnama, containing his "spiritual thoughts," which is required reading in all schools. Indeed, Rukhnama quotations have been carved alongside Koranic citations on the walls of the country's largest mosque. In March 2004, the country's former chief mufti, who had opposed the elevation of the Rukhnama, was sentenced in a closed trial to 22 years in prison.

A new law on religion, passed in 2003, further codified policies that effectively ban most religious activity in Turkmenistan and set criminal penalties for those found guilty of participating in "illegal religious activity." Last year, in response to international pressure, Niyazov issued three decrees easing registration requirements and dropping criminal sanctions on religious activities. As a result, Sunni Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church, plus four small groups (Adventists, Baptists, Baha'is and the Hare Krishnas) were registered. In practice, however, their situation has scarcely improved. Turkmen officials have noted that this apparent easing of registration requirements does not mean that religious communities will be able to conduct services in private homes or that religious groups will no longer be required to request official permission before holding worship services. Therefore, it is not clear what practical benefits registration provides.

Several Jehovah's Witnesses who had refused to serve in the military were released in 2004, but several others were later jailed. One Jehovah's Witness reportedly was tortured in detention.

In addition to recommending that Turkmenistan be designated a CPC, the Commission has also recommended that the U.S. government should:

- suspend all non-humanitarian assistance to the government of Turkmenistan, except programs that serve identifiable U.S. national security interests connected to the anti-terror campaign or U.S. assistance to appropriate non-governmental organizations, or cultural or educational exchanges;
- scrutinize all aspects of any assistance programs in Turkmenistan to ensure that these programs do not facilitate Turkmen government policies or practices that result in religious freedom violations.
- suspend state visits between the United States and Turkmenistan until such time as religious freedom conditions in the country have improved significantly; and
- advocate for creation of a UN Special Rapporteur to investigate and report publicly on the human rights situation in Turkmenistan to the UN.

