

March 13, 2007: Human Rights & Religious Freedom in Sudan

A celebration of
the work of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus

Task Force on International Religious Freedom

Sponsored by the U.S. Commission
on International Religious Freedom

in conjunction
with

the Center for
Religious Freedom

and

the Jacob
Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights

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2203 Rayburn House Office
Building

Commissioner Gaer's Introductory Remarks

Good evening. It is
my pleasure to welcome you to our celebration of the work of the Congressional
Human Rights Caucus and of its Task Force on International Religious Freedom.

My name is Felice Gaer. I am speaking today in two capacities:

I am the Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the
Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee. The purpose of the Jacob Blaustein Institute
is to promote creative thinking, discourse, and action for the protection of

the human rights of all people.

I am also here as the current Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The Commission is an independent, bipartisan Federal Government advisory body created by Congress to monitor violations of religious freedom worldwide and to recommend to the Congress, the Secretary of State, and the President policies designed to promote freedom of religion or belief worldwide. The legislation that created the Commission - the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, called "IRFA" for short - resulted from the efforts of a broad coalition that spanned the range of American public life: Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, Americans of many faith backgrounds. IRFA was intended to ensure that promotion of religious freedom is a key element in U.S. foreign policy.

Next year we'll be celebrating IRFA's 10th anniversary. In the years since the passage of IRFA, the Commission has worked closely with the Congress, and in particular with the Human Rights Caucus and its Members, as well as with members of the broader human rights community, to focus the attention of policy-makers on violations of the freedom of religion or belief. History has shown that wherever religious freedom is threatened there is a potential for atrocities on a wide scale - crimes against humanity, war crimes, even genocide - committed in the name of religion or with religious undercurrents.

Sudan is only one example. On the other hand, respect for religious freedom is invariably one of the hallmarks of stable, democratic, and productive societies. In protecting and promoting religious freedom we are not only defending the rights of others but we are building a more peaceful, more secure world for us all.

We on the Commission look forward to working closely with the Human Rights Caucus' Task Force on International Religious Freedom, with other Members, and with all in the broader community of those who are concerned with America's responsibility to uphold human rights in Sudan and elsewhere.

At this time, please let me turn to my fellow Commissioner, the Commission's Vice Chair Nina Shea.

Commissioner Shea's Remarks

Like Felice, I'm also here today in two capacities: as Director of the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute and as Vice Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The Center for Religious Freedom has, since its inception in 1986, promoted religious freedom as a component of U.S. foreign policy, working with a

worldwide network of religious freedom experts to provide defenses against religious persecution and oppression.

The Center for Religious Freedom joined the Hudson Institute this January, following a ten-year affiliation with Freedom House. The Center and I personally have been privileged to work with many of you in this room in the campaign to put a stop to the religious genocide perpetrated by a radical Islamic government in Khartoum against Christians and followers of traditional African religions in southern and central Sudan.

I would like to review briefly for you the Commission's work on Sudan.

Sudan was one of the first countries on which the Commission focused its attention. The Commission found religion to be a major factor in Sudan's North-South civil war in which 2 million were killed and 4 million displaced. In May 2001, the Commission called for the appointment of a prominent special envoy to work for an end to that civil war. In September 2001 President Bush appointed former Senator John Danforth as his Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan. The resulting Danforth Mission re-energized the Sudan peace process.

In January 2005, the North-South civil war formally ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (often referred to as the "CPA") between the authorities in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. Regretfully, as you all know from the continuing horror of Darfur, the signing of the CPA has not brought peace to all of Sudan.

In January 2006, a Commission delegation visited Sudan to assess religious freedom conditions and the implementation of the peace agreement after one year. Members of the Commission delegation traveled to Khartoum, Juba, and the Nuba Mountains, meeting with government officials, civil society and religious leaders, and ordinary Sudanese, including those tragically displaced by the conflict. The Commission delegation found ordinary Sudanese eager to enjoy peace and to secure from themselves and their children the freedoms promised in the CPA and Sudan's new Interim National Constitution.

The delegation found Sudan's North-South peace to be very fragile. Nothing that has happened since the delegation's return has changed our assessment. There are serious problems with implementing the peace accord and revenue sharing agreements that ended the North-South civil war. The continuing genocide in Darfur raises question about the commitment to peace of some of those who continue to be in positions of power in Khartoum. There is an urgent need to develop

infrastructure in the war-devastated South and to address the needs of Sudan's millions of internally displaced persons and refugees, needs that compete for scarce donor resources.

In March 2006 the Commission released its findings and recommendations at a Capitol Hill press conference. Congressman Frank Wolf and then House Minority Leader Pelosi seized that occasion to call for a new special envoy to be appointed to coordinate U.S. efforts on achieving implementation of the CPA and on ending the genocide in Darfur. The Commission formally added that recommendation as its own and was pleased when President Bush accepted it and named Andrew Natsios as Special Envoy for Sudan.

The Commission believes that securing the peace will require sustained U.S. resources and attention to encourage compliance with the peace agreement, to address ongoing grave human rights abuses in Darfur and elsewhere, and to facilitate the voluntary return of those displaced. In short, continued U.S. leadership is needed in building a just peace in Sudan, sustained by respect for human rights, the rule of law, and democratic institutions. We thank the Task Force for its commitment to making Sudan a priority in the 110th Congress and look forward to working with the Task Force and other Members on this important foreign policy issue.

At this time, please let me acknowledge these distinguished Members of the Congress present with us today:

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi,

Co-Chairs of the Task Force on International Religious Freedom Congressman Emanuel Cleaver and Congressman Trent Franks,

Co-Chairs of the Human Rights Caucus Congressman Tom Lantos and Congressman Frank Wolf,

Congressman Donald Payne, and [names of other Members present].

As well, please allow me to acknowledge those current and former Executive Branch officials who have labored to bring an end to Sudan's long-running conflicts and to improve

the prospects for a Sudan
that respects human rights and lives in peace with its neighbors:

Former Senator and Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan John
Danforth, not here with us this evening,

[If present.] Presidential
Special Envoy for Sudan
Andrew Natsios, and

Roger Winter, the former Special Representative on Sudan
for the Deputy Secretary of State.

In this regard, I would also like to acknowledge the
contribution to the work of the Commission and to the cause of human rights and
peace in Sudan of Ambassador John Hanford, the Ambassador-at-Large for
International Religious Freedom and ex officio member of the U.S.
Commission on International Religious Freedom.

We are also joined by representatives of non-governmental
organizations that have worked so hard to expose the horrific human rights
abuses in Sudan: [Recognize by name those in the audience
and their organizations active in the Sudan Campaign.]

Commissioner Gaer's Introduction of Nancy
Pelosi

Last March, the Commission held a Capitol Hill briefing to
launch its latest policy brief on Sudan,
reflecting the findings of the Commission delegation's January visit to Sudan. On that occasion, the Commission was
honored
with the presence of Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi.

This time it is my great honor to introduce the Speaker of
the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi.
Speaker Pelosi...

Commissioner Shea's Introduction of Andrew Natsios
[If present.]

Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly last September, President Bush announced the appointment of Andrew Natsios as his Special Envoy for Sudan, with a mandate to include "facilitating the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Darfur Peace Agreement, reviewing the state of U.S.-Sudan relations, and making recommendations for advancing our policy" toward Sudan. Previously, he was personally involved in U.S. humanitarian relief operations in Sudan as Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development and as Special Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan, as assistant administrator for USAID's then Bureau for Food and Humanitarian Assistance, and as director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. In the private sector, he served as vice president of World Vision U.S. In and out of government, Andrew Natsios has been an outspoken champion for the long-suffering people of Sudan. It is my pleasure to introduce him to you today.

Commissioner Shea's Introduction of Roger Winter

Now it is my pleasure to introduce another tireless campaigner for peace in Sudan: Roger Winter. Roger is the former Special Representative on Sudan of the Deputy Secretary of State. He was a member of the team that supported former Senator Danforth in helping to negotiate the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended Sudan's North-South Civil War. He also was an active participant in the Darfur peace process. Roger has been involved in humanitarian relief and conflict-resolution activities in Sudan for 25 years, including as USAID Assistant Administrator for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance.

Commissioner Gaer's Concluding Remarks

Concluding this evening's program, I would encourage Members of the Congress who have not yet do so to join the Task Force on International Religious Freedom. We on the Commission look forward to working with you on Sudan and other countries where this fundamental human right is under threat.

Please let me take this opportunity to thank everyone present for your interest in human rights in Sudan and in the work of the Task Force on International Religious Freedom.

Thank you very much and good night.