

March 8, 2002: Commission Says U.S. Must Press Uzbekistan on Religious Freedom

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WASHINGTON - The upcoming visit of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov affords President Bush and the Secretary of State the opportunity to express the U.S. government's concerns over that country's poor record on religious freedom and other human rights. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has repeatedly expressed its concern that cooperation in the war against terrorism not be traded off for U.S. silence on religious-freedom and other human rights issues. As recommended by the Commission, the Administration has recently affirmed that the campaign against terrorism affords the United States a unique opportunity to encourage much-needed improvement by Uzbekistan's government in its abysmal treatment of religious exercise. In so doing, the United States demonstrates its commitment to its strongest principles and values, including the very rights and freedoms the terrorists would destroy. The first U.S. step should be the conditioning of all aid to Uzbekistan, except humanitarian and human rights assistance, on the Uzbek government taking concrete steps to improve conditions for religious freedom. Since 1999 the Uzbek government has arrested, tortured, and imprisoned (with sentences up to 20 years) thousands of Muslims who reject the state's control over religious practice. In some cases, piety alone brings state suspicion and arrest. Though certain underground groups in Uzbekistan, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, pose a genuine security threat to the Uzbek government, virtually all observers (and many U.S. government officials) contend that the current government's extremely repressive policies are actively contributing to the growth of - and popular support for - radicalized groups there. In addition, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations passed in May 1998 severely restricts the right of independent Muslims, as well as minority religious groups, to freedom of religion. The Commission has raised these issues with the U.S. government, which in turn has pressed the Uzbek government for improvements on religious freedom and human rights. This pressure has led to some recent positive steps, such as the Uzbek government's granting of permission for a local human rights group to legally register. But much more is needed to meet Uzbekistan's international obligations to protect religious freedom and other human rights, and the United States must continue to register its concerns with Uzbek officials at every level. The Commission has asked the Secretary of State to help arrange a meeting with President Karimov to discuss its concerns directly with him. The Commission has given the Administration and Congress a series of recommendations for policies to promote religious freedom in Uzbekistan. These recommendations call upon the U.S. government to: condition all U.S. assistance to the Uzbek government, except for humanitarian and human rights assistance, on the government's taking concrete steps to improve conditions for religious freedom in Uzbekistan; press Uzbekistan to stop its practice of excessively regulating the free practice of religion, including oppressive regulation of Islamic clergy and use of registration requirements to prevent minority religious groups from practicing their faith; continue to press forcefully its concern about religious-freedom violations in Uzbekistan in bilateral and multilateral discussions; press the Uzbek government to cease abusing articles in its criminal code that impinge upon religious freedom; encourage the Uzbek government to review the cases of persons detained for or charged with religious, political, or security offenses and release those unjustly detained or sentenced; press the Uzbek government to adhere to its international commitments to abide fully by the rule of law and to ensure due process to all; develop assistance programs for Uzbekistan to encourage the creation of institutions of civil society that protect human rights and promote religious freedom; retain the Uzbek-language program of the Voice of America and use it and appropriate public diplomacy to explain to the people of Uzbekistan why religious freedom is an important part of U.S. foreign policy. The complete text of the recommendations can be found on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov.

Michael K. Young, Chair

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