

March 14, 2002: Commission Releases Report, Recommendations on Turkmenistan

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WASHINGTON - Religious-freedom conditions in Turkmenistan are extremely poor and respect for freedom of religion there is deteriorating. Those are among the conclusions in the latest report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress. The report also contains a series of recommendations for U.S. policymakers, including a renewal of the Commission's recommendation that the State Department designate Turkmenistan a "country of particular concern." A country of particular concern is described in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 as one where violations of religious freedom are egregious, systematic, and ongoing. Current countries of particular concern include Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Sudan. Among other Commission recommendations, the U.S. government should: Immediately suspend all non-humanitarian assistance to the government of Turkmenistan, with the exception of programs that serve U.S. national security interests in connection with the current campaign against terrorism; Scrutinize all aspects of any remaining assistance programs in Turkmenistan to ensure that these programs do not facilitate Turkmen government policies or practices that result in religious-freedom violations; Support efforts to facilitate Turkmenistan's sale of natural gas on world markets, including support for the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP), only if the Turkmen government takes definitive steps to improve substantially conditions for religious freedom in Turkmenistan; Identify specific steps that the government of Turkmenistan could take in order to have its currently suspended assistance reinstated and to avoid triggering further restrictions on assistance programs. These steps should reflect a substantial improvement in the protection of religious freedom; Press forcefully its concern about religious-freedom violations in Turkmenistan, consistent with the Turkmen government's obligations to promote respect for and observance of all human rights; Suspend state visits between the United States and Turkmenistan until religious-freedom conditions in the country have improved significantly; Encourage scrutiny of religious-freedom violations in Turkmenistan in appropriate international fora such as the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other multilateral venues. The United States should sponsor a resolution at the United Nations condemning religious-freedom and other related human rights violations in Turkmenistan, which would create a U.N. special rapporteur to investigate the situation in Turkmenistan. The report and recommendations may be read in their entirety on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov.

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