

May 2, 2007: USCIRF Names 11 Countries of Particular Concern, Puts Iraq on Watch List

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WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today announced its 2007 recommendations to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on "countries of particular concern," or CPCs. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) requires that the United States designate as CPCs those countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. "The issue of religious freedom is now understood to have a profound impact on our own political and national security interests as well as on political stability throughout the world," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. The Commission's recommendations for CPC designation for 2007 are: Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The Commission has also established a Watch List of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level requiring CPC designation but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments. Iraq has been added to the Commission's Watch List this year, joining Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria. Today the Commission is also releasing its 2007 Annual Report with recommendations on U.S. policy for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress with regard to CPC countries, as well as other countries where the United States can help to promote freedom of religion or belief. The 2007 Annual Report may be found on the Commission's web site at www.uscirf.gov and may also be obtained by contacting the Commission's Communications Department at communications@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3240, ext. 114. The following is the text of the Commission's letter to Secretary Rice with 2007 CPC recommendations: May 1, 2007

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice

Secretary of State

United States Department of State

Washington, DC Dear Secretary Rice: As required by IRFA and pursuant to our review of the facts and circumstances regarding violations of religious freedom around the world, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom continues to recommend that the following 11 countries be designated as countries of particular concern, or CPCs: Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The 2006 State Department Designations Re-Designations In November 2006, you re-designated Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, Sudan, Iran, Eritrea, and Burma as CPCs. The Commission concurs with these 2006 CPC re-designations and continues to conclude that there have been no changes substantial enough to warrant the removal of these seven countries from the list of CPC designations. The Commission finds, as did the U.S. Department of State in previous years, that there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, where the government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and interfering with private religious practice. The government also continues to be involved in financing activities throughout the world that support extreme religious intolerance, hatred, and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. Every religious community in China continues to be subject to serious restrictions, state control, and repression. The most severe religious freedom abuses are directed against Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, "underground" Roman Catholics, house church and unregistered Protestants, and spiritual groups such as the Falun Gong. These abuses involve imprisonment, torture, and other forms of ill treatment. Prominent religious leaders and others continue to be confined, imprisoned, tortured, "disappeared," and subjected to other forms of ill treatment on account of their religion or belief. Religious freedom conditions deteriorated for communities not affiliated with any of the seven government-approved religious organizations, those considered by the government to be "cults," and those closely associated with ethnic minority groups in China. There are no personal freedoms in North Korea and no protections for universal human rights, including religious freedom. The government severely represses public and private religious activities and maintains a policy of pervasive control over government-sanctioned religious practice. As confirmed by the Commission's study released in 2005 and based on new interviews with North Korean refugees, religious belief of any kind is viewed by the government as a potential competitor to the forcefully propagated cult of personality centered on Kim Jong Il and his late father, Kim Il Sung. In Sudan, an authoritarian government which has pursued coercive policies of Arabization and Islamization resulting in genocide severely restricts the religious freedom and other universal human rights of an ethnically and religiously diverse population. Sudanese security forces have not been held to account for the human rights abuses committed during Sudan's North-South Civil War, most of the victims of which were Christians or followers of traditional African religions. With the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005, religious freedom conditions have improved in southern and central Sudan. However, there are serious problems with implementing the CPA, and the agreement has not yet resulted in significant changes in practice in government-controlled areas of the North. The government's actions with regard to the continuing genocide in Darfur, as well as its failure to cooperate with the Security Council-mandated investigation by the International Criminal Court of alleged war crimes, impugn the commitment of Sudanese leaders to support human rights guarantees. Over the past year, the poor

religious freedom record of the government of Iran deteriorated, especially for religious minorities, including Baha'is, Sufi Muslims, and Evangelical Christians. All minority groups faced arrests, imprisonment, other forms of detention, and harassment. There is a consistent stream of virulent and inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders against such groups and an increase in harassment and, in some cases, imprisonment of and physical attacks against them. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's denials of the Holocaust have intensified fears among Iran's Jewish community. Dissidents and political reformers continue to be imprisoned on criminal charges of blasphemy and for criticizing the nature of the Islamic regime. More than 120 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested since early 2005, with dozens still awaiting trial; others have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from 90 days to one year on dubious charges that include "spreading propaganda against the regime." Religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in Eritrea, where the government engages in systematic and egregious religious freedom violations, including: a prolonged ban on public activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized; arbitrary denials of recognition; closure of places of worship; disruption of private religious and social gatherings of members of unregistered groups; arbitrary arrests and detention without charge of their members; and the mistreatment or torture of religious detainees, sometimes resulting in death. The military junta that governs Burma monitors the activities of all religious organizations through a pervasive internal security apparatus. The government imposes restrictions on certain religious practices, controls and censors all religious publications, has supported, allowed, or instigated violence against religious minorities, and in some areas of the country, has forcefully promoted Buddhism over other religions. Ethnic minority Christians and Muslims have encountered the most difficulties in recent years.

Vietnam: Still Deserving CPC Designation
Vietnam was removed from the State Department's CPC list in November 2006, on the eve of President Bush's visit to Hanoi for the Asian Pacific Economic Conference. The Commission expressed its disappointment that the CPC designation was lifted, citing continued arrests and detentions of individuals in part because of their religious activities and continued severe religious freedom restrictions targeting some ethnic minority Protestants and Buddhists, Vietnamese Mennonites, Hao Hoa Buddhists, and monks and nuns associated with the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). The Commission recognized positive religious freedom developments in Vietnam, as the government released prominent religious prisoners, introduced some legal reforms, facilitated the legal recognition of religious communities, and, except for isolated cases, ended large scale forced renunciations of faith. However, the Commission stated that these improvements were insufficient to warrant lifting the CPC designation because it was too soon to determine if the legal protections would be permanent and whether such progress would last beyond Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Lifting the designation also potentially removed a positive diplomatic tool that proved an effective incentive to bilateral engagement on religious freedom, and related human rights. Since the CPC designation was lifted and Vietnam joined the WTO, positive religious freedom trends have, for the most part, stalled, and Vietnam has initiated a severe crackdown on human rights defenders and advocates for the freedoms of speech, association and assembly, including many religious leaders who previously were the leading advocates for religious freedom in that country. Given the recent deterioration of human rights conditions in Vietnam and because of continued abuses of and restrictions on religious freedom, the Commission continues to believe that the lifting of the CPC designation was premature. We recommend that Vietnam be re-designated as a CPC in 2007.

Uzbekistan: Severe Violations Finally Acknowledged
Last year, for the first time, you designated Uzbekistan a severe violator of religious freedom. The Commission welcomes the designation of Uzbekistan as a CPC, which the Commission has recommended for two years. The Uzbek government continues to exercise a high degree of control over the practice of the Islamic religion and to arrest Muslim individuals and crack down harshly on groups and mosques that do not conform to state-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons in recent years, many of whom are denied the right to due process. There are credible reports that many of those arrested continue to be tortured or beaten in detention, despite official Uzbek promises to halt this practice. Moreover, Uzbekistan has a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function, leaving more than 100 religious groups currently denied registration. The government of Uzbekistan faces threats to its security, but these threats do not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill treatment of religious believers nor the continued practice of torture, which reportedly remains widespread.

Responding to the CPC Designation: Discussions with Saudi Arabia
In July 2006, you determined to leave in place a waiver "to further the purposes" of IRFA by announcing that bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia had enabled the United States to identify and confirm a number of policies that the Saudi government "is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purpose of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups." Because previous reform pledges made by the Saudi government have not been implemented in practice, the Commission remains concerned about whether and how the newly reported Saudi policies will be implemented and how the United States will monitor them. The Commission therefore recommends that the State Department report publicly to Congress every 120 days on the implementation of the policies identified in the bilateral discussions. The newly confirmed policies-if actually implemented in full-could advance much-needed efforts to dismantle some of the institutionalized policies that have promoted severe violations of freedom of religion or belief in Saudi Arabia and worldwide.

Additional Countries that Warrant CPC Designation
Of the countries not on your CPC list, in addition to Vietnam, the Commission continues to find that Pakistan and Turkmenistan have engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. We continue this year to recommend that these countries be designated as CPCs. Sectarian and religiously motivated violence persists in Pakistan, particularly against Shi'as, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus, and the government's response to this problem, though improved, continues to be insufficient and not fully effective. In addition, a number of the country's laws, including legislation restricting the Ahmadi community and laws against blasphemy, frequently result in imprisonment on account of religion or belief and/or vigilante violence against the accused. Just last month, six Christians in one city in Punjab province were charged with blasphemy under highly questionable circumstances; others

in the area have reportedly gone into hiding out of fear of attack. These religious freedom concerns persist amidst the wider problem of the lack of democracy in Pakistan, an obstacle the current government has done little to address. The death of President Saparmurat Niyazov last December presents an opportunity for the United States to encourage the new leadership in Turkmenistan to act immediately to reverse Niyazov's gross abuses of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. Among the urgent reforms needed are ending Niyazov's personality cult, which had reached the dimensions of a state-imposed religion; halting of the government's interference with, and excessive control over, religious activities and organizations; and bringing the country's religion law into conformity with Turkmenistan's constitution and its international legal commitments. Although some steps have been taken by the new president to end the country's isolation, they are not directly related to human rights and do not warrant the removal of Turkmenistan, one of the most repressive states in the world, from the Commission's CPC list. The Commission's Watch List In addition to its CPC recommendations, the Commission has established a Watch List of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level requiring CPC designation but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments. Afghanistan, where the former Taliban regime was once designated under IRFA as a particularly severe violator, was added to the Commission's Watch List last year, joining Belarus, Egypt, Bangladesh, Cuba, Indonesia, and Nigeria. The Commission is concerned about the serious abuses in these countries, and that the governments either have not halted repression and/or violence against persons amounting to severe violations of freedom of religion, or have failed to punish those responsible for perpetrating those acts. We urge you to pay particular attention to the poor situation for religious freedom in these countries, as we will continue to do. This year the Commission has added Iraq to its Watch List, due to the alarming and deteriorating situation for freedom of religion and belief. Despite ongoing efforts to stabilize the country, successive Iraqi governments have not adequately curbed the growing scope and severity of human rights abuses. Although non-state actors, particularly the Sunni-dominated insurgency, are responsible for a substantial proportion of the sectarian violence and associated human rights violations, the Iraqi government also bears responsibility. That responsibility takes two forms. First, the Iraqi government has engaged in human rights violations through its state security forces, including arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention without due process, extrajudicial executions, and torture. These violations affect suspected Sunni insurgents, but also ordinary Sunnis who are targeted on the basis of their religious identity. Second, the Iraqi government tolerates religiously based attacks and other religious freedom abuses carried out by armed Shi'a factions including the Jaysh al-Mehdi (Mahdi Army) and the Badr Organization. These abuses include abductions, beatings, extrajudicial executions, torture and rape. Relationships between these para-state militias and leading Shi'a factions within Iraq's ministries and governing coalition indicate that these groups operate with impunity and often, governmental complicity. Although many of these militia-related violations reveal the challenges evident in Iraq's fragmented political system, they nonetheless reflect the Iraqi government's tolerance-and in some instances commission-of egregious violations of religious freedom. Finally, the Commission also notes the grave conditions for non-Muslims in Iraq, including ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Yazidis, and Sabean Mandaeans, who continue to suffer pervasive and severe violence and discrimination at the hands of both government and non-government actors. The Commission has added Iraq to its Watch List with the understanding that it may designate Iraq as a CPC next year if improvements are not made by the Iraqi government. Conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan remain increasingly problematic. Flaws in the country's new constitution, which does not contain clear protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief for individual Afghan citizens, failed to prevent a number of criminal court cases that were in violation of the rights of the accused. In addition, the failure or inability of the Afghan government to exercise authority effectively outside Kabul contributes to a progressively deteriorating situation for religious freedom and other human rights in many of the provinces. As far back as 2002, the Commission raised strong concerns about the decision not to extend the international security presence outside of Kabul; it now seems clear that the political reconstruction process has indeed become seriously threatened as a result of the alarming and deteriorating security conditions. In the past year, the government of Belarus appeared to be adopting increasingly tough sanctions against religious leaders and others who take part in unregistered religious activity, including through short-term imprisonment. In addition, the highly authoritarian government persists in enforcing the country's harsh 2002 law on religion, resulting in calculated and serious regulatory obstacles and bureaucratic and legal restrictions on the activities of many religious communities. In the past two years, the Belarusian authorities have increased the amount of the fines for "unauthorized" religious activity, as well as expanded the range of religious groups that are subject to fines, which in many cases now amount to five times the average monthly wage in Belarus. The Commission traveled to Egypt in 2004 and found that serious religious freedom violations affect Coptic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Baha'is, as well as members of minority Muslim communities, all of whom are also subject to religiously-motivated attacks. The Commission is deeply concerned about a December 2006 decision by the Supreme Administrative Court of Egypt to uphold the Egyptian government's discriminatory policy of prohibiting Baha'is from obtaining a national identity card. A lower court decision in April 2006 had allowed members of the Baha'i faith in Egypt to obtain national identity cards and to list their religious affiliation, but the Egyptian government appealed that ruling to the Supreme Administrative Court. Known converts from Islam to Christianity also receive attention from the state security services, and converts have been arrested for attempting to change their religious affiliation on identity documents. In addition, although religious pluralism in Egypt has been acknowledged, more can and should be done by the government to punish those responsible for the rise in religious violence in recent years, and to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism and other intolerance in the media and in the education system. Bangladesh has been in the throes of a major political and constitutional crisis, the resolution of which will determine whether religious freedom and other human rights will be protected by the rule of law or the country will continue on a downward spiral toward authoritarianism and intolerance. The Commission placed Bangladesh on its Watch List in 2005 due to concerns about increasing Islamist radicalism and violence and the threatening conditions for

and discrimination against religious minorities, including Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadis. Members of religious minority communities have expressed concerns about being excluded from voter rolls, intimidated from voting in the next national election, or targeted by anti-minority violence as had followed the last national election in October 2001. After the January 2007 postponement of the election and the installation of a new caretaker government that has given the military a high-profile role in domestic law enforcement, there have been numerous reports of serious human rights abuses, including suspected extrajudicial killings by the security forces, arbitrary detentions, torture, and curbs on press freedom. Religious belief and practice continue to be tightly controlled in Cuba, where a 2005 law on religion reinforces the government's efforts to maintain control over religious practice. Both registered and unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression. Political prisoners and human rights and pro-democracy activists are increasingly being denied the right to worship. Religious leaders report pressure, sometimes blatant, by the government to expel pro-democracy or human rights activists from their church, and activists have been asked by church leaders to distance themselves from their congregations. Although the situation has continued to improve in Indonesia, the Commission remains concerned about ongoing sectarian violence and the Indonesian government's inability or unwillingness to hold those responsible to account; the forcible closures of places of worship belonging to religious minorities; and the growing political power and influence of religious extremists, who harass and sometimes instigate violence against moderate Muslim leaders and members of religious minorities. Violence targeting Ahmadiyah Muslims has risen dramatically in recent years and extremist groups are known to train, recruit, and operate in Central and South Sulawesi. In the last year, at least nine Protestant churches, four Ahmadiyah mosques, and one Hindu temple were closed or damaged in areas of West Java, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and West Nusa Tenggara as a result of the influence of extremist groups who incited mobs and/or intimidated local officials. In Nigeria, the government continues to have an inadequate-though improved-response to ongoing violent communal conflicts along religious lines, the expansion of sharia into the criminal codes of several northern states, and discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims. In April 2006 in Plateau state, at least 25 people, both Christian and Muslim, were killed and hundreds fled their homes during sectarian clashes over land ownership. In September 2006, a mob of Muslim youths injured six Christians and burned nearly a dozen churches in Jigawa state in northern Nigeria. * * *Summaries of conditions in all of the countries discussed in this letter can be found in the Commission's Annual Report, which we have enclosed and which will be released concurrently with this letter. The Commission has made specific policy recommendations on most of these countries, and we encourage you to give special attention to those recommendations, which can also be found in our report. We also urge the Department of State to take any actions necessary to implement the IRFA legislation. Madame Secretary, the work of the Commission continues to demonstrate that the issue of religious freedom intersects with numerous U.S. foreign policy concerns. Severe violations of freedom of religion or belief have a profound impact on our own political and national security interests as well as on political stability throughout the world. When our government actively promotes religious freedom, we work to undercut the extremism that threatens the world. In advancing this central human right, we thus act to promote peace and security for all nations, including our own. The Commission looks forward to meeting with you to discuss its 2007 CPC recommendations.

Respectfully yours, Felice D. Gaer

Chaircc: John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State

R. Nicholas Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs

Paula J. Dobriansky, Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs

Barry F. Lowenkron, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

John V. Hanford, III, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

Stephen Hadley, National Security Advisor

Michael G. Kozak, Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights and International Organizations, National Security Council

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