

February 8, 2008: Burma: Commissioner Nina Shea Briefs Congressional Staff on USCIRF Recommendations

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WASHINGTON-Commissioner Nina Shea briefed congressional staff on Jan. 29, 2008, on recommendations for making U.S. policy toward Burma more effective. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom developed the recommendations after sponsoring a hearing on the brutal Burmese government crackdown on the Buddhist monks, students and others who led and took part in last fall's Saffron Revolution. The recommendations were contained in a 4-page letter on Jan. 11 to President Bush from the Commission, which urged extra efforts to advance democratic reform and respect for human rights in Burma as a major priority of the Administration and was signed by Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. The recommendations include:

- establishment of an interagency taskforce on Burma under the National Security Council. This taskforce should be headed by a senior ranking official, to coordinate U.S. government policy on Burma;
- appointment of a Special Coordinator on Burma at the State Department to coordinate bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts and to serve as the Administration's point person for efforts to bring about democratic reform in Burma; and
- continuing, firm U.S. support for various UN diplomatic efforts including:
 - • granting unimpeded access to the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma and the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Burma;
 - • engaging in constructive dialogue with the UN Human Rights Council and its special procedures, especially the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar and the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and
 - • initiating action on a UN Security Council resolution that will include a binding timeframe and offer the UN Secretary General a clear mandate in his interactions with Burmese authorities.

The Commission letter pointed out the desperate need for U.S. leadership to keep the international focus on demands for democracy and the protection of human rights in Burma. "The world cannot turn its back on Burma and allow the regime's brutal repression to continue. Inaction or silence allows Burma's military leaders tighten their grip on Burma's

people," Commissioner Shea said at the briefing. "The United States should continue to take a leading role in shaping bilateral and multilateral efforts to bring about a peaceful democratic transition."

The off-the-record briefing was chaired by Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ), sponsored by the congressional Task Force on International Religious Freedom, and included the participation of Rep. Joseph Pitts (R-PA). David Mathieson, Burma Consultant in the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, and Jennifer Quigley, Advocacy Coordinator for the U.S. Campaign for Burma, also took part.