May 3, 2006: USCIRF Annual Report Press Conference

U.S.
COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
PRESS CONFERENCE ANNOUNCING RELEASE OF 2006 ANNUAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO SECRETARY OF STATE CONDOLEEZZA RICE ON COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN
WEDNESDAY, MAY 3, 2006 WASHINGTON,
D.C.

Transcript by:

Federal News Service

Washington, D.C.

MR. CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome.

Our first rule of business would be if you would kindly turn off your cell phones. It helps during a press conference for them not to go off -- unless you are a medical doctor. And if you are, I'm not sure why you're here.

Welcome. I'm Michael Cromartie, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. As you know, in 1998 the International Religious Freedom Act was signed. And the act reminds us that the right to freedom of religion is a universal human right, and a fundamental freedom articulated in numerous international documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Congress and the International Religious Freedom Act created the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to advocate within U.S.
foreign policy a prominent place for the promotion of religious freedom.

Now in our seventh year of operation, the Commission is drawing the attention of policymakers to the growing strategic importance of protection of religious freedom to U.S. national interests, raising greater public awareness as to why religious freedom is a critical component of how countries treat their own people and deal with the world around them, and working with members of Congress in a bipartisan effort to promote religious freedom abroad.

Now, over the past year, the Commission has traveled to China, to Sudan,

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.
We have testified on numerous occasions before Congress. And we've held press conferences and roundtables and hearings on Capitol Hill and at various policy institutions in and around Washington.
The annual report which we're releasing today -- and if you haven't received a copy, they're right outside here -- the annual report we are releasing today provides a comprehensive review of the commission's activities, our findings, our recommendations, our achievements during the past year to promote the universal right to freedom of thought, conscious and religion or belief.

The report describes conditions for religious freedom and interrelated human rights in the countries of concern to the Commission, and we highlight key findings and present the Commission's U.S. policy recommendations.
One of the Commission's chief statutory responsibilities is to make recommendations to the Secretary of State on countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. Under IRFA, those countries that meet the statutory criteria must be designated by the Secretary of State as countries of particular concern -- or better known as CPCs.

Now today, concurrent with the release of this report, the Commission is releasing its 2006 recommendations to the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, for the CPCs. And for those recommendations, I turn now to my fellow commissioner, Nina Shea.

Commissioner Shea.

NINA SHEA (USCIRF Vice Chair): Thank you.

As the chair said, one of the Commission's chief responsibilities in promoting religious freedom under IRFA is to draw attention to those countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom and recommend that they be designated as countries of particular concern, or CPCs. This designation not only puts a spotlight on those countries where the most severe violations take place but also lays the groundwork for important decisions in U.S. relations with these countries.

As required by IRFA, the commission has assessed the facts and circumstances regarding violations of religious freedom around the world. And pursuant to our review, we recommend that the Secretary of State designate the following 11 "countries of particular concern," or CPCs: Burma, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, -- North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

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 and tolerated by these governments. Afghanistan, where the former Taliban regime was once designed under IRFA as a particularly severe violator, has been added to the commission's watch list this year, joining Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria.

My colleagues here will be discussing the situations in a number of these countries on the Commission's CPC and watch list. Before that, however, I would like to draw attention to the fact that IRFA requires that the President not only name those countries that are the most egregious violators of religious freedom but also take specific policy actions in response to that CPC designation.

In September 2004 the State Department designated three new countries as CPCs -- Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Eritrea. The International Religious Freedom Act requires the U.S. government to take further action in response to those designations. Today I will focus on the State Department's response to Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, since our inception the Commission has recommended and continues to recommend that Saudi Arabia be designated a country of particular concern. In September 2004, the State Department, for the first time, followed the Commission's recommendation and so designated Saudi Arabia.

In September 2005, one year after the designation of Saudi Arabia, Secretary Rice approved a temporary 180-day waiver of further action as a consequence of CPC designation to allow for continued diplomatic discussions with the Saudi government and to, quote, "further the purposes of IRFA." This waiver expired in late March 2006.

As of today, no action with regard to Saudi Arabia has been announced by the U.S. government. Given the extent of religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, the Commission urges the Secretary to consult with Congress and other parts of the United States government, including the Commission, during its discussions with the Saudis, and to make any agreement reached with the Saudi government public in the interest of accountability that results from transparency.

Since religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia have not substantially improved in the last year, the U.S. government must not hesitate in taking aggressive action to demonstrate that it will not disregard the persistent and egregious religious freedom violations committed by the Saudi government.

Turning to Vietnam, Vietnam continues to harass, detain, imprison and discriminate against leaders and practitioners of all religious communities. In response to its designation as a CPC, the Vietnamese government has released a number of prominent religious prisoners, reopened some churches in the central highlands, officially outlawed forced renunciations of faith and issued new decrees to help speed the process of legal registration of religious venues. Nevertheless, serious abuses of religious freedom continue to occur, particularly against Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Vietnamese Mennonites, followers of Hoa Hao Buddhism and leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

In addition, in the last year, credible reports of forced renunciations of faith continue to emerge, the number of religious venues reopened is low relative to the number that were closed, and new detentions continue to occur. Though promises of future improvement are encouraging, we should not reward Vietnam too quickly by lifting the CPC designation or downplaying human rights concerns to advance economic or military interests.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner Shea.

We're now going to hear about Afghanistan, and we'll turn to Commissioner Bansal.

PREETA D. BANSAL (USCIRF Commissioner): Thank you.

We're going to be discussing and focusing on a few of the countries that we have specifically focused a lot of our attention on this past year. One in particular is Afghanistan.

Although conditions for freedom of religion or belief have certainly improved since the fall of the Taliban, they have continued to become increasingly problematic in this past year, and the Commission, therefore, has recommended that Afghanistan be placed on the Watch List of countries for which we are concerned about future conditions of freedom of religion or belief. The principal concern of the Commission consists of flaws in the country's new constitution. The constitution does not contain clear protections for the right to freedom of

religion or belief for individual Afghan citizens.

In March, as I'm sure all of you know, the world's attention was gripped by the case of Mr. Abdul Rahman, an Afghan citizen who was detained in Kabul and threatened with the death penalty for changing his religion. While this particular case garnered a lot of attention and international pressure was brought to bear such that he was granted asylum in a European country, unfortunately, his case is not an isolated incident. Also last year, a journalist and a Muslim scholar was charged with blasphemy for questioning the use of harsh punishments under Shari'a in Afghanistan. Other charges of blasphemy have been lodged against political reformers and defenders of women's rights. Our concern is not with these individual cases alone, although we're very concerned about the cases, but with the bigger structural problem in the new constitution that allows incidents like this to continue to occur.

For example, the constitution contains no specific guarantee for the individual right of freedom of religion or belief. While the constitution does allow certain religious groups to have the right of worship, it does not guarantee the right of religious freedom for each individual, which means that the large majority of Afghan population, which is Muslim, and 99 percent of Muslims within Afghanistan, do not have a right to dissent from state-imposed orthodoxy.

So our concern for freedom of religion or belief is that the absence of it in Afghanistan affects Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In addition, all of the bill of rights guarantees -- bill of rights-types guarantees -- in the Afghan constitution can be superceded by ordinary legislation. So for example, the constitution provides that the right to life in Afghanistan is guaranteed, except as provided by law. So ordinary legislation can trump the most basic guarantees.

Thirdly, there is a repugnancy clause in the constitution which says that any law that is contrary to the sacred religion of Islam shall not be valid.

And finally, the group that's charged with enforcing that and determining what is contrary to the sacred religion of Islam is the Afghanistan supreme court. We had the pleasure two years ago of meeting the chief justice of the Afghanistan supreme court on our mission to Afghanistan, Chief Justice Shinwari. And he told us that he supports all of the individual rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights except for three -- the freedom of religion, the freedom of speech and gender equality. Needless to say, this caused us great concern that the interpretation of Afghanistan's constitution is in the hands of judges such as Mr. Shinwari.

The defects in the constitution are the principal concern for the

Commission, and we continue to believe that the constitution was an important missed opportunity in our reconstruction work in Afghanistan. But they're compounded by the current role and power of the judicial system and the judiciary, which we continue to believe is not yet adequately versed in civil law and does not have the infrastructure and support necessary to govern with a strict sense of the rule of law.

So all of these developments indicate the religious extremism, even in official circles, is an increasing threat to democratic consolidation in Afghanistan. And we recommend that the international community should work with the Karzai government and the Afghan legislature to bring the criminal laws into line with international standards to support judicial reconstruction efforts. Without these concrete steps, we fear that the door will be opened for the imposition of harsh, unfair and even abusive interpretations of religious orthodoxy, not just for the nation's religious minorities, which include Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, but also for the Muslim majority.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you. We'll now hear from Commissioner Land on Iraq.

RICHARD D. LAND (USCIRF Commissioner):

The Iraqi people have faced considerable human rights challenges as their political leaders continue to try to forge a new government to advance the political process and as U.S. coalition forces and their Iraqi counterparts address serious, ongoing security concerns. In the last year, there has been a grave escalation of Sunni-Shi'a violence and religiously motivated violence at the hands of insurgents and Islamic militants continues unabated. These attacks have had an impact on all elements of Iraqi society, including Chaldo-Assyrians, Sabean Mandeans, the Yezidis and non-Muslim groups targeted on account of their religion, as well as secular Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Roma, women, homosexuals and others.

As the U.S. Department of State acknowledged in its 2005 International Religious Freedom Report, quote, "While the general lawlessness that permitted criminal gangs and insurgents to victimize citizens with impunity affected Iraqis of all ethnicities and religions, many individuals were targeted because of their religious identity or their secular leanings." The Commission has concluded that because the United States has been so directly involved in Iraq's political reconstruction, it has a special obligation to act vigorously, together with the Iraqi leadership, to identify and to promptly remedy the systemic flaws which continue to undermine the protection of universal human rights in Iraq.

Toward that end, our report has made specific policy recommendations for the U.S. government, and these include immediately appointing and dispatching a

senior foreign service officer to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, to report directly to the ambassador, and to serve as the lead human rights official in Iraq as endorsed legislatively by Congress; second, speaking out at the highest level against religiously motivated violence, including violence targeting women and members of religious minorities, as well as efforts by local officials and extremist groups to enforce religious law in violation of the Iraqi constitution and international human rights standards; and third, urging Iraqi leaders with direct, U.S. government support to establish an independent and adequately financed national human rights commission.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Commissioner Land.

Sudan. When the Commission visited Sudan in January 2006 to assess the state of religious freedom there, we also wanted to assess the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended a two-decades-long civil war between the north and the south. Although the comprehensive north-south peace agreement, the CPA, was signed a year ago, the Commission found that there had been significant delays and shortcomings in the CPA's implementation raising questions regarding the sincerity of the commitment of the National Congress Party and the Government of National Unity.

Moreover, the religious freedom and other human rights protections agreed to in the CPA and enshrined in Sudan's interim national constitution have yet to result in significant changes in practice in government-controlled areas of the north. Government agencies continue to harass and discriminate against Christians as well as against Muslims who dissent from the government's view. The continuing genocide in Darfur also illustrates the lack of commitment of Sudanese leaders to respecting human rights.

In addition, no country comes close to Sudan in terms of the number of civilians displaced by conflict. Our visit, particularly to a camp for internally displaced persons, also showed us in intensely personal terms the plight of the millions who have fled their homes due to religious and ethnic conflict in Sudan.

The Commission, therefore, recommends that Sudan remain a CPC, a recommendation the State Department has repeatedly adopted. Our recommendations, then, are these: The U.S. government should remain engaged at the highest level in bringing about a just and lasting peace for all Sudan by, number one, devoting a senior personnel to the issue, including a presidential special envoy, a coordinator for U.S. assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons, and an official in the embassy working full time on human rights; number two, closely monitoring implementation of the CPA and of the U.N. Security Council's resolutions on Darfur; number three, publicly reporting to the Congress on CPA implementation and on the return of refugees and internally displaced; and number four, supporting a stronger international presence in Sudan sufficient to protect the civilian populations.

In addition, sanctions should remain until particularly severe religious freedom violations end throughout Sudan and the genocide ends in Darfur, but should not preclude U.S. assistance for development in the south for CPA implementation or for educational exchanges.

I would like to turn to my fellow commissioner, Dr. Land, to speak to us about China.

RICHARD LAND (USCIRF Commissioner): Thank you, Michael.

In August of 2005, a Commission delegation made an unprecedented two-week visit to China to engage senior government officials on Chinese policies and practices relating to religious freedom. The trip followed three years of diplomatic effort by the U.S. government.

The Commission found that religious freedom conditions in China continue to be poor. Chinese government officials control, monitor and restrain the activities of all religious communities, specifically targeting unregistered and illegal groups, such as the Uighur Muslims, house church Protestants, unregistered Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists and practitioners of Falun Gong.

The commission continues to recommend that China be designated as a country of particular concern, or CPC, as it has been since 1999. The State Department has followed the commission's recommendation and named China a CPC.

Prominent religious leaders and lay persons alike continue to be confined, tortured, imprisoned and subjected to other forms of ill treatment on account of their religion or belief. Religious leaders among communities that resist registration with China's system of patriotic religious associations are particularly vulnerable to such harassment.

Despite recent promises to the U.S. government that religious education of minors was not contrary to Chinese law, problems persist in this area and restrictions remain, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet. Within the last year, Chinese authorities have also continued arrests of unregistered Christians that gathered to worship in homes, despite public statements that this practice was not illegal.

In March 2005 the Chinese government promulgated the national Regulations on Religious Affairs. Those Chinese leaders heralded the regulations as, quote, "a significant step forward in the protection of religious freedom," end quote. The Commission concludes that the new regulations were issued in large measure to regularize the management of religious affairs, thus offering party leaders more extensive control over all religious groups and their activities.

In our annual report, the Commission has issued several recommendations intended to expand existing efforts to improve the rule of law in China; to strengthen the U.S.-China human rights dialogue; to improve public diplomacy efforts; to address conditions of North Korean refugees in China and to expand technical assistance on human rights and religious freedom.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Commissioner Land.

We'll now hear about North Korea from Commissioner Chaput.

CHARLES J. CHAPUT (USCIRF Commissioner): Thank you for being here today.

The Commission continues to recommend that North Korea be designated a CPC. In November of 2005, the Commission released a study entitled "Thank You, Father Kim Il-Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion in North Korea." It's authored by David Hawk. The Commission undertook the study because there was such a limited amount of information available about conditions inside North Korea. The study is unique because it provides extensive and detailed interviews with North Korean defectors about their experiences in North Korea and China.

"Thank You, Father Kim Il-Sung" offer compelling evidence of the systematic destruction of religious life in North Korea and of ongoing severe abuses of religious freedom. It also offers insights into the character of the Kim Jong-Il regime, its fear of the growth of independent religious institutions, and the extent to which it controls the most basic beliefs of the North Korean people. The report provides eyewitness accounts of torture and executions of religious believers and the survival of very limited religious activity in North Korea.

The Commission's annual report includes several recommendations that address human rights and regional stability on the Korean Peninsula. These include that the United States work with Asian and European allies to fashion a comprehensive plan that would link human rights and security concerns on the

Korean Peninsula, modeled after the famous Helsinki Accords of 1975; secondly, that all human rights and democracy assistance funding, authorized in the North Korean Human Rights Act, be appropriated; third, that the United States government fund programs that expand alternative sources of information for North Korea -- radio broadcasts, television, Internet and print information sources -- and a production of video and other digital programming to accommodate growing DVD circulation and satellite dish technology in North Korea.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Archbishop.

By the way, if you'd like a copy of our report on North Korea, authored by David Hawk, just call the Commission and we'll send you a copy.

I'd like to call now on Commissioner Prodromou to talk to us about Russia.

ELIZABETH H. PRODROMOU (USCIRF Commissioner): Thank you.

Currently, Russia is neither a CPC nor a Watch List country. However, Russia has been a consistent focus of the Commission since our inception in 1999. And this is not so much because of the severity of their religious freedom violations, per se, in Russia, but because of the general fragility of human rights protections, including those for freedom of religion and belief.

Now, in February of 2006, we traveled to Moscow where we made a presentation at the Russian presidential administration training academy conference on human rights intolerance in today's Russia. And we also met on that visit with members of civil society groups, as well as human rights organizations and various academics. And on the basis of that visit, the Commission remains very concerned about what appears to be general backsliding and a retreat from the kinds of democratic reforms that had marked an overall improvement in the human rights situation and the religious freedom conditions after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Now, some of the developments that are especially concerning to us of late include the following:

First, there has been a trajectory upward, a marked increase in recent years of incidents of religiously, racially or ethnically motivated violence and attacks. And the Russian government, the Russian state has not been vigilant in combating hate crime, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and

Islamaphobia.

Secondly, although the Russian government itself no longer sponsors anti-Semitism, vandalism and physical attacks on members of the Jewish communities and Jewish property continue. Most notably, in January of this year, there was an attack on seven men. They were stabbed outside of a Moscow synagogue.

Thirdly of concern to us is the fact that many Russian state officials have a close relationship with members of the Russian Orthodox Church. And as a consequence, this results in unofficial, yet preferential treatment for the Russian Orthodox Church. This is a particular problem at regional and local levels where, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church has influenced official decisions on building permits for other religious groups, such as Catholics and Protestants. It's also a problem at the regional and local levels insofar as the Russian Orthodox Church has been able to affect decisions regarding building permits and improvements on locations of worship for Muslim groups.

Fourth point of concern for us is the fact that conditions for Muslims throughout Russia are worrisome. Muslims throughout Russia are subject to discrimination and violence due to their perceived links to the decade-long conflict in Chechnya. And as a consequence, Muslims in Russia have been subjected to violations of due process. And once again, this is especially acute in areas where Muslims are not a majority, where they are a minority population.

And then finally, the Commission is very worried, very concerned about the new Russian NGO law, which was passed earlier this year. Our concern is that the law itself may be implemented in an arbitrary manner that ultimately restricts civil society in Russia and violates Russia's international commitments concerning freedom of speech, press and association. This NGO law mainly expands the government oversight prerogative of the activities, funding sources and composition of registered religious communities, and again, as a consequence, may be utilized to curtail the freedom of civil society.

As a consequence of these concerns, the Commission has made several recommendations regarding U.S. government steps vis-a-vis Russia. And amongst those, briefly, are urging of the Russian government to assure that any special role for the Orthodox Church, or any other religious community, does not result in violations of the rights of or discrimination against members of other religious groups. We've also encouraged the Russian government to accept a site visit to Chechnya from the U.N. special rapporteur on torture, extraditional executions and violence against women. Likewise, we have urged continuing pressure on the Russian government to ensure that religious communities are not broadly and indiscriminately labeled as threats to Russia's national security. And then finally, amongst other recommendations, we have encouraged the Russian government to monitor the actions of regional and local officials who interfere with the right to religious freedom, whether in terms of belief or manifestation. And we've encouraged that they take

steps to bring local laws and regulations on religious activities into conformity and compliance with the Russian constitution and Russia's international human rights obligations.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you.

And now we want to talk about refugee and asylum issues, and that will be our final presentation. And then we have a special guest with us here today we're going to introduce to you in a moment. And then we'll have time for your question and answers.

Commissioner Bansal.

MS. BANSAL: Thank you.

The statute that created our Commission is called the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. And that act created a number -- had a number of mandates to include religious freedom concerns within United States foreign policy. And it included a number of different tools by which to achieve that, including the creation of our Commission.

Another set of tools contained in that act concerned refugee and asylum issues. The International Religious Freedom Act includes provisions related to asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, with particular concern for securing protections for those individuals who have fled countries that have severe violations of religious freedom.

The commission continues to urge the State Department and other relevant agencies to implement completely the provisions of the International Religious Freedom Act, including the refugee and asylum provisions. And we welcomed remarks in November 2005 by the ranking members of several key House subcommittee that they intend to do that. In particular, the ranking member of the House Subcommittee on International Operations, Human Rights and Africa has spoken about the need for greater congressional oversight in this area.

Last year, the Commission had done a widely hailed report on expedited removal for asylum seekers in the United States. This year, following up on that report, we've had a number of accomplishments in this area, and four, in particular, I want to highlight for you, and there's others contained in the annual report.

First, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff appointed a senior refugee and asylum policy adviser. That was a move he indicated was in response to a key recommendation of our report last year on expedited removals.

Secondly, Congress included in the North Korean Human Rights Act a provision that implemented a policy recommendation of the commission. And that provision provides that the U.S. refugee program should include annual descriptions in its report to Congress of how access to the U.S. refugee program is facilitated for those who flee countries of particular concern, or CPCs.

Thirdly, Congress renewed the Specter amendment, which adopted a recommendation by the commission to promote consistent adjudications by the U.S. refugee program for members of religious minorities fleeing Iran.

And finally, although the Commission doesn't get involved in individual cases of asylum and refugee conditions, we do weigh in when there is the prospective of a precedential decision which will have ramifications for United States policy. And citing evidence provided by the commission, one such case happened this year and was reversed in response to our involvement.

In the case of Li versus Gonzales, Mr. Li was an asylum seeker from China who had been arrested, beaten, fired and charged with the crime of organizing an unregistered house church in China. The Department of Justice took the position in the courts -- the various courts -- that he was not persecuted on the basis of his religious beliefs, but rather was persecuted on account of his doing illegal activity. And it also -- and the 5th Circuit ultimately held, based on the United States Department of Justice's position, that China had the sovereign right to regulate unregistered religions.

The Commission got involved and contacted the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security and informed them that China's policies in this regard were contrary to international human rights standards. And as a result, the United States Department of Justice changed its position, fought re-hearing en banc of the 5th Circuit decision, and ultimately, the 5th Circuit vacated its decision, thereby ensuring that a decision that is contrary to United States foreign policy and contrary to international human rights standards does not remain precedential.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you.

We have one more presentation, sir, and then we'll have questions.

We are privileged and honored today to have a special guest with us. Phuntsog Nyidron is a person who was a prisoner in Tibet for over 17 years. And she arrived in Washington, D.C., on March 15th and was released -- you can stand right there -- and was released and came to Washington on March 15th, and she's come to be with us today and we're grateful for that. She has a statement for us, and then we'll have your questions.

PHUNTSOG NYIDRON: (Through interpreter.) I would like to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to make a presentation here at their press conference on the release of their annual report.

Even though when Commission members visited Tibet last year, and when they met with me, I did not really know who they were or what the significance of their visit was -- neither did the Chinese government tell me anything about it. I mainly had the feeling and I assumed they were a part of the many foreigners who had some sort of concern for the Tibetan people.

It was only after coming to this land of freedom and after understanding the situation that I realized that the people who met me then were members of this U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and I understood the significance of their visit and the length they went to come to meet me in Lhasa.

If you take the situation in Tibet today, if you look at the superficial level, people might assume that there is some sort of religious freedom, but in real terms, there is no religious freedom in Tibet today. Even though monasteries and nunneries are supposed to be places for the study of religious philosophy, in Tibet what we see is that these monasteries and nunneries are administered and governed by an officially appointed committee. And in the Tibetan religious scheme of things, reverence to one's Lama -- to one's religious-spiritual leader -- is very important. And the Chinese government's policy today is such that they prevent people from doing anything of such nature.

Not only that, they -- the Chinese government -- sort of forces people to criticize one's religious leaders, one's spiritual leader. And when people do not want to do those things, then they are punished severely. I've noted that the Commission has been working actively on the issue of the Tibetan Buddhists and the situation in Tibet in the past. And I hope and I urge that the Commission would continue to pay attention to the situation of the Tibetan people.

Just to give you an understanding of the real situation in Tibet today, even though I am a Buddhist nun and I was in prison for 15 years for my own religious belief, and for my own belief, but even after I was released, I was not allowed to go back to my nunnery for my religious study.

Fortunately, I am free today, but there are many more people -- Tibetans in Tibet today -- both inside prison, those who may have been released from prison, whose religious freedom continue to be curtailed by the Chinese authorities; and therefore, I will take this opportunity to urge you all -- the Commission and the U.S. government and everyone -- to help change the situation in Tibet.

Thank you very much.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you. (Applause.)

Our guest is famous also for being part of a group of Buddhist nuns who were called the singing nuns, and if time allowed, we would ask her to sing; but time does not allow. (Laughter.)

There's now time for your questions and answers.

Yes, sir. You've been waiting patiently. Please identify yourself and direct your question to whoever you like.

Q: (Off mike.) Chinese president was here, but nothing is changing in China as far as the religious persecution is concerned, because millions of citizens are under occupation from the Chinese. And no matter what you do, I don't know how can you press hard on the Chinese to free Tibet.

But my question is also that today, looking at this report, there is no India on the report, but Pakistan is there. Last time you had no Pakistan, but India. What is the reason?

And final question is also that today Hindus are under attack not only

outside, but also in India everywhere. And they're not -- (off mike) -- just like the World Trade Center in New York. Of course, the World Trade Center was an act of terrorism, but this temple was the act of the (off mike) government.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, sir. Thank you very much.

Anybody on the Commission who would like to comment on that?

Q: (Off mike.)

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, sir.

Let me just quickly say, the commission has two lists -- the CPCs and the Watch List. And then we often comment among ourselves; we have a third list -- it's an unpublished list. It's a list that we just every now and then say, they're on that third list and India has been there. But let me see if anyone would like to comment.

MR. LAND: Well, the issue of Tibetan independence is not an issue that our commission has the authority to address. We do have the authority to address religious freedom in Tibet, and so we have to stay within the confines of our purview, and our purview is to recommend to our government ways in which American foreign policy can be used to strengthen religious freedom and the universal understanding and recognition of human rights. So that's why we didn't comment on that part of the China report.

MS. BANSAL: Just to follow up a little bit, I believe for the past two years -- well, two years ago, both India and Pakistan appeared as CPC recommendations. Last year, the Commission recommended that Pakistan be a CPC, but not India, and that was due to certain improvements at the time that we were cautiously watching: a sense that the principal concern that led to the CPC designation of India, which were the Gujarat riots; a sense that there was attempts by the Supreme Court to ensure effective prosecution for the perpetrators of that violence; also, some changes since the new government in India had taken place concerning textbooks and other policies. So there remains cautious optimism that India is improving its religious freedom record. We had not seen anything in Pakistan to justify a change in the original recommendation on CPC status.

With regard to your suggestion about the various -- I think you said Hindu

temples and Hindus being persecuted within India. The purview of the commission is to focus on governmental acts that may have implications for religious freedom and that violate international law. To the extent that there has been violence against Hindus within India, it has never been brought to our attention that that's as a result of the actions by government actors within India.

And the Commission continues to monitor and comment upon issues of religious freedom affecting all religious communities throughout the world. And we've commented on the state of violence against Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians in many parts of the world.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you.

Yes, ma'am. Yes, if you could hand the mike to her, and then if you would hold the mike close to your mouth, we'll be able to hear you clearly.

Q: I'm Suzanne Struglinski with the Desert Morning News out of Salt Lake City, Utah.

I was wondering if any of you could comment on any specific thing that you noticed while doing the report on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or the Mormons -- however you'd like to address it?

MR. CROMARTIE: Anyone?

MS. BANSAL (?): I'm not sure we've received any indications or reports of incidents involving members of that church.

MR. CROMARTIE: It's difficult sometimes for us to tell you that there's news that we're glad not to give you, but there you have it. We haven't -- but if you have reports of such, we'd love to know, but we don't. And so that's good news.

Yes, who's next? Yes, sir. You sir, and then this gentleman. Go ahead.

Q: My name is Alkhami (ph), Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia.

Nina Shea, first of all, I want to thank you all for the superb job you do, because your voices are actually among the very few voices that are being raised today in this city in terms of violations of human rights and lack of religious freedom in places like Saudi Arabia. There is a gag here about people talking about what's going on.

Nina Shea, lack of religious freedoms has a deeper implication. It's not just people are not allowed to practice their religions. There is a lot of stigmatization that come with it -- financially and politically and other things.

There have been talks about improvement in religious freedoms in Saudi Arabia last year. I, for one, don't see them -- especially in the south part of Saudi Arabia.

MR. : (Off mike.)

Q: None of your -- (off mike) -- these people here.

Do you have anything to show that there has been any religious relaxations, comprehensive or inclusive in that country?

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, sir. Thank you for your question.

MS. SHEA: Well, Alkhami (ph), since you mentioned my name, I'll attempt to answer your question.

No, we haven't seen it -- at least not to the point where they would get off the -- that Saudi Arabia would be taken off the CPC list. It's one of the, really, dozen countries in the world that are the worst persecutors, most egregious persecutors of religious believers of all kinds, including Muslims like the various Muslim interpretations and schools and doctrines within Saudi Arabia itself.

There was a recent article about Sufis receiving better treatment in The Washington Post, I believe, just a week ago or within the past week. And if you read that carefully, you'll see that, in fact, the Sufis -- despite the photo-op -- are still being raided, their literature is still being confiscated, they're still being harassed.

And you know, we've had cases of -- well, a brave Muslim teacher who was sentenced to 750 lashes of the whip for teaching tolerance in the fall in Saudi schools. He was saying that Jews were nice people and there are some good things in the New Testament -- that's what he was teaching his class. He was sentenced to 750 lashings and a three-plus year jail sentence. After international outcry, he was given a royal pardon. I don't know how many of those lashes he did receive before he was pardoned.

But in any event, there's every indication, you know, there's no churches, there's no -- there was a Catholic priest just expelled who was ministering to the exile community there right before Easter. There are no churches allowed. Private worship -- despite what the government says -- is often raided and closed down. There are about three big house churches that were privately meeting, of Christians, that were shutdown in the past year. So, no; they're still on the CPC list.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you.

This gentleman right here. Yes, sir. Please put the mike right up to your --

Q: Yes. (Inaudible) -- (Muslim community ?) worldwide -- (inaudible) -- country of the world. And I'm involved -- (inaudible) -- two and a half years with the human rights situation in different countries of the world, particularly Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia.

And I do appreciate the work which this Commission is doing. And they are helping me in doing my job, because I'm going to go to all the congressional leadership on foreign relations, human rights telling about the true story of what is happening there. And when you write a report -- in your report -- it helped me a lot just working with congressional leadership.

I do appreciate your visit to Bangladesh and talking to a delegation over

there. I think it must have given you a true picture of what is happening there.

I have been telling all along to Steve Snow -- I've contacted your Commission office on a regular basis -- that my community is a peaceful community living in (181 ?) country of the world.

MR. CROMARTIE: Sir, I need to hear a question. I need a question.

Q: I'm coming to the questions.

We don't come here for any help -- not -- (inaudible) -- for help. We are here to help the world at large, because if my large are not granted, 100 percent rights of other citizens of that country and the world are not granted at all, and history is there -- (inaudible).

I'm coming to my question to Nina Shea: I met Paul Marshall in Freedom House for almost two hours. We discussed different things. I'm asking you, if possible, to come up with a report on Pakistan because Pakistan is the biggest terrorist country in the world. They are exporting the terrorism around the globe, not within Pakistan. Come up with a report as you came on Saudi Arabia. Just give a picture, a real picture, what is happening there in Pakistan.

Just a crazy story -- we come every year since 1987. Every year we document this report on Pakistan.

MR. CROMARTIE: Sir, your question is?

Q: My question is if we can have a comprehensive report on Pakistan religious freedom. Thank you.

MS. SHEA: Well, as you mentioned, I wear two hats. I'm really here representing the Commission today. And Pakistan is one of our countries and there is a synopsis of the problems there in this report. I think it's extremely significant that it has been identified as a CPC. And as far as Freedom House goes, we'll take it under consideration. We'd

like to do a report on Pakistan.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, sir.

Yes, sir. This gentleman here.

Q: Alan Elsner, Reuters. Thank you for recognizing a member of the working press. I will resist the opportunity to give you my life story and just ask --

MR. CROMARTIE: (Laughs.)

Q: Is there any evidence that the U.S. government, Bush administration, takes any notice of your recommendations when they are directed against U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan?

MR. CROMARTIE: Who would like to answer that?

Go ahead, Archbishop.

MR. CHAPUT: I think that last year when the administration acknowledged our recommendation that Saudi Arabia be on the list, it was an extraordinary move on the part of the Bush administration -- same thing regarding Vietnam. I think that there has been a certain amount of courageous amount of activity around the issues by the Bush administration.

Now, you know, some of our concrete recommendations on how these governments should be treated haven't been implemented in the way we'd like, but the fact they -- the simple fact that they appear on the list and were accepted by the secretary of State is a very good thing.

MR. LAND: Also --

MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Land.

MR. LAND: I think it's important to note that we've had recommendations about items we wish the president would bring up with his counterpart in China and in other countries. And we have reason to believe he's done so, and also that he's made this issue part of his highest level talks with his counterparts in China, for instance.

The trip that we took -- this rather extraordinary 15-day trip to China that seven of our Commissioners made last summer -- was a result of persistent and insistent pressure by the Bush administration and the State Department over several years.

MS. SHEA: Can I add something?

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, Ms. Shea.

MS. SHEA: I'd just like to add something. I would say that the administration's response on Saudi Arabia probably has been the weakest of all. We have not seen a lot of pushback publicly.

On the other hand, you have a country like Sudan where the administration has taken up -- it was one of or first countries that we started with -- and had taken up a lot of our recommendations, including using the bully pulpit and coordinating aid in south Sudan and having an envoy and so forth. And that was a very successful outcome.

So I guess I would say that would lead me to conclude that the administration should take up the rest of our recommendations.

MS. BANSAL: Also, in the case of Iraq, when the Transitional Administrative Law was being drafted before the permanent constitution, we weighed in quite actively, vocally and frequently with the State Department. And we have reason to believe that a lot of our suggested changes were ultimately made within that -- within that document.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, and I thank you.

And I'll call on you, and I hope you also are a member of the working press.

Q: Thank you. I'm Maureen Fiedler, and I'm with the radio show -- public radio show "Interfaith Voices."

And this is some ways a follow-up to the gentleman from Reuters. I'm wondering if anyone on the Commission or one of your staff follows how your reports are covered in the press of the countries that you designate as countries of particular concern? In other words, is the world listening in any sense to what you say? And do reports on things like Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, secret prisons in Europe -- all of the various human rights violations that have been publicized about the United States -- does this in anyway diminish the credibility of what you have to say on human rights?

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, thank you. That's a very good question.

Who would like to answer that on behalf of the staff? And if not, we'll call on the staff.

MS. BANSAL: I don't know that we systematically or in a formal way monitor the press in other countries. We do every day get news clips from around the world. And certainly from our travels, whenever we go to our country, it's very notable to us -- and even within Washington, I should say, we're contacted constantly by the members of the press. And when we travel, it's very clear to us that -- it's kind of the counterpart to what the gentleman from Reuters said.

Even if we're not listened to entirely in the United States, we're certainly listened to around the world. Our impact may be greater in the foreign press than it is among the myriad issues that face the domestic.

MR. CROMARTIE: I think that's, in fact, right. In fact, we get more attention from the foreign press than we do from our own. We do thank you for coming, but I mean, we do get more attention from the foreign press -- (laughter) --

MR. LAND: I think it's also important that there are some countries

who are very, very anxious not to be noted and identified by us as particularly egregious violators and have taken steps to make certain that they don't -- that that doesn't happen.

MS. PRODROMOU: A follow-up point on your question about whether or not reports of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and renditions in any way diminishes the credibility or the legitimacy of the Commission, I would suggest it's precisely the opposite. In fact, that's where our dialogue with other governments is very important, because although those incidents certainly make what we do far more complex, our visits allow us to really hear what other governments are thinking about religious freedom questions as they pertain to the United States, and allow us an opportunity to engage around these issues. So it keeps channels of communication more open than they otherwise would be, I think.

MR. CHAPUT: You know, sometimes countries do try to use those to silence us. When we visited China, there was a very clear effort on the part of the Chinese -- some of the Chinese officials -- to kind of push that in our face and say, who are you to speak? But it was very inappropriate and I think we responded appropriately by challenging them about what they're actually doing.

MS. BANSAL: And one of the things we frequently say is that, you know, if every country would respond to issues that they face as quickly as the United States did with respect to Abu Ghraib, then we would certainly have a lot less to report on.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes?

MR. LAND: Do you want to let Tad respond, to the extent we monitor the press?

MR. CROMARTIE: Go ahead -- just say we do. (Laughter.)

TAD STAHNKE (Director for Policy, USCIRF): Tad Stahnke, policy director of the commission.

We do monitor the foreign press on a daily basis. And as someone mentioned, there's a lot of evidence to suggest that not only the foreign press but also foreign governments -- certain foreign governments at least -- take what the Commission has to say quite seriously, as well as people in those

countries as well who might be sufferers of violation.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you.

Yes, sir.

Q: Hi, Rob Maruse with Associated Baptist Press.

And with regards to Afghanistan, for years this Commission, since the beginning of the reconstruction and in the development of the constitution and so forth, has made several recommendations that if taken by the State Department might have prevented some of the difficulties that we've seen and the ones that you all are outlining today.

Do any of you feel like saying to the State Department or to the rest of the administration, "I told you so?"

MR. LAND: You're making the assumption we haven't. (Laughter.)

MR. CROMARTIE: I think that's sufficient. Thank you, Commissioner Land.

Yes, sir, in the back.

Q: Richard Finney with Radio Free Asia. Could you say something about your concerns about Burma and what your recommendations are with regard to that country?

MR. CROMARTIE: Comments on Burma -- anyone in particular? Our Policy Director.

MR. STAHNKE: The Commission has consistently recommended that Burma be

a country of particular concern. And the State Department has placed Burma on the list since the first set of CPC designations in 1999.

The Commission has raised specific concerns about the treatment of certain religious and ethnic minorities in Burma that are related to the conflicts there between the Chin, Karen Christians, as well as Rohingyas Muslims in that country. And severe violations of the Burmese government to forcefully impress Buddhism on some of those religious minorities.

The other thing that the Commission has raised as a concern is the control by the Burmese government over some of the elements of Buddhism in that country. In particular, those Buddhist monks and others who are pressing for greater political openness and democracy.

The Commission, this year in its report -- (audio break, tape flip) --

Q: My question is about as you have made a -- documented all what is happening truly in the whole world in different countries, and there are countries that have particularly legalized the punishment of certain communities. If you can make recommendations to the governments where they -- for example, some escaped from those punishments and traveled to other countries to grant them asylum without any question, without proving that something personally happened to them. Because the laws are in existence, they should be granted such asylums. And I recommend -- I commend your findings about the countries.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you for your comment.

Q: (Inaudible) -- can make any comment.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, go ahead. Commissioner Shea.

MS. SHEA: Yes, we do note that the situation -- (inaudible) -- in Pakistan, for example, is very, very difficult because of the limitations on the practice of faith as a group unable to recognize their human dignity. Baha'is in Iran would also, I guess, fit into that category. And we are trying to get this sense out, getting this recommendation out to asylum officers in the United States that when groups are entirely banned as heretical or not allowed to practice their faith, they shouldn't have to go through individual proof.

Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, sir.

Yes, ma'am?

Q: Good morning. My name is Basrat Nesgeba (ph) with the U.S. Foundation for the Horn of Africa. I have a question anyone on the panel can answer, but I think, Ms. Shea, you're the only person I've seen who has actually talked about Eritrea. I know you just had an article recently in The Washington Post.

I have a question about the fact that considering that Eritrea was designated as a country of particular concern listed among, you know, Saudi Arabia, like you guys have mentioned, that only recognizes one form of Islam; North Korea, where there are virtually no personal freedoms; you know, Sudan, like you guys have mentioned -- very intensive course of policies of Arabization and Islamization; and in Eritrea, where the population, which is, you know, close to 97 -- 95 to 97 percent of the population which is represented by four religions that have been living in harmony for centuries with really no, you know, religious conflict -- how it became designated as the only country to get the I think it was the presidential action -- I'm not quite sure what the technical terms was, but it's the only country as of yet to be sanctioned.

So I would like an explanation of how Eritrea compared to these other countries was singled out to be the recipient of the first-ever presidential sanction.

MS. SHEA: You know, I'll start out this conversation by saying that Eritrea was designated as a -- was recommended as a CPC by us for the first time in 2004, and we renewed that again this year. And there are Muslims, hundreds of whom have been imprisoned, detained, typically without charge. There are Evangelicals and Pentecostal Christians affected. I know some of these people have been held in shipping containers in the desert in the hot sun at the risk of their lives, really. Jehovah's Witnesses have been barred from government jobs and business licenses and terribly discriminated.

So we are pleased that the -- that Secretary Rice has followed our recommendation and designated Eritrea as a CPC. And so we will continue

to monitor that and speak out for the victims.

MS. BANSAL: I think there's two aspects to your question: one is why is it a CPC; and one, why did it get separate -- why did it get the first set of sanctions imposed under IRFA.

Q: I mean, if I could just clarify. Thank you for answering. I mean, the report lists why the Commission felt that Eritrea was a CPC. I personally don't agree with the reasons, but I'm not here to argue with the commission about that. I'm just curious, like you said, with how it managed to be singled out -- as the only country to be singled out with sanctions when, in my opinion -- ever -- when the countries -- the other countries -- you know, I'm not going to get into an argument saying, you know, they've arrested more Christians than others. You know what I mean? That's a silly argument. But compared to what we've seen, why was it that Eritrea has been targeted and received the sanction when no other country has?

MS. BANSAL: Many of the other countries on the CPC list are already the subject of sanctions by the United States government -- for example, Burma, China, some of the others; there's already -- North Korea -- there's already pre-existing sanctions.

MS. SHEA: Sudan.

MS. BANSAL: Sudan. So it's not that Eritrea has been singled out. The other countries already have sanctions against them. Eritrea did not yet -- was not in that situation. So the act requires that there be some responsive action to the designation of a country. And where there's no other sanctions that can be piggybacked on, for example, then some new responsive action needs to take place. That's why Eritrea had something new imposed on it because it wasn't already subject to pre-existing sanctions.

MR. CHAPUT: Also, we make recommendations, but we don't know why the State Department decides to follow through on some cases and doesn't follow through on others. So in some ways, that question really should be asked of the State Department. So it's not that we're treating Eritrea differently; they may, and it may be because they think they can, it's more effective, and others are -- I don't think we're in a position to answer for the State Department.

MS. BANSAL: We've certainly recommended sanctions for Saudi Arabia,

other countries as well.

MR. CHAPUT: Many other countries.

MR. CROMARTIE: Okay. There's two more questions in the back. The gentleman with the pencil in his hand, you're first.

Q: (Name inaudible) -- from Agence France-Presse. When the Commission recommended that aggressive action be taken against Saudi Arabia in the letter to Rice, what -- (word inaudible) -- are there for this sort of action? Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: I'm sorry; let me get the last part of the question. What --

Q: What do you mean by aggressive action? What steps do you propose?

MR. CROMARTIE: Okay. Thank you, sir.

Anyone like to comment on that?

MS. BANSAL: We have released a press release that detailed some of our suggestions for responsive actions. Included among those, as I recall, were that we take -- that the United States consider suspending --

MR. CROMARTIE: Exports.

MS. BANSAL: -- well, suspending the ability of certain senior governmental officials, Saudi government officials that are associated with certain ministries from being able to have visa rights to visit the United States, certain exports of certain items be suspended from Saudi Arabia, including -- that are particularly -- can be used for torture purposes. And I think -- I can't remember the other ones right off the top of my head, but we have issued that in a formal written statement in the past.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I'd like to clarify that aggressive does not mean -- we're not recommending military action. (Laughter.)

MR. CROMARTIE: Go ahead. Commissioner Land, go ahead.

MS. SHEA: Aggressive diplomatic steps. (Laughs.)

MR. LAND: Yeah, the implementation of any one or several of the recommendations we make in our report would be aggressive action, especially when you consider that up until now we haven't done much as a government. I think it's important to note that it took awhile for us to finally get the State Department to agree -- I mean, we had been recommending Saudi Arabia for CPC status for -- ever since I think Commission's existed. And it was just granted this last year, and that was a very significant step and one that I have reason to know did not make the Saudi government very happy, which was, of course, part of our intention.

That was sort of a bonus. (Laughter.) But any of the actions or any group of the recommendations would be seen as aggressive diplomatic action.

MR. CROMARTIE: All right. Thank you.

Yes, sir. The gentleman in the back there.

Q: In the past --

MR. CROMARTIE: Please identify yourself, sir.

Q: My name is Habpti Apgabriel (ph) with EriAm PAC -- Eritrean-American Political Action Committee. And what the lady has said is completely false, but I'm not going to go there.

In the past, many times religious institutions have been used to divide societies and to put some kind of subversive activities and overthrow governments. Don't you think many countries are weary of religious institutions that are going into societies and trying to organize religion -- the new religion organizations?

MR. CROMARTIE: Well, that's a -- that's a question everyone on the Commission would like to comment on, but who would like to begin first?

MS. BANSAL: Yes.

MR. CROMARTIE: Go ahead. Commissioner Bansal first?

MS. BANSAL: No -- governments certain are -- some governments certainly are weary of religious institutions because of their -- the possibility they perceive that these institutions can be sources of alternative organization, political dissent. That was certainly what we heard in China a lot. And there are many other countries -- North Korea -- where that's a reality.

MR. CHAPUT: Well, you know, I think also some secularist kind of countries are fearful of any kind of religious expression -- public religious expression -- and they think they do a service to the broader community by trying to get religious groups to be quiet and to be very, very private. I would, of course, disagree with that. I think the best -- the best of all of our religious traditions can enrich a country as long as we have a deep respect for human dignity, common good, religious freedom of people who disagree with us.

So I think that that's an easy answer to a complex problem. "Oh, the way we'll solve the problem of religious conflicts is just make sure religion isn't a prominent part of our reflection of our culture." That's dangerous. It takes away a basic right of human beings.

MR. CROMARTIE: Others? Thank you.

MR. LAND: Well, if I could just say --

MR. CROMARTIE: Commissioner Land, and then --

MR. LAND: Almost all of the countries in the world have signed the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and one of the basic rights listed there is the right to freedom of religious expression and the right to practice one's faith and the right to change one's faith.

Let me -- let me be very clear, particularly for those who are -- whose basic orientation is the foreign press: the U.S. commission's standard is not the American standard of our First Amendment, as much as I might recommend it as an American citizen to countries of the world. We don't have the right, and we're not trying to impose the American First Amendment standard of separation of church and state on the world.

Societies have the right to make their own religious arrangements. If they want to make a religion -- if they want to give it preference in their society and give it state sponsorship, that's their business. But it is the -- it is the business of humankind that human beings have certain basic rights, and among them is the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of belief and freedom of practice and the freedom to change one's faith. Those are all very basic tenets in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which most countries of the world are signatories to.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you for your question, sir.

Are there other questions? If not, we can thank you very much for coming. If you'd like to know more about the commission, of course our website is uscirf.gov. Thank you for coming, and help yourself to the report out here.

(END)