

USCIRF Welcomes Redesignation of Eight "Countries of Particular Concern"; Disappointed that Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan Not Designated

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the continued designation by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice of Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Vietnam as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs), as there have been no developments in the past year in any of those countries to warrant their removal from the CPC list. At the same time, the information in this year's Annual Report on Religious Freedom, released this week by the State Department, makes clear that three other countries merit CPC status in addition to those that have been previously named by the Secretary of State. The Commission finds that the governments of Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan persist in engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and regrets that they were, once again, not designated as CPCs this year. However, the Commission notes that countries may be designated as CPCs at any time during the year.

"The omission of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan from the CPC list is particularly troubling and a discredit to Congress's intent in passing the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)," said USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie. "Turkmenistan, among the most repressive states in the world today, allows virtually no independent religious activity. The government of Uzbekistan places strict restrictions on religious practice and continues to crack down harshly on individuals and groups that operate outside of government-controlled religious organizations. The Ambassador-at-Large and the State Department have for years attempted to engage the governments of these two countries in an effort to seek improvements. However, the response has been extremely limited. In the face of the severe religious freedom violations perpetrated by the Turkmen and Uzbek governments, the continued failure to name them as CPCs undermines the spirit and letter of IRFA."

Since 2001, the Commission has recommended that Turkmenistan be designated a CPC. In addition to the severe government restrictions that effectively leave most, if not all, religious activity under strict and often arbitrary state control, Turkmen President Niyazov's ever-escalating personality cult has become a quasi-religion to which the Turkmen population is forced to adhere. His self-published work of "spiritual thoughts," called Rukhnama, is required reading in all schools. In addition, copies of Rukhnama must be given equal prominence to the Koran and the Bible in mosques and churches. In the past year, in a move likely aimed at avoiding a possible CPC designation, President Niyazov passed several decrees that permitted the registration of five very small religious communities. Despite this alleged easing of registration criteria, religious groups continue to require permission from the state before holding worship services of any kind, making it unclear what-if any-practical benefits registration actually provides. Moreover, religious groups that do not meet the often arbitrary registration rules still face possible criminal penalties due to their unregistered status, and even newly registered religious groups have been raided by police.

The Commission has also recommended that Uzbekistan, which the Commission visited last year, be designated a CPC. The Uzbek government continues to exercise a high degree of control over the practice of the Islamic religion and to crack down harshly on Muslim individuals, 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 over 100 religious groups currently denied registration. The government of Uzbekistan

does face threats to its security, including from members of Hizb ut-Tahrir and other political groups that claim a religious linkage, and the Commission's recommendation of CPC status for Uzbekistan should not be construed as a defense of that or any similar organization. However, 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.

The shooting by Uzbek troops of hundreds of unarmed protestors in Andijon in May of this year provides the most brutal example to date of the Uzbek government's response to real or perceived threats to its security. In Andijon's aftermath, the Uzbek authorities have mounted a repressive campaign against religious believers, particularly Muslims; Andijon residents; journalists, human rights activists, and Uzbek employees of Western non-governmental organizations. The Uzbek government has refused requests from the U.S. and other Western governments for an independent international investigation into the Andijon tragedy and is reportedly cracking down on any human rights or other activists who have attempted to report on the events.

The government of Pakistan continues to provide an inadequate response to vigilante violence frequently perpetrated by Sunni Muslim militants against Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians. Discriminatory legislation effectively bans many of the activities of the Ahmadi community. Blasphemy allegations, routinely false, result in the lengthy detention, imprisonment of, and sometimes violence against Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus, as well as Muslims, some of whom have been sentenced to death. Belated efforts to curb extremism through reform of Pakistan's thousands of Islamic religious schools appear to have had little effect thus far, and many of these schools continue to provide ideological training and motivation to those who take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and abroad. After the terrorist attacks in London last July, President Musharraf renewed his call to fight extremism in madrassas; however, his record on this issue has unfortunately not been encouraging.

The Commission would also like to use this opportunity to note that the State Department has not, to this date, taken decisive action on the September 2004 designation of Saudi Arabia as a CPC. In September 2005, fully one year after that CPC designation with no ascertainable human rights progress in Saudi Arabia over the intervening year, the Secretary of State authorized a 180-day waiver of action "in order to allow additional time for the continuation of discussions leading to progress on important religious freedom issues." During the past year, the Commission has made several statements urging the State Department to select and implement one or more of the concrete actions for CPCs set forth in IRFA. In the absence of real progress in Saudi Arabia over the past year, the Commission believes that the U.S. government should use the 180-day extension to engage the Saudi government directly to achieve demonstrable progress by the end of that period of time.

In addition to its CPC recommendations, the Commission has established a Watch List of countries where religious freedom 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. Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria are on the Commission's Watch List.

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