

December 9, 1999: Religious Freedom: A Fundamental Human Right

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Dec. 09, 1999 Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. -- Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights On the 50th anniversary (Dec. 10) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, religious freedom is on the cutting edge of human rights struggles, said Rabbi David Saperstein, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. "More than ever before, the struggle for religious freedom for all people is finding its rightful place in the foreign policy of the United States, and that refreshing wind is starting to be felt abroad as well" Chairman Saperstein said. He pointed to passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which created the Commission and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, headed by an ambassador for international religious freedom. Under the law, the State Department issues a country-by-country annual report on the state of religious freedom. Following publication of the first report in September the Department designated China, Iran, Iraq, Burma (Myanmar), and Sudan as "countries of particular concern," making them subject to diplomatic and economic sanctions. State also listed Serbia and the Taliban movement in Afghanistan as "particularly severe violators of religious freedom." Saperstein said the Chinese Foreign Ministry's demand Tuesday that the religious-freedom sanctions be lifted shows the effort has gotten Beijing's attention. The chairman also noted new movements by human-rights organizations to encourage divestment from countries that suppress religious freedom and from companies that directly or indirectly assist them. Currently activists are urging divestment from Talisman Energy, Inc., a Canadian firm, and a ban on an initial public offering of stock in the U.S. market by China National Petroleum Corporation. Both are major investors in Sudanese oil fields. Revenues from those fields would allow the Islamist Sudanese government to step up its war against the Christian and animist south to extend Islamic law to that area. During the 16-year war, the government has provoked massive famine; government forces have kidnapped southern women and children, selling them into slavery; the regime has harassed and killed Christian clergy and destroyed churches; and Khartoum has dealt harshly with Muslim opponents. About 2 million people have perished. The Commission plans hearings in the first part of next year on the repression of religious freedom in Sudan and China and to explore moves the U.S. government and public can take to promote religious liberty as set out in the Universal Declaration. The Commission will issue its own report May 1, as called for in the IRFA.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

- Dean Michael K. Young, Vice Chair Hon. Elliott Abrams Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Firuz Kazemzadeh Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director