

October 27, 2008: USCIRF Welcomes Tenth Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998

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Today, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom marks the tenth anniversary of the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). This U.S. legislation focused a spotlight on the importance of ending violations of religious freedom around the world and the need to promote this and other freedoms as integral components of U.S. foreign policy. Developments of the past decade have reinforced recognition of the importance of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as the U.S. government navigates a world threatened by religion-based extremism and religion-imbued conflict.

"The first 10 years of IRFA implementation are only the beginning," noted Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. "In this, the sixtieth anniversary of the landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are reminded that, as with other cherished human rights, there is much work to be done in order for the international right to the freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief to become a global reality."

Throughout the past decade, the existence of IRFA has focused U.S. policymakers on the importance of religious freedom for individuals and religious communities. Human rights defenders, including courageous and irrepressible religious freedom advocates throughout the world, often struggle under oppressive conditions. The Commission has been privileged to meet and work with such individuals of conscience and faith around the world. Commission delegations abroad have met some of them in their prison cells or in their homes where they were being held under house arrest. Their grass-roots efforts dovetail with those of governments and international organizations.

"The Commission also recognizes the important contributions of all the private citizens who have served on the Commission in its first ten years, and all those who support its ongoing effort to promote the recognition of human rights, including freedom of religion" stated Gaer.

"As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims, these rights constitute the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

Much room remains, however, for more effective policies promoting the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief globally. The Commission is required annually to recommend to the Department of State nations that constitute the most severe violators of religious freedom. In May 2008, the Commission recommended that the Secretary of State designate the following countries as "Countries of Particular Concern:" Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. A Commission "Watch List" also calls for close monitoring of: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria. The Commission is currently preparing a report on religious freedom in Iraq. For more information on the Commission's findings and an overview of its first decade, please see the 2008 Annual Report at www.uscirf.gov