

3/27/09: U.S. State Department Names Religious Violators

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - For the first time since 2006, eight countries were designated recently by the U.S. State Department as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC) for their severe and egregious religious freedom violations.

The Bush Administration re-designated the same eight countries it named in 2006 - Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan. The formal designation by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice took place Jan. 16, but the list was not made available until this week, when the Obama State Department released the list in response to a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) inquiry.

Being designated a CPC requires the president to encourage improvements in violator nations through a range of tools, including sanctions, or a waiver, if the president determines it is in U.S. interests to do so. This year, as in the past, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan were given waivers by the departing Bush Administration, which in effect gives them a pass. No sanction was cited for any other country.

USCIRF expressed disappointment that the State Department did not accept its recommendation that Pakistan, Vietnam, Turkmenistan and Iraq be designated CPCs.

"The Commission is disappointed that Secretary Rice refused to designate any new countries and that waivers were granted for both Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia," said Felice Gaer, USCIRF chair. "Religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia are appalling and a specific U.S. government response is required."

USCIRF sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Feb. 10, in which it identified outstanding Commission concerns, including the State Department's failure to designate CPCs.

Saudi Arabia has been a CPC since 2004, and has received a waiver every year. Despite its promises of reform, USCIRF has concluded that there has been little or no improvement in the Kingdom's religious freedom conditions.

Ms. Gaer also noted that the State Department's designation was long overdue. "In adopting IRFA, Congress recognized that CPC designation is an important tool in securing improvements in international religious freedom," said Ms. Gaer. "State Department efforts to negotiate with certain countries to bring about improvements in religious freedom certainly might be an appropriate reason for delaying CPC designation, but the Commission concludes that the State Department should have acted years ago in the case of a number of the countries our Commission recommended for CPC designation, under our statutory authority. As it reviews the previous Administration's CPC designations, we hope the

Obama Administration will recognize the added value that CPC status can bring to American public diplomacy on human rights."

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) requires an annual State Department review by Sept. 1 of each year. While IRFA does not set a specific deadline for CPC designations, the fact that the decision is based on the annual review indicates it is meant to occur soon thereafter. The more than two year delay is particularly problematic, as presidential actions taken under IRFA terminate after two years, if not expressly reauthorized.

The CPC designation is for countries engaged in or tolerating "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom, which are systematic, ongoing, and egregious, including acts such as torture, prolonged detention without charges, disappearances, or "other flagrant denial[s] of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons."

The 2008 USCIRF Annual Report recommended that the following countries be designated as CPCs: Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Iraq was added to the list in Dec. 2008.

USCIRF's 2009 Annual Report will be delivered to Congress, the President and the Secretary of State May 1, and will recommend nations to be designated as CPCs, as well as list nations on the USCIRF Watch List.

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