

5/6/09: USCIRF Letter to President Obama Regarding Meetings with Pakistani and Afghan Presidents

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, sent the following letter to President Obama on May 5, urging him to raise pressing concerns about religious freedom in Pakistan and Afghanistan during his meetings with President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan in Washington, DC.

“...the forces that threaten the integrity of the Pakistani and Afghan states, and therefore, U.S. security interests, operate according to a violent extremist ideology that rejects tolerance for non-Muslims and internal differences amongst Muslim believers,” said Felice D. Gaer, USCIRF Commission Chair. “The United States can optimize its security mission by working to ensure respect for religious freedom as integral to the fundamental human rights of all citizens of Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

The complete text of the letters follows:

May 5, 2009

The President

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write today respectfully to urge you to raise concerns about religious freedom and related human rights when you meet later this week with the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is core to the creation of stable, secure societies and to sustainable states built on the rule of law. Indeed, the forces that threaten the integrity of the Pakistani and Afghan states, and therefore, U.S. security interests, operate according to a violent extremist ideology that rejects tolerance for non-Muslims and internal differences amongst Muslim believers. The United States can optimize its security mission by working to ensure respect for religious freedom as integral to the fundamental human rights of all citizens of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

I write to you in my capacity as Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal government commission created by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress. The Commission released its 2009 Annual Report last week, and it again recommends that Pakistan be designated a "country of particular concern" for the systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government. The Commission placed Afghanistan on our Watch List of countries with serious and troubling violations of religious freedom.

In Pakistan, a number of the country's laws, including laws against blasphemy and laws directed against members of the Ahmadi religious community, have been used to silence members of religious minorities and dissenters, and frequently have resulted in imprisonment on account of religion or belief and/or vigilante violence. Also, in view of U.S. reengagement with the UN Human Rights Council, special mention should be made of Pakistan's continued promotion of the flawed "defamation of religions" concept which seeks to limit the freedoms of religion and expression everywhere, while creating in effect a global blasphemy law. In February, the Commission also publicly expressed serious concern about the Pakistani government's so-called "peace deal" with Taliban-associated extremists, as we concluded such an agreement would represent a significant victory for the extremists and could embolden them to expand their control elsewhere in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Commission's concerns sadly are being borne out as, soon after Pakistan's Parliament and President approved the deal, the extremists moved to duplicate their success in neighboring regions of the country.

There is a need to include lessons on tolerance for the beliefs and religions of others in both nations' state-sponsored curricula. Further, the state educational systems must be strengthened, as the current weakness results in schools operated by extremists being the only viable educational option for many children.

The Commission has long raised concerns about Afghanistan's new constitution which does not protect the right of individuals to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy on Islamic beliefs and practices. This lack of clear constitutional protections for the freedoms of expression and thought, conscience, religion or belief has resulted in serious abuses, including criminal court cases for blasphemy that violate the rights of the accused. Journalists and publishers either are intimidated into self-censorship or face severe legal consequences for writing or disseminating material that is deemed "un-Islamic." An example is the case of a student journalist, Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh, who originally was sentenced to death for blasphemy for circulating material from the Internet about women's rights in Islam. Last October, an appeals court reduced his sentence to 20 years in prison.

Mr. President, the Commission asks that you raise with each president these troubling limitations on religious freedom and make clear your Administration's genuine commitment to fundamental human rights for all. Considering the role of religious-based insurgencies in both countries, ensuring religious freedom protections would help establish the rule of law based on the protection of all rights. Thank you for considering the Commission's views.

Very Truly Yours,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair