

December 13, 2002: Commission Commends Initial Congressional Action on Afghanistan; Urges More

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Eileen A. Sullivan, Deputy Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 26

"While the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is pleased with the passage of The Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, it continues its call for President Bush or Secretary Powell to appoint a high-level official to advance human rights protections in Afghanistan, while it is still possible to influence the development of the country's new political and legal institutions," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. However, the Commission, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, today welcomed the enactment of legislation to advance human rights, including religious freedom, in Afghanistan as part of America's multibillion-dollar assistance program for the rebuilding of that war-torn country. "Enacting The Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002 signals the importance of protecting human rights, including religious freedom, so that Afghanistan does not once again become a haven for tyrants or terrorists," stated Ms. Gaer. "We hope that full use will be made of the Act's tools to protect human rights in Afghanistan." The Commission has expressed alarm over mounting evidence that Afghanistan is being reconstructed - without significant U.S. opposition - as a state with oppressive crimes and punishments derived from an extreme interpretation of Islamic law, as well as religious law enforcement apparatus and police. These are among the developments that justify an urgent focus by the United States on human rights issues. The Commission expressed satisfaction that several of its recommendations to advance human rights, and particularly religious freedom, as part of U.S. reconstruction aid for Afghanistan had been incorporated into the Act. Under the Act: Assistance to Afghanistan should "foster the growth of a pluralistic society that promotes and respects religious freedom" and help achieve a representative government that respects the human rights of all Afghans. The President is urged to work in the United Nations Security Council and with U.S. allies to expand the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) throughout the entire country, a key recommendation of the Commission in its June 2002 report on Afghanistan. The operation of ISAF currently is restricted to the capital of Kabul and surrounding areas. Funding is authorized to support drafting a constitution and other legal reforms that protect religious freedom and to support civil society organizations that promote human rights. Aid is also authorized for the Afghan National Human Rights Commission, human rights training for the military, police, and legal personnel, and the dissemination of information throughout Afghanistan on human rights, including religious freedom and the rights of women. A total of \$80 million is provided to assist women and girls in the areas of human rights, education, health care, and other programs. There is support for efforts to investigate human rights atrocities, whether by the Taliban, by warlords, or by terrorists, such as al-Qaeda. Reconstruction assistance is conditioned on progress on human rights issues. The President must certify each year "that progress is being made toward adopting a constitution and establishing a democratically elected government for Afghanistan that respects human rights." Although the President may waive this restriction, he must explain to the Congress why it is in the U.S. national interest to do so. For more information about promoting respect for human rights, including religious freedom, in Afghanistan, please see the Commission's: June 2002 Report on Afghanistan October 2002 Statement: "Appoint a High-Level Human Rights Envoy for Afghanistan"

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

- Dean Michael K. Young, Vice Chair Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director