

January 14, 2008: Burma: USCIRF Urges President Bush to Implement New Policies to Advance Democratic Reform, Respect for Human Rights

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WASHINGTON—The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has sent a letter to President George W. Bush urging his administration to make extra efforts to advance democratic reform and respect for human rights in Burma. “U.S. leadership is desperately needed to keep the international focus on demands for democracy and the protection of human rights in Burma,” Commission Chair Michael Cromartie wrote in the letter. The Commission has found that egregious violations of religious freedom are central to the military junta’s attempts to maintain its power. Following a hearing on Burma that it convened last month, the Commission recommended among other things that the U.S. government establish an interagency taskforce on Burma under the National Security Council (NSC), appoint a Special Coordinator on Burma to further coordinate bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts, and continue its firm support for various UN diplomatic efforts. The text of the letter follows. January 11, 2008

The Honorable George W. Bush

President of the United States of America

White House

Washington, DC 20500 Dear Mr. President: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges that you make extra efforts to advance democratic reform and respect for human rights in Burma as a major priority of your Administration and implement new policies to address one of the world’s most repressive regimes. Given the brutality of the recent crackdown by the military junta and the reluctance of many countries in the region firmly to condemn the Burmese military’s egregious human rights abuses, the Commission believes that political reconciliation and reform will not be realized without determined U.S. leadership. The Commission commends the steps you have taken recently to support the democratic aspirations of the Burmese people, including bolstering U.S. sanctions on Burma and urging the United Nations to take resolute action in the Security Council. Last month, the Commission received testimony on the Burmese military’s violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrations led by Buddhist monks and its ongoing abuses against Burma’s ethnic and religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians. At the hearing, the Venerable Ashin Nayaka, a prominent Burmese monk, told us that his country is at a critical moment in history. A number of prominent monasteries have been closed, he said, others emptied. Monks have disappeared and the global outcry has waned. In his words, “Strong, effective and timely intervention by the international community is urgently needed. This is a moral crisis that Americans must stand for.” The Commission has found that egregious violations of religious freedom are central to the military junta’s attempts to maintain its power. Thus, the protection and promotion of religious freedom should be a critical component of U.S. diplomatic efforts and any road map for political reconciliation and democratic reform. U.S. leadership is desperately needed to keep the international focus on demands for democracy and the protection of human rights in Burma. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has said that a return to the status quo ante in Burma is not acceptable. U.S. leadership is therefore crucial to focus international attention on peaceful democratic change and reform in Burma. The Commission therefore respectfully recommends the following actions regarding Burma for your consideration and implementation. 1. Establish an interagency taskforce on Burma under the National Security Council (NSC), headed by a senior ranking official, to coordinate U.S. government policy and actions on Burma, including sanctions, humanitarian aid, democracy promotion, counternarcotics, trafficking in persons and other policy objectives. The taskforce on Burma should provide regular briefings to the State Department, the NSC, the White House, and congressional leaders that track the activities and the effectiveness of all departments of the U.S. government in: the implementation of sanctions targeting Burma and the leaders of the Burmese government, including those responsible for violations of religious freedom and other human rights; strategies for pursuing bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to strengthen international pressure for democratic change in Burma; and activities to support non-governmental and humanitarian organizations in the promotion of human rights and national reconciliation in Burma, including among its ethnic and religious minority communities, and in offering relief to Burmese refugees who have fled religious freedom violations and other human rights abuses. 2. Appoint a Special Coordinator on Burma, with the rank of Ambassador, to further coordinate bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts and serve as the Administration’s point person for efforts to bring about political reconciliation and democratic reform in Burma. The Special Coordinator should be responsible for coordinating diplomatic efforts and building support for: the implementation of a common set of sanctions, coordinated multilaterally, including lists of individuals to be targeted for financial sanctions; building support among Asian nations, including members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for effective bilateral and multilateral actions on Burma, including arms embargoes and targeted economic and diplomatic sanctions; and U.S. leadership to construct a coalition of democracies to conceive a road map outlining clear steps Burma must take before economic and political sanctions are lifted. The Special Coordinator should hold consultative meetings with representatives of non-governmental organizations that implement programs involving religious freedom and other human rights in Burma, representatives of the Burmese opposition, and other experts, including the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Special Coordinator should also be responsible for directing U.S. personnel, including the diplomatic and intelligence

communities, to collect information on efforts by the Burmese military to circumvent sanctions and create lists of individuals who bear responsibility for human rights abuses and others who may assist in, or be complicit in, the evasion of sanctions by targeted individuals.³ In its diplomatic interactions with the government of Burma, the U.S. government should press the government of Burma to: reveal the whereabouts of people who are still detained and missing, including the more than 300 monks who led or participated in the protests during August and September, and release unconditionally all persons who have been taken into custody for the peaceful exercise of the right to religious freedom; allow unimpeded access to the monasteries by members of the public and allow all monks who were forcibly defrocked to return to their monasteries and resume religious, social, and charitable activities without interference from government authorities; and immediately and unconditionally release National League for Democracy Chairman Aung San Suu Kyi and engage in meaningful dialogue with the democratic opposition and with leaders of the country's ethnic minority groups, leading to a peaceful, time-bound, and effectively monitored transition to civilian rule.⁴ The United States should continue its firm support for various UN diplomatic efforts including:

- granting unimpeded access to the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma and the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Burma; engaging in constructive dialogue with the UN Human Rights Council and its special procedures, especially the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar and the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and initiating action on a UN Security Council resolution that will include a binding timeframe and offer the UN Secretary General a clear mandate in his interactions with Burmese authorities. Mr. President, the Commission is convinced that pressing for the protection of fundamental human rights and political reform in Burma will greatly strengthen peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The United States must take a leading role in this effort to demonstrate our resolve that peaceful progress toward democracy and the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, is in the best interest of all nations. Sincerely,

Michael Cromartie

Chaircc: Steven J. Hadley, National Security Advisor

Michael Kozak, Senior Director for Democracy, Human Rights, and International Operations, National Security Council

Dennis C. Wilder, Senior Director for Asian Affairs, National Security Council

Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State

R. Nicholas Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs

Paula J. Dobriansky, Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs

Christopher R. Hill, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs

Jonathan D. Farrar, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

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