

March 5, 2003: Commission Welcomes CPC Designations but Deeply Disappointed at Neglect of Others

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, welcomes Secretary of State Powell's redesignation of Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Sudan as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) for severe religious freedom violations. However, the Commission is deeply disappointed that Secretary Powell did not designate India, Laos, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam as CPCs, all of which the Commission recommended for designation in September 2002. The final State Department list remains as it was in 2001, even though egregious abuses persist or have increased in these other countries. The Administration has 90 days under the law in which to identify policy measures for the CPC countries. "We are looking for the Administration to designate policy measures it will take to improve the situation," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. The Commission believes there is ample evidence, even within the State Department's own religious freedom reports, that India, Laos, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam also meet the legislative criteria to be named CPCs. "For three years, the Commission has recommended Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Laos for CPC status because of their deplorable religious freedom violations, yet none has been named. Even the State Department's own report states that religious freedom 'does not exist' in Saudi Arabia. We urge the Department to continue to assess the religious freedom violations in these countries and make CPC designations throughout the year," said Gaer. The nine independent Commissioners deliberate on their CPC recommendations throughout the year. On September 25, 2002, the Commission met with Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to discuss its recommendations. On September 30, 2002, the Commission sent a letter with its recommendations to Secretary Powell. It has now been five months since the Commission made its recommendations. "In the past, the State Department has taken no additional policy action against CPCs, explicitly relying instead on pre-existing sanctions simply to meet requirements under the law. While this may be technically correct under the statute, it is indefensible as a matter of policy," said Gaer. For more information about the Commission's CPC recommendations, country summaries are attached. To read its September 2002 letter to Secretary Powell, click on "CPCs" on our home page.

COUNTRY SUMMARIES

Burma: The Burmese government persists in exercising strict control over all religious activities and imposing severe restrictions on certain religious practices. Members of the Burmese military have reportedly killed members of religious minorities or instigated violence by the Buddhist majority against them. Police and military personnel have failed to protect religious minorities during periods of violence. The plight of religious minorities in Burma is made worse by the widespread social tensions—encouraged by the regime—between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities there. Other severe violations of religious freedom have included forcible conscription of religious minorities as military porters and death for those who refuse.

China: The Chinese government continues to confine, torture, imprison, and subject individuals to other forms of ill treatment on account of their religion or belief, including Protestant Christians, Roman Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and others, such as members of Falun Gong, that the government has labeled "evil cults." In fact, in the past year, official respect for religious freedom in China has diminished. Chinese government officials have continued to claim the right to control, monitor, and restrain religious practice in that country. As part of China's crackdown on religious and spiritual believers, individuals have been charged with, or detained under suspicion of, offenses that essentially penalize them for manifesting freedoms of religion or belief, speech, association, or assembly. In addition, several prominent religious leaders have been detained, often on reportedly dubious criminal charges, such as rape and other sexual violence, or financial crimes. The crackdown against religious believers was authorized at the highest levels of the government, according to reportedly official documents obtained by human rights non-governmental organizations.

India: In 2002, at least 1,000 Muslims were killed and more than 100,000 forced to flee their homes as a result of violence by Hindu mobs in Gujarat State after 58 Hindus were killed on a train in Godhra. Christians, too, were victims in Gujarat when many churches were destroyed. The state government has failed to hold key violators accountable for these abuses.

Iran: The government of Iran engages in or tolerates systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the victims. Minority religious groups that are not officially recognized by the state and those perceived to be attempting to convert Muslims suffer particular repression. Civil and human rights apply on the basis of one's religious affiliation, and only to those groups officially recognized by the government as legitimate.

Iraq: For decades, the government of Iraq has conducted a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, arbitrary arrest, and protracted detention against the religious leaders and followers of the majority Shi'a Muslim population. Shi'a Muslims also continue to face harassment, destruction and desecration of property, and decimation of leadership. The Iraqi government has also sought to undermine the identity of minority Christian (Assyrian and Chaldean) and Yazidi groups, and members of these groups have faced repression, forced relocation, and denial of political rights.

Laos: Government officials in Laos continue to arrest, detain, and imprison members of minority religions on account of their faith. In some instances, officials attempted to force Christians to renounce their faith. A Commission delegation visited Laos in February 2002.

North Korea: Religious freedom remains non-existent in North Korea, where the government has a policy of actively discriminating against religious believers. The North Korean state severely represses public and private religious activities. The Commission has received reports that officials have arrested, imprisoned,

tortured, and sometimes executed North Korean citizens who were found to have ties with overseas Christian evangelical groups operating across the border in China, as well as those who engaged in such unauthorized religious activities as public religious expression and persuasion. Pakistan: In 2002, there has been an upsurge in attacks targeting Pakistan's Christian minority and the Government has failed adequately to protect religious minorities from sectarian violence. Discriminatory religious legislation, including the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws, helps create an atmosphere of religious intolerance. Blasphemy charges, often false, result in lengthy detention and sometimes violence, including fatal attacks, against religious minority members as well as Muslims. American journalist Daniel Pearl was forced to "confess" his religion as Jewish before being beheaded on a training video by Islamic extremists. Saudi Arabia: As noted in past years by the State Department, religious freedom "does not exist" in Saudi Arabia. The government vigorously prohibits all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and presentation of Sunni Islam. Last year, numerous foreign Christian workers were detained, arrested, tortured, and subsequently deported. Shi'a clerics and religious scholars are detained and imprisoned for their religious views, which differ from those of the government. Other severe violations include torture and cruel and degrading treatment or punishment; prolonged detention without charges; and flagrant denials of the right to liberty and security of the person, including coercive measures directed against women and the extended jurisdiction of the religious police, who exercise their vague powers in ways that violate others' religious freedom. Sudan: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has identified Sudan as the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief. In the Commission's view, the Sudanese government has committed genocidal atrocities against civilian populations in the South and in the Nuba Mountains. Religious conflict is a major factor in Sudan's ongoing and prolonged civil war. In the context of the civil war, government and allied forces continue to commit egregious human rights abuses, such as forced starvation as part of the denial of international humanitarian assistance, abduction and enslavement of women and children, the forcible displacement of civilian populations (e.g., from oil-producing regions), and aerial bombardment of civilians, including church property, and of humanitarian facilities. Turkmenistan: The government severely restricts religious activity other than by the government-sanctioned Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. Members of unrecognized religious communities - including Baha'is, Baptists, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, independent Muslims, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists - have reportedly been arrested and detained with allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, imprisoned, deported, harassed, and fined; they have had their services disrupted, congregations dispersed, religious literature confiscated, and places of worship destroyed. Vietnam: The government continues repressive policies toward all religions and their followers. A Commission delegation that visited Vietnam in March 2002 found that religious dissidents remain under house arrest or are imprisoned, including Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, who was detained after submitting testimony to the Commission in 2001. In addition, government officials continue to suppress organized religious activities and to harass leaders and followers of unregistered religious organizations, as well as clergy members of officially recognized religious groups.

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