

March 19, 2003: Religious minorities in peril; Secretary Powell warned about potential for retribution

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urged Secretary Powell, in the event of military action in Iraq, unmistakably to remind foreign governments of their responsibility to protect the lives and freedoms of members of minority religious communities. The Commission is concerned that extremists have tried to portray military action against Iraq as part of an alleged U.S. attack on Islam, and that retribution will be sought against Christians, Jews, and others throughout the Islamic World, as well as in the West, who are perceived as having some affiliation or affinity with the United States or its coalition partners. The text of the letter follows: Dear Secretary Powell: On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, we urge you, in the event of military action in Iraq, unmistakably to remind foreign governments of their responsibility to protect the lives and freedoms of members of minority religious communities. Particularly during times of tension and danger, all governments have a heightened obligation to protect against reprisal the safety and security of their minority communities, including religious minorities, as well as to honor the right of victims of persecution to seek refuge by crossing borders, if needed. The Commission is concerned that extremists have tried to portray military action against Iraq as part of an alleged U.S. attack on Islam, and that retribution will be sought against Christians, Jews, and others throughout the Islamic World, as well as in the West, who are perceived as having some affiliation or affinity with the United States or its coalition partners. The danger could be particularly acute in Pakistan where leaders of a political coalition, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, have made threats to consider any attack as one "on the whole Muslim world." In response, the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance has expressed fear for all minorities and urged the Pakistani government to take all precautionary measures to protect them. The Commission believes such fears are well founded. The government of Pakistan has worked closely with the United States in the war on terrorism, including finding and capturing al-Qaida leaders. Yet since the beginning of coalition military action in Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, there have been repeated attacks against Christian churches, schools, and charitable and medical institutions in Pakistan, leaving scores of innocent men, women, and children dead or maimed. Although the Musharraf government has deplored these incidents, the authorities have so far failed to bring the perpetrators to justice. Mr. Secretary, immediately after the events of September 11, 2001, President Bush made a strong statement calling on all Americans to respect the security and rights of Muslims in the United States. In the same way, the U.S. government should take every possible measure to insist that governments of countries where minority religious communities are threatened make concerted efforts to protect the security and rights of those communities, particularly in countries where attacks against religious minorities have occurred in the past. We urge you to determine the adequacy of the preparedness of the Pakistani government, and indeed all other relevant governments, to protect the members of diverse religious minorities who will be made especially vulnerable in the event of hostilities between the United States and Iraq. Respectfully,
 Felice D. Gaer Chair 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