

October 27, 2003: 5th Anniversary of IRFA

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Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - Today marks the 5th anniversary of the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) by Congress. The IRFA established the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency; the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State; and a Special Advisor for Religious Freedom on the National Security Council. Through IRFA, Congress made clear that because of the critical importance of this most fundamental freedom, the promotion of religious freedom should be a central element of U.S. foreign policy. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Because it is so central to us as human beings, religious freedom is one of the first freedoms that repressive governments attempt to stifle and suppress. Religious faith provides us with our own individual identity, when repressive governments want to impose a state-defined identity from above. Religious faith provides us with an alternative source of external authority, when authoritarian governments insist on being the exclusive source of every kind of authority for their population. Governments that do not respect religious freedom demand the right to have control over virtually every other aspect of their people's lives. And governments that do respect religious freedom also respect their own limited role in the lives of their citizens. "Commissioners come from varied backgrounds and beliefs, and hold diverse views on many issues. On international religious freedom, however, all Commissioners have acted in a bipartisan fashion on behalf of this freedom we all value so highly. Religious freedom is important not just because we value it as Americans. Religious freedom is important because it is perhaps the most critically defining element of every individual's human identity. We are not fully human without the freedom to freely seek out the answers to this very fundamental question," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. The Commission commends Senator Sam Brownback for introducing legislation designating October 27, 2003, as "International Religious Freedom Day." The legislation also requests that the President issue a proclamation calling for a renewed commitment to eliminating violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and protecting fundamental human rights, and calling upon the people of the United States and interested groups and organizations to observe International Religious Freedom Day with appropriate ceremonies and activities. The Commission also commends Representative Frank Wolf for introducing legislation recognizing the 5th anniversary of the signing of IRFA and urging a renewed commitment to eliminating violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and protecting fundamental human rights. "This legislation will help to keep religious freedom at the forefront of foreign policy," said Young.

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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