

2/25/10: USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo Testifies on Human Rights and Religious Freedom in Iran

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 25, 2010

Washington D.C. - Leonard Leo, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, testified today before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on human rights and religious freedom in Iran.

The following is an excerpt from Mr. Leo's testimony.

Since its inception, USCIRF has recommended that Iran be named a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The State Department designated Iran a CPC the first time it named countries under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) in 1999 and has done so every year since. USCIRF again recommends this year that Iran be designated a CPC.

Over the past few years, and especially after the contested June 2009 presidential election, the Iranian government has imposed harsh prison sentences on prominent reformers from the Shi'a majority community, many of whom have been tried on criminal charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. USCIRF has long been on record opposing the application of these kinds of blasphemy and other similar laws. Furthermore, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression has said that such charges brought by Iranian courts "lack any objective criteria" and are open to "subjective and arbitrary interpretation by judges implementing them."

This systematic repression extends to religious minorities, particularly Baha'is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims, all of whom have suffered intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. Heightened anti-Semitism and repeated Holocaust denial threats and activities by senior government officials have increased fear among Iran's Jewish community. Members of those minority groups that are formally recognized — Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews — also face legal and other forms of discrimination.

[Click here to view the entire testimony.](#)

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257.