

December 18, 2003: State Department: Commission comments on religious freedom report

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, welcomes the release today by the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom of the fifth annual report documenting conditions of religious freedom in every foreign country. "Among the countries cited in the new State Department report for egregious religious freedom violations are Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the report states, as it has every year, that freedom of religion does not exist. The extent of the religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam demonstrates clearly the importance of U.S. action to ensure their compliance with international human rights standards," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. "The new report leaves no doubt that Secretary of State Colin Powell should promptly designate Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam as 'countries of particular concern' (CPCs) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA)," said Young. CPCs are those countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom. Currently Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Sudan are designated as CPCs. Once a country is designated, the IRFA requires the President to oppose those violations by taking actions specified in the IRFA. Such measures can vary, ranging from a private diplomatic demarche to sanctions or a waiver of action. In addition, the Commission recommends the following: Saudi Arabia: The U.S. Congress should fund and authorize a study that investigates Saudi government funding of the global propagation of any religious ideology that promotes hate, intolerance, or violence; Turkmenistan: The U.S. government should immediately suspend all non-humanitarian assistance to the government of Turkmenistan, a government whose persistent and flagrant violations of religious freedom and other human rights are documented by the State Department; Vietnam: The U.S. Congress should pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act of 2003, which would condition future increases in non-humanitarian bilateral assistance to Vietnam on a Presidential certification of demonstrated improvements in the Vietnamese government's protection of religious freedom and other human rights. The USCIRF appreciates the year-long monitoring, reporting, and dedication necessary to compile such a detailed report.

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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