

February 3, 2004: France: Proposed bill may violate freedom of religion

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 3, 2004 Contact:

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

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, today expressed concern over the proposal by French President Jacques Chirac for a new law that would prohibit students from wearing certain forms of religious clothing or symbols in French public schools. The proposal would ban dress or symbols that "conspicuously show religious affiliation," such as headscarves for Muslim girls, "plainly excessive" crosses for Christian children, skullcaps for Jewish boys, and turbans for Sikhs. A vote on the bill is scheduled for next week in the National Assembly. Commission Chair Michael K. Young said, "These restrictions, if enacted, may violate France's international commitments, including the European Convention on Human Rights, under which each individual is guaranteed the freedom to manifest religion or belief, in public as well as in private." Many Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs consider it a religious obligation to cover one's head. President Chirac called the proposed law necessary to maintain the secular (lai'c) nature of French schools. The French proposal would restrict individual choice in religious expression. Under international law, the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject to limitation only as necessary to protect public order, health, safety, morals, and the rights and freedoms of others. "Increased immigration in France in recent years has created new challenges for the French government, including integration of these immigrants into French society as well as problems of public order. But these challenges should be addressed directly, and not by inappropriately limiting the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief," Young said. "The French state's promotion of its understanding of the principle of secularism should not result in violations of the internationally recognized individual right to freedom of religion or belief." The Commission recommends that the U.S. government urge the government of France to ensure that any state regulations on public expression of religious belief or affiliation adhere strictly to international human rights norms. The French government and legislature should be urged to reassess this initiative in light of its international obligations to ensure that every person in France is guaranteed the freedom to manifest his or her religion or belief in public, or not to do so.

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair Nina Shea, Vice Chair Preeta D. Bansal Patti Chang Archbishop Charles J. Chaput Khaled Abo El Fadl Richard Land Bishop Ricardo Ramirez Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director