

November 22, 2006: USCIRF Marks 25th Anniversary of UN Declaration on Elimination of Religious Intolerance

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(202) 523-3240, ext. 114 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, today marks the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, which was adopted Nov. 25, 1981. "The right of everyone to the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is universal, as the unanimous adoption of the Declaration on Religious Intolerance showed once again," said USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer. "Regrettably, violations of this universal right continue to be committed across the globe. The occasion of the 25th anniversary is a call to all governments to intensify their efforts to protect freedom of religion or belief at home and to advance respect for religious freedom abroad. The ability of people throughout the world to live in peace and freedom depends on it." The Declaration on Religious Intolerance proclaims that: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. The Declaration also calls on all states to take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination and to combat intolerance on the grounds of religion or belief." "The Declaration on Religious Intolerance recognizes that the infringement of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or whatever belief has contributed to instability and 'kindl[ed] hatred between peoples and nations,'" commented Gaer. "This occasion reminds us that securing greater protection of this right is essential to address some of the most pressing problems facing the international community today, such as religious extremism and terrorism." "While the right to freedom of religion was proclaimed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Declaration on Religious Intolerance reinforced the importance of freedom of religion or belief. The UN Commission on Human Rights in 1986 appointed a Special Rapporteur to monitor and report publicly on UN member states' implementation of the Declaration on Religious Intolerance. The current Special Rapporteur is Ms. Asma Jahangir of Pakistan. In order to demonstrate their commitment to implementing the principles embodied in the Declaration on Religious Intolerance, states should undertake the following, with the full participation of nongovernmental organizations and individuals: Review laws and regulations to bring them into conformity with international standards regarding freedom of religion or belief; Improve practical implementation of guarantees of religious freedom at all levels of government; Provide effective mechanisms for individuals to make complaints and seek remedies for violations of this right, and hold accountable perpetrators of abuses, including public officials, or those who act at their behest; Review state educational textbooks and curricula, as well as practices of state-controlled media, to remove or end expressions of hatred and intolerance based on religion or belief; Support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, including by responding to communications of concern, inviting the Rapporteur to visit the country, and implementing the recommendations resulting from such visits; Support efforts by international and regional organizations to monitor and publicly report on violations of freedom of religion or belief, as well as assistance programs for governments and non-governmental organizations to strengthen legal protections and cultural respect for religious freedom; Review their foreign policies to advance respect for freedom of religion or belief through bilateral and multilateral relations; and Disseminate widely the Declaration on Religious Intolerance and other information on human rights. The Declaration on Religious Intolerance is part of a body of international human rights standards that guides the work of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. USCIRF is unique as the only independent government agency devoted solely to monitoring religious freedom conditions worldwide and making recommendations to advance that right. It was created by the U.S. Congress under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Other countries might consider setting up such an independent government body. More information about USCIRF and IRFA can be found at www.uscirf.gov.

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