

## November 13, 2006: USCIRF Disappointed About Removal of Vietnam from U.S. Government's List of Religious Freedom Violators; Welcomes Re-Designation of Saudi Arabia and Addition of Uzbekistan

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 13, 2006

Contact:

Angela Stephens, Assistant Communications Director,

(202) 523-3240, ext. 114

WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, expressed strong disappointment today that the State Department dropped Vietnam from the list of "countries of particular concern" (CPC) that are designated under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 because of their governments' systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom. Vietnam has been designated a CPC since 2004.

"Violations such as forced renunciation of faith and new arrests and detentions of religious leaders continue in Vietnam. Vietnam has released some religious prisoners and promised legal reforms, but the improvements made by Vietnam are, as yet, insufficient to warrant removing Vietnam from the list," said USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer. "The CPC designation of Vietnam has been a positive incentive for engagement on religious freedom concerns. Lifting the designation removes that incentive."

Evidence available to the Commission from sources inside Vietnam indicate that religious prisoners remain confined, only a fraction of the churches closed since 2001 have been re-opened, forced renunciations of faith continue in many different provinces, and Vietnam's new laws on religion are being used to detain or intimidate religious leaders who refuse affiliation with the government-approved religious organizations. In addition, the government remains highly suspicious of Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Vietnamese Mennonites, followers of Hoa Hao Buddhism, and leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Abuses and restrictions occur less frequently than in the past, however, there remain severe concerns for all of Vietnam's diverse religious communities.

"The Commission is deeply disappointed that Vietnam has not been re-designated a CPC," Gaer said. The Commission recently sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urging that she maintain Vietnam as a CPC.

Under IRFA, the Secretary of State must take into consideration the Commission's recommendations regarding CPCs. The Commission delivers these recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress annually on May 1.

The Commission welcomes the designation of Uzbekistan as a CPC, which the Commission recommended earlier this year. The Uzbek government continues to exercise a high degree of control over the practice of the Islamic religion and to crack down harshly on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to state-prescribed practices or that the government claims are associated with extremist political programs. This has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons in recent years, many of whom are denied the right to due process. There are credible reports that many of those arrested continue to be tortured or beaten in detention, despite official Uzbek promises to halt this practice. Moreover, Uzbekistan has a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of religious communities to function, leaving over 100 religious groups currently denied registration. The government of Uzbekistan faces threats to its security, but these threats do not excuse or justify the scope and harshness of the government's ill

treatment of religious believers nor the continued practice of torture, which reportedly remains widespread.

The Commission also welcomes the redesignation of Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Sudan as CPCs. The Commission will closely monitor Saudi policies to improve "religious practice and tolerance" which the State Department announced in July following bilateral discussions with the Saudi government. These Saudi government policies claim a willingness to improve religious freedom conditions despite the fact that many stated commitments in the past have not resulted in specific actions, nor have they resulted in measurable improvements.

The Commission was disappointed, however, that Pakistan and Turkmenistan, which the Commission recommended for CPC designation, were not designated.

The government of Pakistan continues to provide an inadequate response to vigilante violence frequently perpetrated by Sunni Muslim militants against Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians. Discriminatory legislation effectively bans many of the activities of the Ahmadi community. Blasphemy allegations, routinely false, result in the lengthy detention, imprisonment of, and sometimes violence against Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus, as well as Muslims, some of whom have been sentenced to death. Belated efforts to curb extremism through reform of Pakistan's thousands of Islamic religious schools appear to have had little effect thus far.

Turkmenistan, among the most repressive states in the world today, allows virtually no independent religious activity. In addition to severe government restrictions that effectively leave most, if not all, religious activity under strict-and often arbitrary-state control, Turkmen President Niyazov's ever-escalating personality cult has become a quasi-religion to which the Turkmen population is forced to adhere. His self-published work of "spiritual thoughts," called Rukhnama, is required reading in all schools. In addition, copies of Rukhnama must be given equal prominence to the Koran and the Bible in mosques and churches.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair • Michael Cromartie, Vice Chair • Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Vice Chair • Nina Shea, Vice Chair • Preeta D. Bansal • Archbishop Charles J. Chaput • Khaled Abou El Fadl • Richard D. Land • Bishop Ricardo Ramirez • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio • Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director