

May 28, 2004: Turkmenistan: Should be designated a "Country of Particular Concern"

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WASHINGTON - "The Commission believes that Turkmenistan should be designated a 'country of particular concern' (CPC) for its egregious violations of religious freedom," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. "This week's statement by the Turkmenistan's Ministry of Justice, declaring unregistered religious activity illegal, underscores the need for the State Department to set down a series of benchmarks that require more than paper promises. CPC designation would likely lead to significant improvements for the religious communities in Turkmenistan who have been ignored by the outside world for too long." "The Turkmen government deploys a battery of repressive measures such as threats, fines, job demotions and dismissals, beatings, confiscations, and deportations against religious communities, as documented by the USCIRF in its reports. The Ministry of Justice in Turkmenistan this week said that unregistered religious activity remains illegal despite the May 13, 2004, decree by President Niyazov that dropped from the criminal code the practice of unauthorized religious activities. The May 13 decree supplemented a March 11, 2004 decree that dropped from 500 to 50 the number of adherents in a religious community required for registration. Some had hoped that Niyazov's May 13 decree would result in the legalization of Shia Muslim, Baptist, Baha'i, Pentecostal, Adventist, Armenian Apostolic, Lutheran, Hare Krishna, Jehovah's Witness, and Jewish religious activities. As of now, only the state-regulated Sunni Muslim and the Russian Orthodox Church are granted limited legal status in Turkmenistan. On March 29, President Niyazov suddenly announced that no new mosques could be built after that date in Turkmenistan. On May 13, Niyazov also issued a second decree that nullified a secret decree promulgated on 23 March, eleven days after his "liberalization" of the registration requirements for religious communities. The 23 March decree had required all registered religious communities to subject themselves to strict state financial regulation. Despite the May 13 decree, however, religious communities are required to adhere to a six-page model statute as a condition of registration. These harsh registration requirements violate international law and force many religious communities in Turkmenistan to function "underground." Despite the blatant and on-going violations of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, some believe that if the government were to allow a few religious communities to register then Turkmenistan should not be designated a CPC. The Ministry of Justice said yesterday, however, that no religious communities have been allowed to register.

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