

## June 16, 2004: USCIRF meets with Secretary of State Powell

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today met with Secretary of State Colin Powell as part of its statutory mandate to advise the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on the promotion of religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. The Commission reiterated its June 2003 recommendation that the United States appoint a high-level official to the new U.S. Embassy in Iraq, reporting directly to the Ambassador and supported by a unit of personnel within the Embassy, to monitor and report on human rights, including religious freedom, and to promote the protection of international human rights standards as a key U.S. policy objective. The Commission underscored that the new Embassy should have a vigorous program to engage Iraqis to promote the provisions in the Transitional Administrative Law's (TAL) guaranteeing the rights of every Iraqi to freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief and practice in the permanent Constitution. "The provisions in the TAL are a milestone in the Arab world, constitutionally protecting not only religious minorities but also individual Muslims, and particularly women, to debate the role of Islam and to pursue reform. The deplorable Abu Ghraib prison incidents highlight the necessity for the United States to ensure that human rights are protected both in U.S. actions in Iraq and in the permanent Constitution," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. The Commission also urged Secretary Powell to designate Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, as outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). In a report released yesterday, an independent task force on terrorist financing of the Council on Foreign Relations specifically endorsed several USCIRF recommendations on Saudi Arabia, including that the U.S. government in its bilateral relations with the Saudi government should more frequently identify serious human rights violations and that Congress should initiate and make public a study on Saudi exportation of intolerance. "In addition to Saudi Arabia, Commissioners also urged Secretary Powell to designate Turkmenistan and Vietnam, and Eritrea as CPCs. In Turkmenistan, recent moves by President Niyazov in response to U.S. pressure have not fundamentally changed the restrictive and abusive policies there. In Vietnam, the Vietnamese government has not taken positive steps despite constant specific high-level diplomatic discussions. In Eritrea, the government has not been forthcoming in response to U.S. efforts to discuss the worsening religious freedom situation there. The integrity and utility of IRFA is being undermined by the failure to name abusive countries as CPCs," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young.

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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