

September 30, 2004: Nigeria: End the Violence by Ensuring Religious Freedom

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) announces its latest Policy Focus on Nigeria, which addresses the communal and sectarian violence that has killed more than 10,000 Nigerians in the past five years alone, the expansion of sharia law in the north, discrimination against religious minorities, and increasing extremist activity. The policy brief includes recommendations for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. Nigeria has been listed on the Commission's Watch List for three years due to the nature or extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the Nigerian government. The response from the Nigerian government to the issue of religious freedom remains inadequate. Little effort has been exerted to stop the outbreaks of violence, and subsequent reprisals between Muslims and Christians. The Commission continues to monitor the actions of the Nigerian government to determine if the situation warrants designation as a "county of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. "The Commission has recommended that President Bush urge President Obasanjo to address communal and sectarian violence, religious freedom issues, particularly the sharia controversy, and discrimination against religious minorities," said USCIRF chair Preeta D. Bansal. "The Commission is also concerned about an increasing number of extremist activities in northern Nigeria. This Policy Focus contains observations from a Commission staff visit and outlines USCIRF recommendations for U.S. policy on Nigeria to ensure the protection of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief." "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. The Commission calls on the U.S. government to publicly urge the Nigerian government to: Take effective steps to prevent and contain acts of sectarian and communal violence, prevent reprisal attacks, and bring those responsible to justice; Open a consulate or other official presence in Kano, or in Northern Nigeria with representation from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); Ensure that sharia criminal codes do not apply to non-Muslims or to individual Muslims who do not wish to go before sharia courts, and prevent law enforcement activities in northern states by any quasi-official or private corps of sharia enforcers; Support human rights defenders responding to credible allegations of religious discrimination in any part of Nigeria; and Urge the Nigerian government to identify, publicize, and counter foreign sources of religious extremism as part of its counter-terrorism efforts. "The USCIRF urges the U.S. government to evaluate its foreign assistance programs and policy on Nigeria and consider these recommendations made by the Commission," said Bansal. The Policy Focus on Nigeria is available on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov.

Preeta D. Bansal, Chair

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