

October 6, 2004: Congress: USCIRF Chair Bansal testifies before the HIRC

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WASHINGTON - U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Chair Preeta D. Bansal testified today before the U.S. House of Representatives International Relations Committee (HIRC) on the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom 2004 and Secretary Powell's designation of "countries of particular concern" (CPCs). Bansal welcomed the designation of three new CPCs - Eritrea, Vietnam, and Saudi Arabia - noting that the Commission has long called for these designations, particularly that of Saudi Arabia, and reinforcing that designation is a beginning and not an end. The full text of Commissioner Bansal's testimony may be found on USCIRF's Web site www.uscirf.gov in either PDF or HTML format. "The designation of CPCs is one of the most significant human rights acts of the U.S. government. In welcoming these designations, I would underscore that IRFA is very clear that more is required of the U.S. government than just naming these three countries as CPCs. Important obligations, in the form of consequent actions, flow from the CPC designation," said Bansal. "The Commission plans soon to issue recommended responses for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress pursuant to the IRFA statute to follow up on the CPC designations." Bansal noted that the 2004 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom contains no country report on Iraq. She testified that the absence of a report should not in any way be construed as an indication that religious freedom is not essential to the development of a stable and democratic Iraq. As the Iraqi people embark upon the historic task of crafting a permanent constitution in the coming months, the U.S. government cannot lose sight of the vital need to ensure that the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is guaranteed in Iraq's permanent constitution. Bansal voiced the Commission's concern that it is critical that what happened in Afghanistan not be repeated in Iraq. She noted that the Annual Report does not address the "fatal flaw" in Afghanistan's new constitution. With no guarantee of the individual right to religious freedom and a judicial system instructed to enforce Islamic principles and Islamic law, the new Afghan constitution does not fully protect individual Afghan citizens. There are also fewer protections for Afghans to debate the role and content of religion in law and society, to advocate the rights of women and members of religious minorities, and to question interpretations of Islamic precepts without fear of retribution. This could stifle voices that seek to debate and dissent from state imposed religious orthodoxies. On the report as a whole, Bansal commented that while many individual country reports continue to be lengthy and revealing, the Commission remains concerned about a number of informational inaccuracies in several important reports. In addition, she added, "The Annual Report is meant to be a report on U.S. policies and activities to promote those policies, and not only a report on conditions. However, it is not apparent from the information presented in the Annual Report that the State Department has conducted its activities in a coordinated way to implement particular policies and to achieve specific goals." Finally, Bansal discussed the Commission's work with regard to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which covers a vital region including all of Europe, the former Soviet Union, Canada and the United States. The need to recognize and to combat growing anti-Semitism in the region, together with the need to promote religious freedom for the growing Muslim minority populations in OSCE countries, cannot be understated.

Preeta D. Bansal, Chair

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