

December 20, 2007: USCIRF Calls for Reform of Turkmenistan's Repressive Religion Law, Removal of State-Imposed Ideology from Religious Practice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Dec. 20, 2007

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is calling for reform of Turkmenistan's repressive religion law and the removal of any state-imposed ideology from religious practice in the formerly Soviet Central Asian nation. At the launch of the Commission's latest Policy Focus study on Tuesday, Chair Michael Cromartie outlined several positive steps the government has undertaken since the death one year ago of President Saparmurat Niyazov but concluded, "Unfortunately, Turkmenistan's oppressive laws and practices remain in place."

Freedom House co-sponsored the release of the Commission's Policy Focus Turkmenistan, which was based on a Commission trip to Turkmenistan in August to assess the state of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief as well as related human rights. The Commission was the first U.S. government delegation to focus on human rights in Turkmenistan following Niyazov's death. The delegation met with the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Education, Culture, and Internal Affairs. It also held meetings with religious communities and civil society organizations.

The Commission raised key concerns with Turkmen government officials, including:

- The negative impact of the late President Saparmurat Niyazov's cult of personality on public life and human rights;
- Intrusive registration procedures for peaceful religious communities;
- Penalties imposed on unregistered religious communities deemed "illegal: under Turkmen law;
- Obstacles to the purchase or rental of land or buildings for worship services; and
- The ban on the import and printing of religious and other material.

The Commission acknowledges that the government has undertaken some positive actions, including releasing the former Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, from prison-a move that the Commission had long advocated. The Commission encourages it to implement reforms to bring Turkmenistan's laws, policies, and practices into accord with international human rights norms. At the very least, these steps should include reform of the religion law, allowing members of all religious communities in Turkmenistan-registered or unregistered-to engage freely in activities protected under international law, and the removal of any state-imposed ideology from the religious practice of Turkmenistan's citizens. Until tangible reforms have been implemented, the Commission continues to recommend that the U.S. government should designate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC.

Senior Policy Analyst Catherine Cosman noted that the book of Niyazov's spiritual writings, the Ruhnama, which the state forcibly promoted, continues to be present in mosques, which are tightly controlled by the state. Police raids on and other forms of harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups have increased somewhat this year, she said.

The Commission's findings and recommendations on Turkmenistan can be found in the Winter 2007 Policy Focus.

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