

## April 7, 2006: USCIRF Vice Chair Felice Gaer Briefs Members of Congressional Human Rights Caucus

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Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Vice Chair Felice D. Gaer testified before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus at a Members' briefing titled "Anti-Conversion Laws and Religious Freedom in South Asia and the Middle East: The Case of Abdul Rahman" on Friday, April 7. In August 2003, Gaer led a delegation from the Commission that traveled to Afghanistan. During this visit, the country was in the process of finalizing its new constitution. On March 22, 2006, the Commission issued a statement concerning the reported arrest and threatened death sentence for Abdul Rahman, a convert to Christianity. The Commission stated that it had previously noted that the absence of a guarantee of the right to religious freedom in Afghanistan's constitution, together with a judicial system structured to enforce Islamic principles and Islamic law, leaves the door open for a harsh, unfair, or even abusive interpretation of religious orthodoxy to be officially imposed on all Afghans, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, potentially leading to unjust criminal accusations of apostasy and blasphemy. "Clearly, Mr. Rahman's case reveals the weak state of human rights protections in Afghanistan today, and reminds us that freedom and democracy are still in peril," said Vice Chair Gaer. Continued Gaer, "Five years after the Taliban regime, Islamic law governs Afghanistan at the expense of universal human rights. Despite U.S. and international involvement in its development, the country's new post-Taliban constitution does not serve as a strong enough countervailing force to protect human rights. The freedom to adopt a religion or belief should be guaranteed everywhere, and the United States should stand with all who seek to protect it. As President Bush has said, freedom is a universal norm and the United States should not shy away from expressing the desire for there to be universal liberty." Felice D. Gaer is Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute of the American Jewish Committee and has been a Commissioner appointed since 2001. Her testimony will be available on the Commission's website [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov).

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