

September 1, 2006: USCIRF Calls for Candor on Iran's Religious Freedom Violations; Concerned about Former Iranian President Khatami's Speech at the National Cathedral

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Contact:

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(202) 523-3240, ext. 14 WASHINGTON-Felice D. Gaer, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency, today called on the National Cathedral to ensure that former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami is questioned about his own record on human rights and religious freedom when he speaks at the National Cathedral Sept. 7. In a letter to Reverend Canon John Peterson of the National Cathedral's Center for Global Justice and Reconciliation (full text below), Gaer pointed out the irony of inviting Mr. Khatami to speak on the role of the Abrahamic faiths in the peace process when, in his own country, Mr. Khatami presided as President while religious minorities-including Jews, Christians, Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, dissident Shia Muslims, and others-faced systematic harassment, discrimination, imprisonment, torture, and even execution based on their religious beliefs. Commissioner Gaer called for Mr. Khatami to be questioned openly and asked whether the Cathedral forum will ensure that Mr. Khatami is asked pressing questions about cultural tolerance, dialogue, and respect for human rights in his own country. Mr. Khatami is the highest-ranking Iranian official to be granted a visa to the United States since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The full text of the letter follows: Dear Canon Peterson: I write regarding the planned address of former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami at the National Cathedral. I serve as Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal body tasked with monitoring violations of freedom of religion throughout the world. The Commission has followed with great interest the Cathedral's recent announcement regarding President Khatami's address and would like to present a few questions and suggestions regarding the event. The National Cathedral's press release correctly notes that the Cathedral is "an important platform for dialogue and discussion." It states that Mr. Khatami is being invited to give a speech about the role that "Abrahamic faiths can play in shaping peace throughout the world," and describes him "as a man of peace and moderation." The Commission believes there is a troubling irony in inviting Mr. Khatami to speak on this topic. In his own country, Mr. Khatami presided as President while religious minorities - including Jews, Christians, Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, dissident Shia Muslims, and others - faced systematic harassment, discrimination, imprisonment, torture, and even execution based on their religious beliefs. During his term, Iranian officials persecuted reformers, students, labor activists, and journalists for "insulting Islam" and publishing materials deemed to deviate from Islamic standards. In 1998, student protests were followed by severe repression, and a series of extrajudicial murders of dissidents followed in the years thereafter. In 2004, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression concluded that charges against those detained for criticism of the government "lack any objective criteria" and are open to arbitrary interpretation by the judiciary. Women of all faiths have also suffered discrimination and repression. Because of these recurring and egregious violations of religious freedom, the Commission continues to recommend that Iran be included in the U.S. State Department's list of "countries of particular concern." Since 1999, Secretaries of State from both the Clinton and Bush administrations have agreed. Iran was initially placed on this list during Khatami's tenure as President. The Commission's 2006 Annual Report and the State Department's International Religious Freedom Report conclusively demonstrate that Iran's egregious, systematic violations of religious freedom did not significantly improve during Mr. Khatami's administration. Against that backdrop, we are prompted to ask if President Khatami plans to use the pulpit at the National Cathedral to denounce and express regret for these offenses. Such a step would go a long way toward facilitating reconciliation among his own countrymen and women, as well as among the Abrahamic faiths. We also note that the Cathedral's press release mentions Mr. Khatami's call for a "dialogue of civilizations." Certainly, it is useful to urge clergy and leaders in the West and throughout the world to respect a diversity of views, beliefs, and cultures. We wish to inquire whether Mr. Khatami will use his address at the National Cathedral to call upon clerics in his own country to respect the universally guaranteed right to freedom of religion and belief, as well as the rights of those who hold diverse views and beliefs. Furthermore, unconditioned "dialogue" between Iran and the West is precisely what is being urged by Iran's current president at this time as an alternative to its compliance with UN resolutions regarding weapons of mass destruction. Mr. Khatami's address at the Cathedral on this very topic of "dialogue" could easily be manipulated to make it appear that the Cathedral is conferring the moral high ground to Iran on this critical issue. Dialogue and discussion require that more than one voice is heard. It also demands what the UN-sponsored Alliance of Civilizations calls "responsibility" among the participants. In that light, will the National Cathedral ensure an opportunity for countervailing voices at the lecture? Will there be respondents? Will the Cathedral forum ensure that Mr. Khatami is asked pressing questions about cultural tolerance, dialogue, and respect for human rights in his own country? To be candid, it appears that the Cathedral is providing a public platform to an individual who was responsible for implementing and administering policies that resulted in the severe persecution of religious minorities as well as dissident voices within Iran's own Shiite community. Chief among these victimized groups are the very Abrahamic faiths he will discuss in his address. The National Cathedral is one of America's most significant moral symbols. It is a place where national leaders have been laid to rest and it is where the nation grieved the victims of September 11. It is a place where our nation-despite political differences-has come together to mourn, reflect, and unify. It is a place where people from diverse faiths and backgrounds gather to worship. As the caretakers of one of America's national symbols, it is imperative that those responsible for the National Cathedral

preserve its unique role, and not allow it to be misused or manipulated. The Commission fears that Khatami's address, in its announced format, jeopardizes this important tradition and may ultimately undermine the Cathedral's critical national role. With these concerns in mind, the Commission urges the Cathedral to provide a public respondent who can facilitate a genuine dialogue. Should you wish, the Commission would be pleased to play such a role. In the final analysis, it would be a tragic oversight for the former leader of Iran to be invited to give a lecture on these specific topics in such a prominent place of worship without being questioned openly and seriously on both the nature of diversity and the legacies of his own record on human rights and religious freedom. I very much appreciate your willingness to consider these questions and look forward to your reply. Sincerely, Felice D. Gaer

Chair

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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