

September 15, 2006: USCIRF "Simply Shocked" At State Department's Unwarranted Softening of Assessment of Saudi Arabia in Annual Report on International Religious Freedom

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(202) 523-3240, ext. 14 WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) concludes that the country conditions described in the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, released today, clearly support the Commission's recommendations that Saudi Arabia, Iran and Vietnam, as well as Burma, China, Eritrea, North Korea, and Sudan, should be redesignated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) for severe religious freedom violations. Three other countries-Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan-clearly merit CPC designation as well."The Commission is simply shocked that the Department removed longstanding and widely quoted language from its report that freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia," said Felice D. Gaer, Chair of the Commission. In July, the U.S. government confirmed a variety of Saudi policies to improve "religious practice and tolerance"-many of which were first recommended in Commission reports. However, the new State Department report shows that such policies have not yet been implemented. The Commission continues to conclude that freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia. The Department's own report states that "there generally was no change in the status of religious freedom during the reporting period." The government of Saudi Arabia persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and forcefully represses private religious practice. Members of the Shi'a and other non-Sunni communities, as well as non-conforming Sunnis, are subject to government restrictions on public religious practices and official discrimination. There is a continuing pattern of punishment and abuse of non-Muslim foreigners for private religious practice. The government also continues to be involved in financing activities throughout the world that support extreme religious intolerance, hatred, and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. The report also highlights certain improvements in Vietnam, but these advances have not been uniform and serious abuses continue against members of all of Vietnam's religious communities. "The CPC designation has been an important incentive for dialogue on addressing religious freedom concerns in Vietnam," Gaer said. "Nevertheless, given the current level of engagement between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments and the ongoing religious freedom abuses, the CPC designation for Vietnam should be maintained." The Department's report also describes continued serious violations inUzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan, three countries that have not been previously designated as CPCs. "In Uzbekistan, a government crackdown on Muslim individuals, groups and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices has resulted in the imprisonment of thousands of persons, and torture is endemic," Gaer said. "Turkmenistanis among the most repressive states in the world today, with independent religious activity quashed by the authoritarian and increasingly megalomaniacal rule of President Saparmurat Niyazov. In Pakistan, minority religious groups are targets of violence and discrimination, and religious extremism is growing in the country with little response from the government," she added.The Annual Report on International Religious Freedom is an important tool that documents conditions of religious freedom in every foreign country. The Commission commends Ambassador John V. Hanford III and his staff at the State Department for all their work, as well as personnel at U.S. embassies around the world who contribute to the report, which is required under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). The report is a major component of information from which Secretary Rice will, at a later date, make designations of CPCs, those countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing and egregious" violations of religious freedom, as defined by international standards.The Commission each year recommends in its Annual Report, released in May, which countries should be designated by the State Department as CPCs.Once a country is designated a CPC, IRFA requires the President to take one of a range of actions specified in the Act. Such measures include agreement with the foreign government to end particularly severe violations, economic or political sanctions, and a waiver of action.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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