

November 6, 2006: Saudi Arabia: USCIRF Concerned by Misleading Claims about Release of Religious Prisoners

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 6, 2006

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(202) 523-3240, ext. 114 WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned about misleading claims by Saudi Arabian authorities regarding the purported release of religious prisoners in the southwestern region of Najran. Saudi state media reported last week that Ismaili religious prisoners held in Najran were pardoned. Despite these reports, the Commission has learned that at least 18 Ismaili Muslim religious prisoners still remain in jail, including Hadi Al-Mutaif, who has been in prison for nearly 15 years, serving a life sentence on blasphemy charges. Early last week, King Abdullah visited Najran, and the Ministry of Interior reported through the Saudi state media that the King had pardoned the Najran Ismaili religious prisoners, including those who were involved with protests in 2000 after Saudi authorities closed an Ismaili mosque for "practicing sorcery." However, the Commission has received reliable information that only 10 prisoners—who had served all but one year of their original sentences—were pardoned by the King and released from prison. At least 17 other Ismaili prisoners who were involved with the protests in 2000 remain in jail and continue to serve the remainder of 10-year sentences. Finally, an additional Ismaili religious prisoner who had been in prison for five years on a separate blasphemy charge was released, but not Hadi Al-Mutaif. Al-Mutaif was originally sentenced to death in 1994 for a wisecrack deemed blasphemous that he made as a teenager. In 1999, his death sentence was commuted to life in prison. "Since 2001, the Saudi government has repeatedly made public statements promising reforms. The Commission has found that many of these claims have not resulted in specific actions, nor have they resulted in measurable improvements," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. "The case of the Ismailis in Najran and Hadi al-Mutaif seems to follow this pattern." According to the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom released in September, there were nearly 60 Ismailis in prison as a result of rioting that took place in Najran in 2000. Although many were subsequently released after serving reduced sentences, some of those that remain in prison are reportedly subject to flogging. Human rights advocates report that Ismailis, a Shi'a sect numbering some 700,000 inside Saudi Arabia, continue to suffer severe discrimination and abuse by Saudi authorities. The Hadi Al-Mutaif case not only has broader implications for other religious prisoners inside Saudi Arabia, but also for U.S.-Saudi discussions on freedom of religion or belief. This case is significant in light of the July announcement by the State Department that the Saudi government has identified and confirmed policies that seek to improve religious practice and tolerance inside of Saudi Arabia. These policies of the Saudi government claim a willingness to improve religious freedom conditions. "The Commission is concerned about the misleading nature of the Saudi government's claims in light of its statements that it is committed to constructive dialogue and engagement on religious freedom issues," said Gaer. "The U.S. government should use this opportunity to raise its concern about this case with senior Saudi officials and give the Saudi government a chance to release all remaining religious prisoners in Najran," said Gaer. In September 2004, the State Department for the first time followed the Commission's recommendation and designated Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. The Commission continues to recommend that Saudi Arabia remain a CPC.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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