

April 18, 2005: Saudi Arabia/Vietnam/Eritrea: CPC statutory deadline has passed; USCIRF recommendations await action

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed concern that the deadline has passed for the United States to take action on the designation of Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) for their systematic and egregious religious freedom violations. In September 2004 the State Department designated these three countries for the first time as CPCs, which followed the Commission's own recommendations. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) requires that the President not only name those countries that are the most egregious violators of religious freedom, but also take specific policy actions within 90 days.

The statute also allows for a 90 day extension. When the extension deadline was up on March 15, a State Department spokesman explained at a press briefing that they had asked Congress for "a little extra time," noting there had been "real engagement" with Saudi Arabia. The United States is now one month beyond the statutory deadline. The bipartisan USCIRF has seen no evidence of specific progress on the ground in Saudi Arabia on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. Last month, the Saudi government's announcement of a national campaign against extremism designed to educate Saudis about the importance of tolerance and moderation was followed by the destruction of a Hindu temple by the religious police. In Vietnam, the government continues to harass, detain, imprison, and discriminate against leaders and practitioners of all religious communities. In Eritrea, the government continues to ban the activities of all unregistered religious groups and closed their places of worship.

"These persistent delays in the process serve only to signal that the United States does not take seriously IRFA's stated and mandated commitments to promote religious freedom and other human rights throughout the world," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "The Commission believes it is time for the United States to act and not waive this obligation."

The Commission recommended specific actions in a February 7 letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

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