

June 19, 2000: Commission to Expand Focus in Coming Year

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 19, 2000 Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today announced an expanded work program for its second year. "With the lessons of our first year, during which the Commission organized itself, hired staff, and moved into offices, now behind us, both Commissioners and staff feel ready to tackle a larger agenda," said Elliott Abrams, the Commission's Chairman. "This is what Congress intended in creating the Commission." In the coming year, Chairman Abrams said, the Commission will: monitor religious-freedom violations worldwide; evaluate US foreign policy responses and make recommendations as to how U.S. policy can be more effective in combating religious persecution; expand the number of countries it will study in depth and make policy recommendations for each; press for implementation of the May 1 report's recommendations regarding China, Sudan, and Russia, while continuing to follow developments in those countries; put forward U.S. policy options on protecting the right to change one's faith and the right to seek to persuade others to change theirs; deliver further recommendations on the extent to which capital-market sanctions and other diplomatic leverage should be used as a diplomatic tool to promote religious freedom in other countries; recommend to the Secretary of State additional countries that should be placed on the list of "countries of particular concern" called for in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 (last year's list included Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Serbia, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan); and perform a study of the Immigration and Naturalization Service's Expedited Removal Program involving asylum claims to see if claims of religious persecution are being properly adjudicated. (This study was authorized by the International Religious Freedom Act.) The Commission plans several public hearings during the final four months of 2000 in support of these activities. "The Commission won't be limited by this list of planned activities," Abrams noted. "If events dictate that we change course and bring other countries or issues into the mix, we will not hesitate to do so."*

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director