

February 29, 2004: United States Must Defend Religious Freedom for All - Kansas City Star

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February 29, 2004 The Bush administration is not using the tools it already has available to promote religious freedom around the world. The failure is inexcusable. Each year the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom studies oppression around the world and makes recommendations about how to combat it. And each year the administration does little or nothing in response. Recently, the commission made public the list of countries it wants the administration to designate "Countries of Particular Concern" because of the egregious violations of religious freedom. Many of the usual suspects, such as Saudi Arabia, North Korea and Turkmenistan, are included among the countries the commission wants designated. Other countries on the commission's list -- each also with an appalling record of religious oppression -- are Burma, Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, China, Sudan, Vietnam and India, although the commission was divided about whether India should be on the list, given some evidence of recent progress there. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 created the commission and provided for a range of economic and diplomatic sanctions. But neither the Bush administration nor the Clinton administration placed new sanctions against oppressive governments or used diplomatic pressure aggressively to support religious freedom. The Bush administration has even avoided naming obvious violators as "Countries of Particular Concern." Saudi Arabia, for instance, does not have that designation even though both the commission and the State Department report regularly that freedom of religion does not exist in that country. Much the same is true in Turkmenistan, where the government prohibits just about any religious activity except for that overseen by the Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church, both of which are government controlled. Americans cherish their own religious freedom, and civilized nations understand that the ability to worship according to one's own beliefs is a foundational right. But in a world where religious oppression is commonplace, our government is lackadaisical about protesting the suppression of that right.