

USCIRF Asks Clinton to Raise Religious-Freedom Issues in Meeting With Russian President

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to President Clinton October 26 urging that he raise religious-freedom issues with Russia's President Vladimir Putin at their upcoming meeting. President Clinton is scheduled to meet with the Russian president November 15 or 16 on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Brunei. The Commission is concerned about a December 31, 2000 deadline by which religious groups in Russia must register or be "liquidated." To date nearly half the groups have been unable to register: The Commission asked President Clinton to urge President Putin to intervene to speed up the registration process and postpone the registration deadline. The text of the letter follows: Dear Mr. President: I am writing on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to request that you take up an important religious-freedom issue with Russian President Vladimir Putin at your planned November meeting in Brunei. Given the progress made in the last eight years in many aspect of U.S.-Russian relations, it would be deeply unfortunate if January brought news of a systematic deterioration in religious freedom in Russia. In the last days of the Soviet Union, the government enacted the most enlightened law on religion in Russia's history. It provided broad legal protections for the right to exercise religious freedom and for the equality of religious communities. The law restored rights, not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, but to Old Believers, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Muslims, Buddhists, and a host of other faith groups who had suffered severe repression since at least 1929. But Russia took a serious step backwards with the passage of the 1997 Religion Law. The 1997 law creates discrimination among religions and violates Russia's international commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It restricts the rights, powers, and privileges of smaller, or newer, or foreign religious communities, while giving special status to Russia's "traditional" religions - including Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. It also creates an onerous and intrusive registration process and other instruments the federal or local officials can use to interfere with religious organizations' activities. Russian Constitutional Court decisions and rulings by the federal authorities have eased the burden for some religious groups. But a greater danger lurks: Immediately upon taking office this spring, President Putin quietly signed a significant and double-edged amendment to the 1997 law. On the positive side, it extended to December 31, 2000, the deadline by which religious groups must register with local and/or federal officials. On the negative side, however, it required that unregistered groups be "liquidated" after that date. If there were in place a due process which religious groups could use and understand to seek registration, it would help. But quite the reverse is true: Local officials in some regions have delayed or denied registration to, and sought liquidation of, unpopular religious groups, even when they have been recognized and registered in other regions or at the federal level. At times, this occurs at the instigation of the local Russian Orthodox bishop or priest. The threat of liquidation upon expiration of the December 31 deadline is substantial: At the end of September, according to the Russian Justice Ministry, only some 9,000 of the 17,000 religious groups in Russia had obtained registration. That means almost half have been unable to register. Given the slow pace of the registration process so far, it is hard to believe most of the remaining group will be able to register by December 31. If religious freedom is to be preserved, Mr. Putin must intervene to 1) speed up the process; and 2) postpone the deadline. Mr. President, we understand that you will meet with the Russian president November 15 or 16 on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Brunei. On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I ask that you use the occasion to stress to Putin how seriously the U.S. takes the issue of religious freedom and how important it is, both for Russia's future and for U.S.-Russian relations, that he postpone the December 31 deadline. The Commission thanks you for your attention to religious-freedom issues, and wishes you success at the APEC summit. Sincerely, Elliott Abrams Chairman

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