Dissent to Testimony on Religious Freedom in Sudan

Commission on International Religious Freedom

Hearing before the House International Relations Committee

May 16, 2000

Laila Al-Marayati, MD, Commissioner

This statement is written in objection to segments of the testimony delivered before this committee on the above date. First, in the opening paragraph, the speaker quotes an unnamed source who claims that the government of Sudan wishes to "remove the Church from Sudan" and that "Islam is the crux." In the conflict that plagues Sudan, religion is used as a propaganda tool by both sides to gain support within Sudan and internationally as well. Clearly, as a military dictatorship, the government's actions have resulted in numerous unquestioned, well-documented human rights abuses against people of all faiths. The statement quoted above is an unsubstantiated opinion, not a fact, which only serves to exacerbate misunderstanding about Islam in general as it relates to the conflict in Sudan. In addition, it belies the fact that Christians in northern Sudan continue to practice their faith without fear of the same tactics used by government forces against southern Sudanese Christians, other forms of discrimination notwithstanding.

The magnitude of the conflict in Sudan requires the urgent attention of the US Government in order to bring peace, justice and an end to the human rights abuses. Yet, the portrayal of Islam, the religion of over 1 billion adherents, as an evil force that is at the "crux" of the conflict is erroneous, offensive and ultimately detrimental to any process seeking to ensure a just, broad resolution to the conflict. Using such a statement in this testimony is reckless and does not contribute in any positive way to our concerns regarding US policy in Sudan.

In addition, the testimony fails to acknowledge my previously written dissent (as documented in the May 1 report) regarding the Commission's recommendation for non-lethal aid to opposition groups. I am opposed to such measures for the following reasons: 1) The Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which would be the major opposition group to benefit from aid, is responsible for numerous human rights abuses in southern Sudan. 2) The US Government has not exerted enough effort to date in bringing an end to the conflict through peaceful means and intense negotiations. These measures should be exhausted before considering aid to rebel forces. 3) By promoting one of the major antagonists in the civil war, the US Government would actually be contributing to the prolongation of the conflict and the subsequent

suffering of millions of Sudanese. 4) The distinction between lethal and non-lethal aid is artificial such that any US assistance to rebel groups may be perceived by the Sudanese government as an act of aggression and a declaration of war which could have severe and violent repercussions for Americans in Sudan and elsewhere.

Finally, while the testimony often refers to the "genocidal" nature of the Sudanese government's actions, it should be clarified that the Commission has not yet determined that the Government of Sudan is deliberately carrying out a campaign of genocide, based on the definition as described by the Geneva Convention. One of the recommendations of our report is that the State Department determine if indeed the situation in Sudan meets the criteria for such a definition which would require a specific response based on international law.