Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Dr. Tamara Sonn Written Answers to Follow-up Questions

November 27, 2001

1. Is there widespread support for Islamic political movements within the various parts of the Muslim world (from Africa to the Middle East to S.E. Asia), and, if so, what accounts for that support? How should the US relate to Islamic political movements vis-a-vis promoting human rights, including religious freedom, in Muslim countries worldwide? Are there Islamic organizations with which the U.S. government can establish a dialogue and liaise to promote human rights and religious freedom?A. There is widespread support for Islamic political movements across the Muslim world. However, that support is for the goals of the movements, most generally described as political and economic independence and development, all within an authentically Islamic idiom. It is not necessarily for the means used by Islamist groups or factions thereof. The widespread support for Islamist goals is a reaction against the colonial experience (economic exploitation, and cultural alienation resulting from imposition of foreign legal and educational systems), and the perception that even after independence, the economies of most Muslim countries remain subject to those of the developed West. As a result, governments are required to cooperate with Western political agendas or face isolation. The human rights of Palestinians are considered the benchmark, although those of citizens of non-democratic US allies like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are included as well. The major Islamic organizations in the Muslim world (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, HAMAS in Palestinian territories, Jamaat-i Islami in Pakistan) tend to operate parallel to the governments, offering social services that the governments do not provide and, at the same time, alternate political agendas. Engaging these groups in dialog with the US would therefore be problematic in our relations with their governments. In addition, years of marginalization by their governments have resulted in radicalization among sectors of many Islamist organizations, again making dialog difficult. A more suitable approach to promoting human rights in the Muslim world, therefore, is through the governments themselves. Alliances with human rights violators should include both pressure to establish and protect democratic freedoms, and aid to promote the roots of economic development - most importantly, education. That pressure should consist of withholding of military assistance until basic human rights goals are met: free and open elections, verified by international monitors, with universal suffrage. These measures (economic aid and political pressure) would have three important effects relative to the rights of minorities (religious and otherwise) in the Muslim world. It would significantly weaken the attraction to parallel (Islamist) organizations (1) by allowing the government to provide basic human services, and (2) undermining opposition to formerly non-responsive governments. In the process, these measures would isolate those radicalized elements within Islamist organizations - and those elements are the source of inter-religious sectarianism.2. As a result of the events of September 11, the U.S. has improved relations with Pakistan. How can the United States use these improvements to help promote human rights as they relate to, inter alia, Pakistan's system of separate electorates, the prevention of discrimination against the Ahmadis, the elimination of abusive enforcement of blasphemy laws, ongoing sectarian violence in the country, and religious education in schools?A. As I outlined in my testimony on November 27, 2001, the current government of Pakistan is the first government since the 1960s to address the radicalization of Islamist groups (e.g., President General Musharraf's effort to roll back the blasphemy laws in April 2000). Radicalized elements within these organizations -- rather than the legal structure of Pakistan -- are the source of sectarian violence. Again, the attraction to the Islamist jamaats lies in their ability to provide at least minimal human services that the government currently cannot provide (due to its debt, the refugee crises, and military commitments), and the perception that they are working in the interests of the majority Muslim people. It must be recognized that the Islamist jamaats are engaged in a power struggle with the government. Islamic "authenticity" is a tool in that struggle. Even when the Islamist organizations cannot provide full services to the majority poor in Pakistan, they can appeal emotionally to their own religious legitimacy by condemning as unorthodox religious minorities. Government efforts to legislate the full citizenship rights of Ahmadis, for example, or to champion the rights of other minorities -- in the context of widespread illiteracy and unemployment, and the emotional appeal of Islamic authenticity coming from the jamaats -- would therefore be counterproductive. The most effective way to promote the rights of minorities in Pakistan is to assist in the socio-economic development of the country. It cannot be overemphasized, however, that this assistance must be at the grassroots level. History demonstrates that loans for the major industrial installations have not resulted in grassroots development. This assistance must be based on education and micro-credit programs that provide tangible benefits to people otherwise drawn to sectarian groups. As above, these measures would isolate radicalized elements within Islamist organizations - and those elements are the source of sectarian violence.3. The governments of some countries that violate religious freedom claim that religious groups also practice or support terrorism. As it interacts with countries in the Campaign Against Terrorism, how can the United States separate legitimate efforts to contain violence from illegitimate repression of religious freedom?A. The simple answer to this question is to use U.S. law as a guide: freedom of expression, freedom of association, due legal process must be protected. Violation of these rights enhances the attraction of anti-government forces. Even people with unpopular views must be allowed these basic civil liberties. The more complex answer is provided in the two responses above. To briefly recap: Islamic "authenticity" is used as a basis of legitimacy for Islamist groups vying ultimately for control of the government. That often spills over into sectarian violence, used sometimes to flex political muscle (as in April 2000 when President General Musharraf attempted to restructure the blasphemy laws), and often as a pressure valve when frustration builds, because the Islamist organizations are unable to provide the options/resources/services they have promised their followers. The recent killing of Christian worshipers in Bhawalpur, for example, should not be seen as part of a campaign, but as a tragically misguided outburst by extremists expressing their hatred of the U.S. -- described by

Islamist extremists as executing a "crusade" in Afghanistan designed to eradicate Muslims. (Christians from the Evangelical Alliance Mission who run the Bach Christian Hospital north of Islamabad, by contrast, have not been targeted.) Again, the most effective counter-measure to this kind of extremism is to marginalize the groups who encourage it by allowing the governments to provide educational and economic opportunities to the majority of illiterate and un-/under-employed populace of Pakistan and Afghanistan.