

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Martha Brill Olcott Oral Testimony

November 27, 2001 DR. OLCOTT: Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify. I'd like to divide my remarks in two parts, to make some general comments about U.S. policy towards religious freedom in Central Asia, and to try to place them in the context of the campaign against terrorism, and then to talk about the answers in my written testimony to the four questions that were posed to me in coming today. I should also add that I'm just back from a three-week trip to Central Asia, which I made since the last time I met with you people. I would argue that the campaign against terrorism is a decisive moment in U.S. policy towards Central Asia, and I would press hard for us to seize this moment. Previously the degree of engagements in these societies was very limited with the exception to some degree of Kyrgyzstan and in the sector of energy in Kazakhstan. Now we have a renewed opportunity to engage in these countries, and we should use it wisely, for the opportunity for future engagement may not be readily forthcoming. In this context I would argue that we should advance our agenda in the area of human rights, but in doing so we should be cognizant of three things. We must, one, maximize the chances of it being heard; two, be patient; and three, to try to prevent our agenda from being hijacked by those who have other purposes. Okay. One, how do we maximize the chances of it being heard? I would argue we maximize our chances of having a human rights agenda being heard, including the promotion of religious freedom, by making sure that these are not our sole points of engagement with these societies. They have to be part of a holistic approach to political, social, and economic development in these states, one which makes clear that the U.S. Government is prepared to invest in these outcomes. Economic reform must be put on the forefront, both in its positive and negative aspects. In terms of positive aspects, I would argue we must emphasize the need for the same macroeconomic reform and place particular attention on projects designed to expand small and medium-size entrepreneurs, including in agriculture, which means move towards private land ownership, even in Uzbekistan. And the negative aspects of economic reform we must put strong efforts at eliminating the financial bases of terrorism and include in these the elimination of the drug trade throughout Central Asia. Anything short of that will not eliminate the capacity for self-financing of terrorist groups in this part of the world. Moreover, I would argue that if we're going to promote security assistance to some of these countries--and I suspect we will be providing increased security assistance to Uzbekistan--it is incumbent upon us to provide economic assistance as well, to balance our security assistance with a much more far-reaching program. I talk about this at length in my testimony. It is in this context that we should put forward our human rights agenda for two reasons. One, because in putting forward human rights as part of a comprehensive agenda, we have offered a carrot to go with the stick. And, two, more importantly, we will create more stakeholders, economic stakeholders, who will relieve some of the burden of isolation on today's human rights activists in the region. Otherwise, what we are doing is really aiding a group that is likely to remain very limited in their society. Second, I would argue we have to be patient, be patient insofar as our expectation of mass support for many of these goals. It will take a long time to develop strong popular support for a broad human rights agenda in Central Asia. In some of these countries it will be a little easier than others, in Kyrgyzstan, for example--I'm going to come back to that in a second. But the good news is, I think the religious freedom part of a human rights agenda will generally be the easiest part of the message to sell in this region, particularly as far as it is understood as trying to reverse the persecution of Islamic believers that is currently going on in many parts of Central Asia, in Uzbekistan, but also in Kyrgyzstan and in Turkmenistan to varying--and in Kazakhstan increasingly as well. But in saying this I am also cognizant of the fact that tolerance is in short supply in the region of Central Asia. I'll give you two examples from Kyrgyzstan from my more recent trip. One was everybody was just really in a flap over what they considered to be the rapid increase in Christian conversion among people in--among ethnic Kyrgyz in Northern Kyrgyzstan, even though in no way, shape or form was this a strategic problem. You know, you were not eliminating the dominance of Islam, these people, everybody admitted, were not revolutionary. But the quote, unquote, "un-Kyrgyzness" of this was something that let it to be mentioned. We had a two-day conference on religion with a whole host of journalists and analysts, and in all my meetings with various parliamentarians and stuff, this topic came up very frequently, even though it posed absolutely no threat to the security of the regime, to human rights, to anything. So that's one example of intolerance. The other, of course, is the intolerance of the Islamic believers themselves, and the whole question of alcohol consumption in public places is really one that comes up frequently now in Central Asia, even in Kyrgyzstan and led to a minor scuffle at our banquet when the clerics refused to sit at the table, because even though we had no bottles of liquor at the table, some of the members of the group were drinking alcohol, and they left the room rather than be present when alcohol was being served. And these are moderate clerics working for the established Islamic establishment within Kyrgyzstan. So that's the point about patient. It's going to take a while. Thirdly, we should try to prevent our agenda from being hijacked. The five states of Central Asia each have a complex and contentious history in which Islam has played an inexorable role, but that role has varied over time and has no single pattern across the region. So there's no consensus in any of these countries as to what Islam's proper place, in quotes, is in society. And partially, discredited former Communist leaders are all trying to weigh in in this discussion, but they're not viewed as credible arbiters on this question, not even by those that share their secular views. So we have to be really careful not to sort of come in on the side of the existing regime. In advancing religious freedom, we must do so in a way that is careful to remove ourselves from playing a direct role in the internal debates on what--debates that are going on throughout Central Asia in each of the Islamic communities. The U.S. is a global leader, but it is not an ideological guidepost on questions of faith in the Islamic world. Instead we have to focus on being a guidepost on questions of human rights and civil society, both here and at home. Finally, we have to be clear that there are costs to U.S. engagement in Central Asia. We have to be sensitive to how our engagement in Central Asia with Uzbekistan has

already shifted the geopolitical balance there, and this can lead to a deterioration of human rights and religious freedom in neighboring states if all we do is provide security assistance in this region and nothing else. And in my 30 seconds that I have left, I would like to just quickly go through my answers to the four questions. To summarize what I said, I would argue, one, that the U.S. should continue to pursue a policy of promoting human rights in Central Asia, including the pursuit of religious freedom. There is a natural tendency to back off from direct criticism of the domestic policies of wartime allies, and certainly we are using Uzbekistan as a launching point now. But even if we choose to temporarily remain silent or downplay the significance of some of these human rights abuses at this very moment, we must still at the same time send very clear signals that this silence is not in any way, shape or form acquiescence to the policies of the Uzbek regime. Secondly, we must ensure that the silence is a short-term strategy. In the medium and long term we must send clear signals that the promotion of human rights and protection of religious freedom is a U.S. priority, and the best way to do this is to make much more effective linkages in our foreign assistance program. We must demonstrate that these states are important to us by increasing the amount of developmental assistance available to them. But at the same time we should establish a series of benchmarks in human rights, including in the area of religious freedom, which are necessary to be met if the assistance is to be continued, including security assistance. It's very important that we target both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The latter has a greater chance of being mired in political chaos than the former, but the consequences of societal collapse in Uzbekistan are much more profound. Three. If creatively used, the U.S. campaign against terrorism gives U.S. policy makers valuable new tools to use in the promotion of human rights including religious freedom. I would argue this is especially true of intelligence cooperation in the area of financial terrorism. Religious groups that are not formally linked to those engaged in terrorist activities should be able to gain legal registration, and we now should be able to put on financial tests as the information and intelligence base increases. And their members, of course, should not be persecuted. In this regard a great deal more has to be done to minimize the self-financing capacity of extremist groups in Central Asia through a systematic crackdown on the drug trade which originates in Afghanistan. Fourth and finally. The U.S. should use religious freedom as a tool in the campaign against terrorism in Central Asia. The Bush Administration has gone to great lengths to argue that the campaign against terrorism is not a campaign against Islam. However, in much of Central Asia the local governments are engaged in the systematic persecution of religious believers, defining as revolutionary all devout Muslims who reject the right of the state to define the content and limits of religious belief. As long as Islam is under pressure in parts of Central Asia, those who preach its most extreme doctrines will enjoy the status of national heroes and they will have no difficulty finding new recruits among the disaffected youth to fill the places of those who were arrested. Thank you.