

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Sidney Jones Oral Testimony

November 27, 2001 MS. JONES: Thank you very much. I wanted to start by listing a number of different ways in which the campaign on terrorism has affected religious freedom in Asia, particularly South and East Asia. First I think we're seeing it leading to heightened feelings of vulnerability on the part of religious and ethnic minorities, in some cases regardless of any objective evidence of an increased threat. Indonesia and Chinese, for example, are applying for asylum in record numbers, including in the United States, not because of any specific incident since September 11th, but because they fear that Muslim anger in Indonesia over the bombing of Afghanistan can lead to violence in which they could be targeted. Secondly, the campaign is emboldening some governments to crack down on peaceful and in some cases not so peaceful activities of some Muslim groups on the pretext that they represent a potential breeding ground for terrorism. China's action vis-a-vis Uighur groups in Xinjiang, which clearly didn't start with September 11th, but nevertheless has gone on, is one example. Rights groups in India are concerned that there has been selective bombing of some Muslim organizations, including the student Islamic movement of India, while similar Hindu groups have been untouched. Third, it can lead to some governments to turn a blind eye to intimidation or attacks by hardline Muslim groups on either moderate Muslims or non-Muslim minorities for fear of alienating important domestic constituencies. We've seen a fairly dramatic rise in attacks on Hindus, for example, in Bangladesh. Now, it's been since September 11th, but it's more directly related to elections on October 1st in Bangladesh in which two Islamist parties won in coalition with the Bangladesh National Party, but those attacks are serious. You probably saw in the "Times" this morning that there's also been an arrest of a journalist who tried to go to India and collect information on attacks on the Hindu minority, came back into Bangladesh and was arrested basically for defaming the good name of the Bangladeshi Government. We've also seen an unwillingness on the part of the Indonesian Government to seriously prosecute criminal actions from very conservative Muslim groups, and we saw that the killing of 16 Pakistani Christians in a church in Punjab on October 28th was condemned by President Musharraf, but in fact, local authorities haven't pursued the killers with any greater zeal than they have in earlier cases of attacks on Christians and Ahmadis. Fourth, There's been anger against the United States among some Muslim groups in a way that's leading to the strengthening of organizations that have used violence in a way that threatens the religious freedom of others. Many groups in Indonesia, for example, have been intensifying recruiting efforts since the bombing of Afghanistan began, and it's important to note two things. One, that we're not just talking in Indonesia about a group like Laskar Jihad, which has been operating in the Moluccas and in other parts of Indonesia, but there were about 8 or 10 groups of a similar persuasion who have been setting up new posts in Jakarta and other cities, sending out flyers, trying to get more volunteers, including volunteers to fight in Afghanistan. But it's also important to note that there are very strong domestic political factors involved in this. It's not just appeal to religious solidarity, but there's a lot of concern in Indonesia that there's maneuvering going on for the 2004 election. The Vice President's political party has some of these paramilitary Muslim organizations working with that party and one aim is try and increase support for his party in 2004. So it's not just religious factors. And finally I would say that there's been an easing of pressure on autocratic governments in the region to bring about democratic reforms, and many of our Pakistani human rights colleagues are very dismayed that in a very close-knit alliance now with Pakistan on terrorism, the pressure on Musharraf to return some civil liberties that have been in abeyance since his coup have basically been forgotten. It may well be as well that the war against terrorism has made it more difficult for the United States to take a leading role in trying to address aspects of these conflicts, particularly communal conflicts, through aid projects or diplomatic intervention. Despite all the actions taken by U.S. officials to counter the perception that the war in Afghanistan is a war against Islam, that perception remains very strong among many Muslims, moderates as well as radicals, in Southeast Asia and South Asia. The detention of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern and South Asian dissent on immigration charges after September 11th here, and the publicity given to the voluntary questioning of 5,000 men, mainly of Middle Eastern or South Asian origin who arrived in the U.S. after January 2000, are being widely reported in the Asian press, and they don't convey a positive image. In terms of how to ensure religious freedom is protected in such an atmosphere, it's difficult to suggest policies that are substantially different from those already in place, but let me just list a few. They should include support for local human rights groups who will monitor violations of religious freedom in a neutral fashion, who can challenge exclusivist interpretation of events, and who can press governments from within for investigations and prosecutions in cases of attack. It's very important that wherever possible critiques on limitations of freedom of religion come not only from within the country where those limitations are taking place, but from people or groups who are the same religion as the attackers. Support additional staff and funding for investigations into attacks on religious freedom, not just by United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, but by other special rapporteurs, for example, on summary and arbitrary executions from the working group on arbitrary detention and from other so-called UN thematic mechanisms. In many cases we're dealing with countries--China is one--where you don't have the local NGOs that can be supportive. The UN can be a very effective operator under such circumstances. The Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance has been in Vietnam and in China, and the people in these positions, these thematic mechanisms, have almost no budget for research, travel or missions, and if we want to call on them to take on additional tasks, they're going to need financial support to do so. I would echo the recommendation made by a number of my colleagues here on the support for independent media efforts, particularly focused on radio and the Internet in Southeast Asia and East Asia, in a way that can counter extremist positions and can counter conspiracy theories that target religious groups. While the Internet can be a potent force for freedom of expression, it is also a vehicle for reinforcing communal hatreds and suspicions. I think one of the things, one of the comments of a moderate Muslim group in Indonesia was that we don't

know how to be militantly moderate, because militant groups can give people a purpose and a goal in life, and moderate Muslim groups can invite people to academic discussion. There's a disconnect there that I think we need to address. I think we need to continue efforts throughout the region to support reform of the legal and judicial systems, and to reinforce the idea that justice for perpetrators of hate crimes is absolutely essential. We need to continue to make a clear and public distinction between genuine efforts to combat terrorism and suppression of legitimate political and religious activities including criticism of the government. I think President Bush did a very good job of raising this distinction when he attended the APEC meeting in Shanghai and raised the treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, but the same message needs to be delivered to Malaysian authorities with respect to their use of the Internal Security Act, and the Indian Government with its efforts to rush through a new Antiterrorism Act that would substantially restrict civil liberties. Our ability to do this, however, has been compromised, as Mort Halperin so eloquently said, by our own efforts to put forward military commissions where there's a great concern about violations of due process. I would also echo my colleagues' recommendations that we continue economic development efforts in countries across the region so that we can reduce the attraction of what are in effect rent-a-thug operations that in some ways are more thuggery than they are religion. Many of these Muslim groups operating in Indonesia, if you look closely at who's involved, have a veneer of religious piety at the top, and at the bottom include thugs who have been known political thugs for decades in Indonesia. And in terms of--you probably remember seeing some of the news stories about attacks or screenings of Americans, people going around to hotels and demanding lists of Americans in these hotels in Solo in Central Java. The key person behind the group doing that, which was a paramilitary organization linked to a Muslim political party, is a thug who's notorious for engaging in these kinds of activities for whoever will pay him. This is not a devout Muslim of longstanding history in supporting Islamic goals.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Ms. Jones?

MS. JONES: Yes?

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: You have one minute left.

MS. JONES: Okay. I would also suggest that in places where there's been communal violence, that we try to find local sponsors for efforts to rebuild and rehabilitate damaged houses of worship from within the community suspected of causing the damage. I'd echo the recommendation on education. And finally, I would say that it was important not only to work for the release of those detained for exercising their right to religious freedom or for other rights linked to promotion of religious freedom, but it's important to get news of those advocacy efforts into other countries. If you, as a Commission, work on behalf of Saad Ibrahim, for example, it's important to get the news of that advocacy to places like Indonesia and Malaysia. Thank you.