

Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Opening Remarks

September 18, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Opening Remarks by Chairman Abrams

CHAIRMAN ABRAMS: Good morning. My name is Elliott Abrams, and I serve as chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'd like to welcome you to today's hearings on religious freedom and U.S. policy in India and Pakistan.

We have a very full program today, so I will keep my opening remarks brief. You can see from the signs the names of the other commissioners present: Judge Smith, Dr. Al-Marayati, Professor Kazemzadeh and Archbishop McCarrick; others will be joining us later, and this is Mr. McFarland, the executive director of the Commission.

The Commission was created by Congress with two purposes: to monitor the condition of religious freedom around the world and to make recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress as to how U.S. policy can most effectively advance religious freedom. The Commission is an independent advisory body appointed by the President and both houses of Congress but separate from them.

This is the first in a series of hearings on several countries that we plan to conduct over the coming months. Earlier this month, the State Department issued its annual report on international religious freedom for the Year 2000. The reports on both India and Pakistan revealed grave violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments of those two countries. These violations concern the Commission and, in addition to turning our own attention to them, we've urged the State Department to monitor the situation closely.

I'd like to emphasize that by holding hearings today on both countries, the Commission does not intend to try to equate the situations in India and Pakistan nor to compare them to each other or to any other country. The situations in India and Pakistan are entirely distinct, and each is extremely

complex. Turning to U.S. policy, in the last two years, there have been significant developments in the region and in U.S. policy toward India and Pakistan. The President's visit earlier this year and Prime Minister Vajpayee's current visit to the United States have raised interest in and awareness of U.S. relations with South Asia. This is precisely the time for the U.S. Government to consider how the protection of religious freedom should factor into the development and implementation of U.S. policy, and it is the Commission's mandate to make recommendations to our government in that regard.

It is with respect to U.S. policy that it appears fruitful to consider both India and Pakistan in the same hearing. Historically, U.S. relations with India and Pakistan have been quite different. There are, nevertheless, a great number of issues that concern both countries, and relations between India and Pakistan have had and will have an impact on shaping U.S. policy toward both countries.

I'd like to say just a word about Kashmir, a sensitive topic. With respect to the ongoing conflict in Kashmir, the Commission is studying the impact of that conflict on the protection of religious freedom and its importance to U.S. policy. The Commission does not intend to take a position on how that conflict should be resolved.

Finally, today's hearings are just one element of the Commission's work with respect to India and Pakistan. Obviously, with the limited time that we have available for a public hearing, we can only hear about a very small portion of what's going on inside the two countries and in policy making circles. The Commission is aware that no one group of witnesses can do justice to the complexity of the issues involved and all points of view.

For this reason, we and the staff will be consulting with others in the upcoming months, and we hope to visit India and Pakistan to see the situation firsthand. In addition, we are happy to receive and will consider written submissions.

Just a word about the structure of the day. There will be two panels before lunch and one after. The morning panels will be on the religious freedom situation in India and Pakistan respectively. The afternoon panel will cover U.S. policy with respect to both countries.

Due to the size of the first panel on India, it will be split

into two parts. Each set of presentations will be followed by questions from commissioners. I have to ask that in the interests of time, each presenter keep his testimony to a maximum of 10 minutes. In order to keep things moving along, I will indicate to the witnesses when--or these lights will--when your time has expired. Your full written statements will be made available to the press and will be posted on the Commission's Website.

With that said, I'd like to welcome our distinguished panelists, some of whom have come from South Asia. We look forward to the benefit of your experience and wisdom. Let me welcome Commissioner John Bolton as well; good morning.

Just a very brief introduction of the panelists. Professor Ainsley T. Embree is professor emeritus of history at Columbia University. He taught for 10 years at Agra University in India. He has been director of the Southern Asian Institute at Columbia; served on two occasions in the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi in the late seventies and again in the 1990s and was a founder of the university seminary on modernization and change in South and Southeast Asia.

Professor Arvin Sharma is on the faculty of religious studies at McGill University. He was born in India and educated at Alhabad [ph] University and then the divinity school and then took a Ph.D. at Harvard. He holds the Burke's chair in comparative religion at McGill University.

Mumtaz Ali Khan, who came here from Bangalore, is executive director of the Center for Research and Development of Dalits [ph]. He's a former member of the state planning board; the Senate of Bangalore University. He's chairman of the Muslim Forum for Social Justice and the South Asia Coordinating Council of the International Association for Religious Freedom in Oxford. He serves on its international council and on the executive committee of the International Association for Religious Freedom.

John Dayal is the national convener of the United Christian Forum for Human Rights. He is the national spokesman in India of the All-India Christian Council and national secretary of the All-India Catholic Union and has focused international attention on persecution of the Christian community in India and Pakistan. He is the editor of an afternoon newspaper, the Delhi Mid-Day, and treasurer of the Editors Guild of India.

With that said, I guess we go in the order in which the names appear, and let me ask Professor Embree to lead us off. Welcome.

