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By Elliott Abrams

With the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in October 1998, Congress launched an important experiment in American diplomacy. Could the issue of religious freedom, an orphan in the nation's official human rights effort, be elevated to its proper importance and integrated into the formulation of American foreign policy? As the nation marks International Human Rights Day, the time is ripe for a score card on the administration's efforts to implement this novel initiative.

The law created several mechanisms to promote international religious freedom. It created an Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department headed by an ambassador-at-large. It called for State to issue an annual report on international religious freedom every Sept. 1. It created a palette of actions and sanctions from which the president could choose to challenge egregious religious persecutors. And it created the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to monitor the process and make policy recommendations to the administration and Congress on additional ways to promote religious freedom abroad.

The State Department has done a highly commendable job (with a few exceptions) in its first two annual reports of telling the tragic story of religious freedom around the globe. This year's second report shows a more complete understanding of religious freedom issues and reflects extensive fact-finding and verification.

The problem is in what the State Department and the administration do with the information they have so painstakingly catalogued. The law calls for the president to designate as "countries of particular concern" the most egregious religious persecutors and then to announce which policies he will adopt and which actions he will take in response. In 1999, the administration listed Burma, China, Iran, Iraq and Sudan as countries of particular concern, and named the Milosevic regime in Serbia and the Taliban movement in Afghanistan as additional severe violators.

That was a good start. In July 2000, the Commission wrote to Secretary of State Albright concluding that these seven nations and regimes should be re-listed. In addition, it noted that the severe violations of Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan also clearly meet the standards set forth in the law and recommended adding these nations as countries of particular concern. Sadly, when the secretary announced the 2000 list, it included the same seven violators with no additions. The Commission will continue to press for the inclusion of the other four.

But labeling violators is only the first step. The next is determining the proper U.S. policy responses. Unbeknownst to most people, the seven violators are under IRFA sanctions as countries of particular concern. Most people don't know this because the State Department never mentions it. You may read about sanctions on Sudan for its past support of terrorists; the State Department spokesman has yet to mention that Sudan or China or Iran is also under IRFA sanctions. When the sanctions are announced, State does so in a letter to Congress that is not released to the public. This is a strange way of making a point about religious freedom.

Perhaps the State Department is loath to call attention to the IRFA sanctions because in important cases, such as Sudan and China, they are wholly inadequate and thus ineffective. In our May 1 Annual Report and since, the Commission has outlined a series of proposals to bolster sanctions against these two nations for their egregious violations of religious freedom. (It would have helped if the administration and Congress had held China to some religious freedom standards before granting it Permanent Normal Trade Relations status unconditionally.)

In addition, this year's State Department religious freedom report details a number of countries where conditions have deteriorated, but U.S. policy has not responded. Religious freedom in China has just passed through the worst 18 months since the Cultural Revolution ended: No change in U.S. policy. In Turkmenistan, the State Department concludes religious freedom has worsened, and high-level promises of improvement go unfulfilled: No change in U.S. policy. In France, State's report details disturbing events, including a bill targeting so-called "sects" for dissolution and establishing a new crime of "mental manipulation." No explanation of what the United States is doing to encourage the French to turn back to their best traditions.

Some may say it was too much to expect IRFA's bold diplomatic experiment to bear fruit in just two years. Certainly it's true that improving religious freedom worldwide - or even halting its

alarming decline in many countries - is a long-term process, one that requires careful knowledge of each society as well as skilled diplomatic efforts. But it also requires a level of energy and commitment that will be a real test of the next administration - as it has been of this one.

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