

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has been invited to participate with the U.S. delegation, headed by U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson, to the Brussels meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on September 13 and 14. USCIRF Vice Chair Felice D. Gaer will participate and represent the Commission. The aim of the conference is to promote tolerance and fight racism, xenophobia and discrimination in the 55 countries of the OSCE region.

Commissioner Gaer said, "The Brussels conference represents an excellent opportunity for the U.S. government to participate in a public review of OSCE states' compliance with pledges to uphold freedom of religion and combat discrimination based on religion, belief or other grounds." The USCIRF and the State Department have issued reports detailing violations of OSCE commitments in this important area.

The Commission has urged the U.S. government, in its engagement with the OSCE and OSCE participating states, to advocate specific steps to counter religious intolerance and discrimination, including:

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creation of new positions in the OSCE, to be appointed by the Chairman-in-Office: a Special Representative on Discrimination and Xenophobia and a Special Representative on anti-Semitism;

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regular public review by OSCE states of compliance with their OSCE commitments on freedom of religion and religious discrimination and an active role by non-governmental organizations in that process;

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public condemnation by OSCE governments of attacks against members of any religious or other minority, and prosecution of the perpetrators of such attacks;

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ensuring that efforts to combat terrorism not be used as an unrestrained justification to restrict the rights of members of religious minorities. OSCE states should discontinue excessive regulation of religion, including the use of onerous registration requirements that prevent the members of religious groups from practicing their faith or belief.

In the OSCE region, the Commission has expressed strong and continued concern regarding particularly severe violations of freedom of religion in Turkmenistan, repeatedly recommending that the U.S. government designate it a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Commission has also placed Belarus, Georgia, and Uzbekistan on its Watch List of countries where religious freedom merits on-going scrutiny. This is the seventh OSCE delegation with which the USCIRF has participated.