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WASHINGTON-Felice D. Gaer, Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, and Vice Chair Michael Cromartie marked the tenth anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) this week. Gaer and Cromartie served as official members of the U.S. delegation to the meeting, which was held in Warsaw, Poland, and closed on Friday.

"IRFA sparked an increased recognition among U.S. policymakers of the importance of religious freedom to people around the world," Gaer said. "This new emphasis was felt among religious freedom advocates throughout the world, many of whom are struggling under oppressive conditions, including some whom Commission delegations have met in their prison cells or under house arrest."

Cromartie noted that "ten years after the adoption of IRFA, the Commission has concluded that promoting religious freedom has proved to be more vital than ever to the political and humanitarian interests of the United States, as well as to national and global security, including in the OSCE region.... The Commission calls on all OSCE states to continually strengthen the protection of this freedom."

Cromartie and Gaer distributed Commission reports and other materials and focused in their statements on the Commission's ongoing concerns in:

- Uzbekistan, where the government continues to arrest Muslims, harshly repress religious groups, and close mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed practices or that it alleges to be associated with extremist political programs;
- Russia, where government policies do not effectively combat xenophobia, religious intolerance and hate crimes, including those motivated by hostility to diverse religions or beliefs; and
- Turkmenistan, where significant religious freedom problems and official harassment continue close to two years after the death of longtime dictator Saparmurat Niyazov.

Gaer and Cromartie consulted widely with government representatives, OSCE staff, and non-governmental organizations attending the annual meeting, which is Europe's largest human rights conference and the most important human rights event of the year for the 56-state OSCE. Its purpose is to examine implementation of the human rights commitments in OSCE's founding document, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, and other, subsequent commitments.

Both stressed the Commission's recommendations that the U.S. government needs to fully support the OSCE and that religious freedom and tolerance should be promoted through various OSCE institutional mechanisms, including the Panel of Experts on Religion and Belief and the three Personal Tolerance Representatives.

For a full list of Commission recommendations concerning the OSCE, see the OSCE chapter in the 2008 Annual Report (http://www.uscirf.gov/images/AR2008/annual%20report%202008-final%20edition.pdf) .