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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the release of the Obama administration's second International Religious Freedom Report and urges increased U.S. government action to promote freedom of religion or belief.

"The State Department's international religious freedom report released Wednesday details the multitude of religious freedom abuses occurring around the world. Many of their findings mirror our own – serious religious freedom abuses continue to occur around the world with impunity," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "So what's next? Actions speak louder than words. We urge the State Department to act decisively and promptly designate 'countries of particular concern' – something the Obama administration has yet to do. We also urge the State Department to follow up those designations with vigorous U.S. diplomatic activity to seek improvements with respect to this fundamental human right."

"Despite our call for new policies, USCIRF commends the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom for its efforts in comprehensively surveying the situation of religious freedom around the globe and we look forward to the confirmation of the Ambassador-at-Large," said Mr. Leo.

"In addition, we welcome the Secretary's strong language stressing all facets of religious freedom and are heartened that the Administration has reinforced the scope of its commitment by calling attention to the broad array of rights and guarantees captured by the phrase 'freedom of religion.' Earlier this year, USCIRF noted a possible shift in administration terminology away from 'freedom of religion' to the narrower 'freedom of worship.' We are pleased to see a return to the broader 'religious freedom' rubric in statements by Secretary Clinton and President Obama," Mr. Leo said.

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) requires the State Department to undertake an annual review of every country to "determine whether the government of that country has engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom." Any

country meeting that threshold is to be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, and the U.S. government is required to take action to encourage improvements in each CPC country. IRFA provides a range of possibilities for such action, from bilateral agreements to sanctions. The Obama administration has yet to designate any CPCs, and the actions stipulated under the Bush administration’s last designations will expire in January 2011.

USCIRF has recommended that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton redesignate Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, People’s Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan as CPCs, and that stronger actions be taken against their governments. In addition, USCIRF has concluded that five other countries meet the CPC statutory threshold: Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

Key recommendations for U.S. policies to be undertaken in response include:

Iraq: As tragically demonstrated by the recent upsurge in violent acts of terror against Christians in Iraq, the country’s smallest religious minorities—including Christians, Mandaeans, and Yazidis—face an existential threat. The U.S. and Iraqi governments must work together to develop and implement a comprehensive security plan at places of worship and other sites where these vulnerable communities congregate.

Saudi Arabia: Since its 2004 CPC designation, Saudi Arabia has failed to enact substantial reforms in spite of ongoing bilateral discussions with the United States. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government lift the existing indefinite waiver of action by extending a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should be pressed to complete reforms on textbooks and to rein in the religious police, holding them accountable for abuses.

China: The People’s Republic of China is among the world’s worst violators of religious freedom, despite statements by officials regarding religion’s importance in social development. Promoting religious freedom in China is a vital U.S. interest that should be integrated into discussions with President Hu in January and particularly within high-level discussions, including the Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

Vietnam: The government of Vietnam continues its systematic and egregious violation of freedom of religion and belief. There continue to be arrests and beatings of religious leaders; forced closure of pagodas, churches, and religious meetings; violence directed at Buddhist communities; and arrests and a beating death experienced by the Catholic community of Con Dau. USCIRF has concluded that these facts meet the CPC threshold and recommends that the United States designate Vietnam again.

Pakistan: Religiously discriminatory legislation, such as blasphemy laws and the recent death sentence of a Christian woman for blasphemy, as well as the anti-Ahmadi provisions in the constitution, foster an atmosphere of intolerance. Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence is chronic, as witnessed with the ongoing bombings of mosques and Islamic shrines. The United States should designate Pakistan a CPC, so it can effectively press Islamabad to address these issues and take steps to protect both majority and minority religious communities from violence.

Iran: High-level U.S. government officials should increase their calls for the release of members of religious minority communities currently in prison, particularly Baha'is, Christians, and Sufi Muslims, as well as dissident Shi'a Muslim clerics. The U.S. government should also press the European Union to impose sanctions on Iranian officials for human rights violations, similar to the U.S. travel bans and asset freezes imposed on Iranian officials responsible for abuses after the disputed June 2009 presidential elections. The United States should go further and impose sanctions on Iranian officials responsible for religious freedom violations prior to the 2009 elections.

Nigeria: The government of Nigeria continues to respond inadequately and ineffectively to recurrent communal and sectarian violence. USCIRF recommends that Nigeria be designated a CPC and that breaking the culture of impunity be made a top bilateral issue. U.S. efforts should focus on prosecutions of perpetrators of sectarian violence and pressing for increased security to help prevent violence in connection with the upcoming presidential election.

Russia: Freedom of religion or belief should become a key issue in U.S.-Russia bilateral

relations, and the U.S. should press Russia to reform its overly broad law on extremism and ensure that it not be used against non-violent religious communities and human rights groups.

Uzbekistan: The Uzbek government arrests Muslims and represses individuals, groups, mosques, and churches that do not conform to officially approved practices or that allegedly are linked to extremist groups. As a result, thousands are imprisoned, denied due process, and subjected to torture. The State Department should again designate Uzbekistan as a CPC, but without a waiver. Sanctions should also be imposed, including a visa ban for Uzbek officials and an end to U.S. security assistance to agencies responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

USCIRF's own assessments and recommendations can be found in our 2010 Annual Report, available [here](#) .

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress.

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