

**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

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FELICE GAER: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name's Felice Gaer and I'm the chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Today, the commission will release its 2009 Annual Report on religious freedom violations in the world. The commission, as you, I'm sure, know, is a bipartisan, federal independent U.S. government commission that monitors violations of the right to freedom of religion and belief abroad and gives independent policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and the Congress.

Today, I am joined by my fellow commissioners, Vice Chairs Elizabeth Prodromou, Michael Cromartie, as well as Commissioners Talal Eid, Richard Land, Leonard Leo, who is coming in just as I'm speaking, Nina Shea and Donald Argue could not join us today. The commission began working in May, 1999. And during the past 10 years, the commission has strived to place religious freedom at the forefront of the U.S. human rights agenda. The annual report that we're issuing today is a key component of those efforts. It covers the period May, 2008 through April, 2009.

We are issuing this report at a critical time. With Taliban-associated extremists advancing to within 60 miles of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad last week, the relevance of our work is crystal clear. In fact, a key focus of the commission during this reporting period is the threat that religious extremism poses to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief worldwide, and to global and regional security. Three of the commission's four public hearings this year examined this issue by looking at policy towards Sudan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. While Pakistani leaders have acquiesced to the rule of Taliban-associated extremists in some regions, members of civil society have courageously objected.

Now, the front cover of this report features Pakistani women standing up to protest against these violent extremist groups. Their signs are written in Urdu, and they protest religious fanaticism and the systematic destruction of girls' schools, 150 of which reportedly have been demolished already. The commission has documented how the rise of extremism leads to human rights abuses.

The commission is tasked by law to conduct a review of the facts and circumstances regarding violations of religious freedom around the world, and to make recommendations to the president and the secretary of state about the countries that we conclude should be designated as countries of particular concern. That is a term in the law. We call them CPCs for short. These are countries that have severe, egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom and meet the statutory standards.

Now for the commission's conclusions. This year, the commission is recommending that 13 countries be designated as countries of particular concern. They are: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Iraq and Nigeria are new to that list. Iraq was added last December and Nigeria, today. The commission has also established a watch list of countries where the conditions don't rise to the statutory level requiring designation as a country of particular concern, but which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief that is engaged in by governments or tolerated by governments.

U.S. policy-makers should not ignore developments in these countries. If negative trend lines continue, further repression and human rights abuses are likely to occur. The commission's watch list this year is composed of 11 countries. Six of these are new. The countries are Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Venezuela. The last six were the new ones: Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Venezuela.

Between the country of particular concern list and the watch list, the commission is naming seven new countries, in total, to its lists of nations severely violating religious freedom. The commission is also concerned that after more than 10 years, the State Department has not implemented – or it has underutilized – key provisions of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which created this commission and the related activity. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have not yet adequately utilized the important components of this legislation.

They've named, currently, only eight countries last year. And in the 10 years that the act has existed, there aren't more than 10 or 12 countries that have been so designated. Of the eight designated last January, in the waning days of the last administration, only one was given a special sanction. That was Eritrea. Two others were given waivers that preclude any U.S. government action. Those were Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

The commission hopes that the new administration will take a new approach to presidential actions under the International Religious Freedom Act, ending the practice of relying on preexisting – already existing – sanctions that do not address specific religious freedom abuses. Today, the members of the commission will provide a brief overview of selected countries. First to speak will be Michael Cromartie, our vice chair, who will speak about Vietnam, a CPC country, and Bangladesh, a country that used to be on the watch list. Michael?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you, Madame Chair. Yes, well, first of all, some good news: We're pleased to report a positive development in Bangladesh. The commission has decided to move Bangladesh off its watch list because the Bangladeshi national elections held during this reporting period notably lacked the anti-minority violence that characterized the previous national elections in 2001, and it allowed for minorities to exercise their voting rights. In addition, the commission is encouraged by positive statements made by the prime minister promising protection of religious freedom and expression and equal treatment for members of

religious minorities and the repeal of discriminatory laws and regulations.

The commission will continue to follow the situation closely to see whether these promises are actually kept, and we encourage the new government to follow its stated intentions with concrete actions. This could include the repeal of the vested property act and the restoration or compensation of property seized, the rescinding of the 2004 order banning the Ahmadi publications, enforcement of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord and creating and supporting the promised national human rights commission. We also note that Bangladesh has suffered in the past from violence by Islamic extremists and that we shall continue to monitor carefully the threat of religiously motivated extremism in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the region.

Now secondly, the commission continues, however, to recommend that Vietnam be re-designated as a CPC. Vietnam engaged with the United States after being designated a CPC between the years 2004 and 2006, leading to some positive developments for religious communities and the release of many prisoners of concern. The commission also urges the Obama administration to view the CPC designation as a flexible tool that can produce serious diplomatic engagement and measurable improvements without hampering other areas in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship.

The commission believes that the CPC designation is warranted because of the many serious abuses and restrictions of religious freedom in Vietnam. Individuals continue to be imprisoned or detained for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, police and government officials are not held fully accountable for their abuses, including beating deaths and the disappearance of religious leaders and independent religious activity remains illegal and legal protections for religious groups and human rights defenders are both vague and arbitrarily interpreted.

In addition, over the past year, peaceful prayer vigils held by Catholics in Hanoi have led to arrests, to threats and to beatings. The commission plans to visit Vietnam in less than two weeks from now, and we will report back to the White House, the State Department and Congress our findings on that trip. We are seeking to engage with high-level government officials, religious leaders and others on the ways to continue religious freedom progress in Vietnam and address the remaining problems. When the commission last traveled to Vietnam, in October, 2007, we were given access to high-level government and provincial officials and to religious prisoners and their families and other dissidents, and we are seeking similar meetings and engagement for our upcoming trip to Vietnam. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you, Michael. The next speaker will be Commissioner Richard Land, who will address the commission's concerns regarding Iran and Cuba. Richard?

RICHARD LAND: Thank you. In Iran, government rhetoric and actions worsened conditions for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for the Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians and members of the Jewish community. The commission has decided to designate Iran as a country of particular concern again because the situation has

worsened. The commission urges the U.S. government to call for the release of all imprisoned Baha'is, including seven Baha'i leaders who have been in prison for a year on baseless espionage charges and all Christian converts from Islam who remain in prison.

In addition, in September of 2008, the Iranian government launched an effort to institute a penal code that, for the first time, would legally enshrine the death penalty for apostasy. If the proposed penal code is approved in parliament, members of many religious minority communities could be subject to death sentences. This proposed penal code should be rescinded. As in the past, some Sunni and dissident Shia Muslim leaders continue to face imprisonment, harassment and discrimination by Iranian authorities. The commission urges the U.S. government to call for the release of Muslim minorities and dissidents, including those Sufi Muslims imprisoned, as well as Ayatollah Boroujerdi, a senior Shia cleric who advocates the separation of religion and state.

The commission has again named Cuba to the watch list. Because of reports of small improvements in religious freedom, the commission tried to visit the island last month, however, the Cuban government did not grant visas before our departure date and offered no alternative time. This decision was unfortunate, as with the warming of relations, a visit to Cuba would have given the commission a better picture of religious freedom conditions in the country. And the commission is still open to visiting. The commission continues to receive reports of religious belief and practice being tightly controlled in Cuba.

For instance, the government expanded its efforts to silence critics of religious freedom policies and cracked down on religious leaders whose churches operate outside of the government-recognized umbrella organization for Protestant denominations. Despite recent talk of improving human rights, President Raul Castro and the government have yet to indicate plans for large-scale improvements in freedom of religion. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you, Richard. Commissioner Talal Eid will now speak about the commission concerns on Venezuela, and he'll also have something to say about India.

TALAL EID: Thanks, Madame Chair. Good morning. I'll speak first on Venezuela. And Venezuela is another new addition to the commission watch list. Since Hugo Chavez became president in 1998, there has been a steady increase in government rhetoric, and in some cases, government actions against the Venezuelan Jewish and Catholic communities, and the Protestant groups with ties to co-religionists in the U.S. While there are no official restrictions on religious practice, actions by President Chavez and other government officials have created an environment where Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are at risk of attack.

Furthermore, the Venezuelan government has failed to take adequate measures to hold perpetrators accountable for attacks on Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions. Anti-Semitic statements by government officials and state media have created a hostile environment where some Venezuelan citizens have harassed and threatened – (inaudible) – vandalized Jewish businesses with anti-Semitic slogans and have called for a boycott of all

Jewish businesses in Venezuela. In February, 2009, the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas was vandalized. These attacks have caused tremendous apprehension in the Venezuelan Jewish community.

On Somalia, the commission placed Somalia on its watch list for the first time this year. And this is the first time the commission has reported on Somalia. In the absence of the rule of law, freedom of religion or belief, like all other human rights in Somalia, is circumscribed by insurgents, warlords, self-appointed officials, local authorities and prevailing social attitudes. Non-Muslims, Christian converts and non-confirming Muslims have been attacked and killed nationwide. Radical interpretations of Islam are increasingly manifested.

Throughout 2008, al-Shabab, a militia with ties to al-Qaeda and designated a foreign terrorist organization by the United States, increased control over central and southern parts of the country. Al-Shabab continues to control large parts of the country and fight an African Union peacekeeping force and a new government. The commission concludes that the transitional federal government provides an opportunity for Somalia to address security, governance, human rights needs and violent religious extremism. And so the U.S. government should work with the international community to assist the TFG – that is the transitional federal government – as it moves forward to address the needs of the country and the citizens.

Concerning India, the commission is not releasing its chapter today. The commission is planning to travel to India next month for the first time, which will give us the opportunity to gain perspective on the government's response to communal violence that occurred in Orissa, Gujarat and elsewhere, as well as the ways in which India, the world's largest democracy, endeavors to respect and to promote religious freedom. The commission looks forward to meeting with senior Indian government officials, representatives of India's diverse religious communities and members of civil society. Therefore, the commission will release the chapter on India during this summer. If, for any reason, the travel does not occur, we will move ahead and release the chapter. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you, Commissioner Eid. The next speaker will be Commissioner Leonard Leo, who will discuss the commission's concerns and visits to Sudan and Nigeria. Leonard?

LEONARD LEO: Thank you, Madame Chairman, and good morning. Under the International Religious Freedom Act, there are two reasons to designate a country as a CPC – a country of particular concern. One is when a country is perpetrating severe, egregious or ongoing abuse of the freedom of religion or belief and the other is when the country tolerates such abuse of the freedom of religion or belief. Now, Nigeria has been on the commission's watch list for seven years, but for the first time, after traveling to the country in March and April of this year, the commission has decided to designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern.

This is based on our findings, which you can find in the annual report, that the government has tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom and

belief. There have been years of inaction by the Nigerian government to bring the perpetrators of religious violence to justice, several hundred to 3,000 deaths in the city of Jos last year, numerous killings in Kaduna, Kano, Yelwa, over 10,000 people – at least 10,000 people – displaced over the past several years, all because of sectarian and communal violence.

The government has allowed these killings, as well as other violence and destruction of churches and mosques to occur with impunity, which is ample grounds for designating a country as a country of particular concern. There have been no serious efforts to prosecute or investigate this sectarian violence and destruction. During our trip, we learned that there were a number of instances where the government of Nigeria failed to heed the warning signs of sectarian and communal violence, and where police failed to effectively respond to such violence with adequate notice and warning.

So we have, as a commission, decided to designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern. Our annual report contains a number of recommendations, including the United States – recommending that the United States and Nigeria enter into a binding agreement that would obligate the government to cease or take substantial steps to address policies leading to the violations of religious freedom. Our recommendations set forth a number of benchmarks for that agreement, including efforts to more vigorously investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of sectarian and communal violence.

With regard to the Sudan, the government of the Sudan continues to commit severe and egregious and systematic violations of the freedom of religion or belief in the areas under its control, particularly against Christians, Muslims who don't follow the government's extreme interpretation of Islam as well as followers of other traditional African religions. The commission has traveled to the Sudan three times, most recently to the southern part of the country last October. And when we were there, we found that there were real risks that the comprehensive peace agreement that was entered into to bring an end to the 22-year-long North-South civil war, might not be implemented.

And it is the commission's view that the inability or failure to implement the CPA places a serious threat on the freedom of religion and belief in the Sudan. We also found that, with regard to Darfur, that security forces and various militias and rebel groups have engaged in serious human rights abuses. We have made quite a number of recommendations in the annual report, which you can take a look at for yourselves.

Some of those include strengthening human rights protections by strengthening or building various elements of Sudan's infrastructure – its political and government infrastructure – for example, the establishment of an independent and impartial human rights commission, as well as trying to undertake other efforts, including building a successful indigenous economy in the southern states and providing various forms of U.S. aid and assistance to enhance the rule of law as well as human rights protections. Thank you very much, Madame Chairman.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much, Leonard. It's not my pleasure to introduce the

commission's vice chair, Elizabeth Prodromou, who is going to speak about the commission's concerns regarding Pakistan and Turkey. Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: Good morning. Regarding Pakistan, since 2002, our commission has recommended that Pakistan be named a CPC in light of a number – a whole range – of serious religious freedom concerns. The State Department, however, has not followed the recommendation of the commission. Today, as our chair mentioned in her introductory remarks, the threat to freedom of religion or belief in Pakistan has measurably increased and demonstrably increased. And therefore, we renew our recommendation that Pakistan be named a CPC country.

This year has seen the largely unchecked growth in the power and the reach of Taliban-associated extremist groups, whose members are engaged in violence both within Pakistan and abroad. And Pakistan's central government in Islamabad has ceded effective control of more and more of the country to these Taliban-associated extremist groups, notably of course in the Swat Valley and its neighboring districts.

At the same time, sectarian and religiously motivated violence continues apace. Particularly acute are violations against Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs. Pakistanis have repeatedly been murdered while engaging in religious worship. Government officials do not provide adequate protection to members of religious minority communities. And perpetrators of violence against those communities are seldom brought to justice, reflecting problems with the judicial system and the policing system. Now Ahmadis, who number approximately three to four million in Pakistan, are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith.

They also face criminal penalties for a wide range of practices that are common to Muslims in Pakistan. They're subject to societal violence as well, and the police often refuse, or they're intimidated into refusing to provide assistance to the Ahmadi community. Laws against blasphemy – these include criminal punishments – oftentimes and frequently result in gross religious freedom and other human rights violations in Pakistan. Blasphemy allegations, which are oftentimes false, result in the lengthy detention of – and sometimes, violence against – those who are apprehended. And this includes Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus and Muslims alike.

The accused oftentimes spend years in prison before they're sentenced, and those acquitted typically have gone into hiding. Sometimes, they even go into exile out of fear of extremist violence against them. So clearly, we see here a connection between violations of religious freedom and problems with the police system and the judicial system. Now, because allegations can be made with no evidence, the laws are easily used by extremists and they're used to intimidate members of religious minorities and others with whom these extremists disagree.

As we've seen in the areas that have fallen under religious extremist control, this threat also extends to Pakistan's women and girls. Pakistani women and girls are denied equal protection under the law. They're denied access, oftentimes, to education and to a range of other

rights, in those spaces in particular that are controlled by Taliban-associated extremists. Despite some minor improvements, for example, in the Hudood Ordinances – these are Islamic decrees that are enforced alongside the country’s secular legal system – there are still harshly mandated punishments that extend mainly to women for violations of Islamic law.

Under these Hudood Ordinances, as well as the way in which they’re playing themselves out in the civil system – the non-Sharia court system – rape victims, for example, run a particularly high risk of being charged with adultery and then of receiving a criminal punishment. Finally, in closing on Pakistan, it’s important to point out that the government of Pakistan has moved to internationalize practices that make religious freedom and democratic rights and principles limited. They have moved to internationalize their practices by promoting measures at the U.N. in the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council to halt the so-called defamation of religions. And this would clearly violate the right of religious freedom and expression.

Now moving to Turkey, the commission, for the first time, has named Turkey to its watch list countries due to ongoing religious freedom violations against many of Turkey’s citizens, including members of the majority Muslim community and especially for the country’s various minority religious communities. Turkey has a democratic government and a strong tradition of secularism – that’s defined as the exclusion of religion from public life. In fact, however, the interpretation of secularism has resulted in many violations of religious freedom.

And these are linked, as well, to limits on human rights, such as the right to education and freedom of expression. Now by way of background, the commission traveled to Turkey in November, 2006, and we met with Turkish government officials, as well as parliamentarians and political leaders. And we also met with leaders of diverse religious communities and civil-society activists. Throughout our trip in Turkey, people of almost every religious tradition stated that despite some serious problems, that they were largely free to gather and worship as provided in the country’s constitution.

We also heard, of course, that conditions for religious freedom have improved in the past decade in Turkey, particularly due to reforms that had been undertaken by Ankara during the EU accession process. However at the same time, we heard, as I mentioned earlier, about serious problems, particularly as these relate to the country’s Alawi minority community, as well as non-Muslim minorities, including Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, Catholics and Protestants regarding the opening, maintaining and operation of houses of worship.

Now, it’s the deterioration in these conditions in particular, as well as limitations on religious freedom of the Sunni Muslim majority, that have prompted the commission to name Turkey to its watch list this year. And the commission is not alone in our assessment: A 2008 European Union report stated that “Turkey needs to make further efforts to create an environment conducive to full respect for freedom of religion in practice.” So examples are instructive: In February, 2008, the Turkish parliament passed amendments to the constitution removing the long-standing ban on wearing headscarves – the turban – on university campuses.

However in June, 2008, the constitutional court held that these amendments violated the secular nature of the Turkish state and therefore, were unconstitutional. And the amendments were not implemented. As a consequence, women are forced to choose between the right to wear the turban or the right to education. Also instructive is the condition of the country's Alawi community. There are between 12 to 20 million Alawis in Turkey, and there are violations on their religious rights – their rights to religious freedom – due to their exclusion from the educational curriculum and also the ongoing denial of their right to opt out of religious instruction.

There are significant restrictions on religious freedom for religious minority communities – non-Muslim minority communities as well – including state policies and actions that deny those communities the rights to own, maintain, transfer property, as well as to operate independently in terms of their religious structures – to train their religious clergy, for example, and to offer a religious education. These problems are particularly acute for the country's Greek Orthodox minority with regard to the ecumenical patriarchy. The commission also notes a rise in anti-Semitism in Turkey, and also episodes of violence against religious minorities, including Protestants and Catholics.

As a consequence, the commission urges the U.S. government to explore cooperation with Turkish authorities on ways to allow women the freedom to express their religious or non-religious views through dress so as to respect their beliefs, as well secular status of the Turkish republic, while ensuring a lack of coercion for those who choose not to wear the headscarves.

The commission also encourages the European Union to raise the headscarf ban with the Turkish government. The commission urges the U.S. government to press Prime Minister Erdogan to follow-up on his January, 2008, statement regarding the status of the ecumenical patriarch, and the commission urges the Erdogan follow up on his position that this is an internal church matter, and therefore, grant official legal recognition to the ecumenical status of the patriarch.

And finally, the commission urges that all religious minorities be free to select and train their religious clergy – for example, by reopening the Halki seminary under the control of the ecumenical patriarch, and also that the process to regain clear title or fair compensation for expropriated properties be expanded to include properties sold to third parties or also, properties that are currently held, following expropriation by the Turkish state. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. Now it's my pleasure to introduce Commissioner Nina Shea. Commissioner Shea has served as a commissioner since the International Religious Freedom Act was adopted and the commission was created. She is the only original commissioner. I want to salute her – both the conviction and the time expenditure and the commitment to these issues that she's brought. And she's going to talk about the commission's concerns on two countries: Iraq and Egypt. Nina?

NINA SHEA: Thank you, Felice. That doesn't make me the oldest commissioner,

though. (Laughter.) Thank you, Madame Chair. Two-thousand and nine (2009) is a crucial year in Iraq, with provincial councils changing hands, national elections expected before year's end, and the U.S. military beginning its drawdown. In December, an extensive report on religious freedoms in Iraq, based on travel, interviews, briefings, meetings and other activities was released by the commission, and we recommended then that, for the first time since 2003, that the State Department designate Iraq as a country of particular concern.

This CPC recommendation was based on the ongoing severe abuses of religious freedom in the country and the government's toleration of these abuses, particularly against Iraq's smallest and most vulnerable religious minorities, including Chaldo-Assyrians and other Christians, Sabeen-Mandean and Yazidis. As described in this year's annual report, the concerns outlined by the commission in December persist as these vulnerable minorities have, in recent years, experienced targeted intimidation and violence, including killings, beatings, abductions and rapes, forced conversions, forced marriages, forced displacement from their homes and businesses and violent attacks on their houses of worship and religious leaders.

Despite the overall drop in violence in the country, these incidents continued in 2008 and 2009, including in this month. The cumulative effect of this has created a serious threat to these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq. And the statistics are staggering. About half the Christian population have left the country or been killed – and that's starting from a total of 1.4 million. And 90 percent of the Mandaean community report that they have left or been killed. This jeopardizes Iraq's future as a pluralistic, diverse and free society.

In addition, the commission is concerned about the continued attacks and tense relations between Shia and Sunni Iraqis, as well as other continued, egregious, religiously motivated report on page 54, where we have extensive recommendations on Iraq. The commission urges the U.S. government to take a number of specific steps to ensure, inter alia, the prevention of abuses against religious minorities is a top priority. We call for the training and deployment of police for these vulnerable minorities, that the KRG uphold minority rights in their area and that the situation of internally displaced persons and refugees is effectively addressed.

I want to go on to Egypt, where serious problems of discrimination, intolerance and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as non-conforming Muslims, remained widespread. And for these reasons, we continue to place Egypt on our watch list. Regarding our reference to non-conforming Muslims, I want to point out that there is, essentially, anti-blasphemy laws in Egypt's penal codes, under which Quranists – those who accept only the Quran as their sacred document – are punished and harassed and arrested. Bloggers, such as Karim Suleiman, have also been arrested and punished for blasphemy – he's now serving a four-year term in prison for blasphemy.

And despite some increased public space to discuss religious freedom issues, as well as some positive but limited judicial rulings, serious religious freedom violations continue to affect Coptic Orthodox Christians, Jews and Baha'is, as well as members of the minority Muslim communities. The government has not taken sufficient steps to halt the repression of and

discrimination against believers, or in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence. The government also has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled press.

Converts to Christianity have been tortured, harassed and abused. All Christians in Egypt are required to obtain permits to build churches. These are often backlogged. We've documented – and the State Department has documented – about 100 permits that have been long-pending – some five years. The discrimination is very acute with Christians being – just a handful of Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. There is one Christian governor out of 28, one elected member of parliament out of 454, no known university presidents or deans and very few legislators or judges.

According to the State Department, public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers exclude non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Quran, and so forth and so on. So because human rights reforms in Egypt have been very limited over the past years, the commission continues to recommend that the U.S. government should establish a timetable for implementation of such reforms. If deadlines are not met, the U.S. government should reconsider the appropriate allocation of its assistance to the Egyptian government. And the rest of our recommendations, in detail, can be found on page 170 of our annual report. Thank you very much.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much, Nina. Well, allow me to speak about a couple of remaining countries, China for one. Last year was not a good year for religious freedom in China. In fact, there was a marked deterioration in the treatment of freedom of thought, conscience and religion in China, particularly with regard to Tibetan Buddhists. The Olympics showcased China's growth and its power to the world, but Beijing also used that power to quell dissent, to arrest dissidents and to place severe, new restrictions on the peaceful religious activities of Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims.

Conditions in Tibet now are worse than at any time since the commission was created. Hundreds remain disappeared or unaccounted for. Many more details are in the annual report. As for Protestants in China, while we welcome the release of Pastor Liu Yan Qi (sp) earlier this week, more unregistered Protestant adherents in China were arrested in the past year than the year before. Unregistered Catholic priests and bishops continue to be arrested and detained. And there has been a stepped-up campaign to completely stamp out the spiritual movement Falun Gong. We understand there were thousands of arrests and detentions – even deaths in custody are reported. And the creation of detention facilities specifically for Falun Gong practitioners has also been claimed.

Now, the commission wrote Secretary Clinton before her February trip to Asia. We urged her to speak about the importance of religious freedom in the U.S.-China relationship. The commission again appeals and urges the Obama administration, as it reviews its various approaches to foreign policy, human rights policy and freedom of religion policy, to include religious freedom concerns in discussions at the highest level. We urge the United States to

signal clearly and repeatedly that human rights are a vital part of the U.S.-China relationship. The commission also urges the administration to take a presidential action that targets state agencies or actors who actually perpetuate religious freedom abuses, whether in provinces or localities where religious freedom conditions are most egregious, or elsewhere.

The commission also remains concerned about the poor status of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, despite some limited reforms initiated by King Abdullah during the reporting period. The commission has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC for some time. The State Department has done so since 2004. But the State Department has maintained a waiver on taking any specific action or sanction regarding Saudi Arabia since 2005. The commission thinks it's time for that to end. The Saudi government interferes with private religious practice, it bans all forms of public religious expression, other than its own interpretation of a particular school of Sunni Islam.

The commission has recently noted an increased crackdown, as well, with arrests and detention of Shia Muslim dissidents, and the government of Saudi Arabia continues to jail many Ismaili Muslims on account of their religion or belief. The commission urges the U.S. government to call for the release of all Shia and Ismaili religious prisoners in Saudi Arabia, including Hadi al-Mutaif, an Ismaili Muslim who's been jailed for nearly 15 years on blasphemy charges, statements he made while a teenager.

Moreover, the commission is concerned that promises and commitments confirmed to the United States in 2006 continue to remain unfulfilled in Saudi Arabia. The anticipated reform of Saudi school textbooks appears to be incomplete. Reports indicate the material that incites violence and fuels extreme religious intolerance remains. The government continues to be involved in supporting activities globally that promote an extremist ideology, and in some cases, violence against non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. Because of these concerns and the lack of sufficient progress by the Saudi government to implement those 2006 confirmed policies, the commission believes it is time for the State Department to take concrete action and end the waiver on Saudi Arabia.

Lastly, I'll speak on Russia – the Russian Federation. The commission has closely monitored Russia over its entire 10-year history. And the commission has been concerned about what can be done to improve freedom of religion in Russia during this period of time. We have now decided to place Russia on the watch list. We are concerned about a deterioration in the status of freedom of religion or belief throughout the country. The reasons for our decision include various official policies with negative effects on religious freedom and other related human rights. The commission is particularly concerned about a new body in the Russian ministry of justice, set up in 2009, which has unprecedented powers to control and monitor religious groups.

This so-called “expert religious studies council” can investigate religious organizations, including their activities and their literature, for a broad array of reasons, one of which is so-called extremism. The commission is concerned about the composition of the new council. It is

chaired by China's most prominent anti-cult activist. The commission has recommended that this new council be dissolved. And there's more in the report, but we're coming to the end of a long presentation.

In its 10 years, the commission has been an articulate advocate on ways to improve U.S. foreign policy on issue of religious freedom and related human rights. The commission has also raised concerns and highlighted a number of problematic global trends, such as the spread of restrictive religious laws in countries of the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, the promotion of the pernicious defamation of religions concept at the United Nations, which you already heard about, and limitations on religious freedom throughout significant portions of Asia.

While much has been accomplished in the past decade, the commission still has a great deal to accomplish. So, too, does United States policy regarding freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. As difficult as the struggle for freedom of religion and belief is, the commission will not give up, and it will not forget those who suffer because of who they are or what they believe. We will not turn a blind eye to governments that repress the freedoms of their citizens. The promise of religious freedom is guaranteed in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

It was a promise established long before that. It's 61 years since that universal declaration. It's 10 years since the commission was founded. We thank you for your interest. We look forward to answering your questions. The floor is now open. Would you be kind enough – and I should have said this at the outset – if you haven't turned off your cell phones, to do so now, although, kindly, no one's have rung. Would you be kind enough to identify yourself before your question and wait for the microphone before you begin? Yes, the gentlemen right here.

Q: Thank you. I'm from KBS – Korean Broadcasting System. According to today's report, you also have designated North Korea as the CPC, but you don't have any mention about that, so I want to hear from you about the pressure and your policy recommendations to the U.S. government on North Korea.

MS. GAER: Well, sure, briefly, it is one of the CPC countries that we have designated and we could say something about that. Michael Cromartie, would you like to say a few words about what we've said on North Korea? You want to take a minute to do that and then we'll take another question in the meantime? We tried to highlight new countries and places where we had new information first. Yes, ma'am?

Q: I'm Penny Starr with CNS News. I'm curious about why there's a distinction on the State Department's list and the commission's list. What – how do these countries that you've named CPCs – why are they not – I mean, what is the procedure to make them recognized by the State Department? Also, I wondered, to follow up just quickly, on the watch list, what's the threshold that countries have to pass, say Afghanistan in particular, to go from watch to a CPC? Is it numbers? Is it visits? I'm just wondering about these distinctions. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you. Michael, are you ready to say a few words on North Korea, and then we'll take your question.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yes, the only thing to be said about North Korea is it's the worst violator of religious freedom rights of any country in the world. And it's not improved at all and it's gotten worse. The violation of religious freedom in North Korea doesn't just involve beatings or imprisonment; it involves brutality, discrimination – even execution. North Koreans who flee North Korea to go to China who are then sent back to North Korea face severe, severe punishment, oftentimes leading, again, to execution. So North Korea is not one where we have any debate or dispute among the commissioners. It is the worst violator of human rights and religious freedom in the world and it remains a CPC.

MS. GAER: A word about the process: You know, the commission has a mandate, independent of the State Department and the executive branch, to monitor and analyze and critique policies related to religious freedom in each country, and to identify and to recommend to the administration those countries that should be designated CPCs under the Religious Freedom Act. Now, the administration has the obligation to consider and to review our recommendations; it does not have to do anything more than review them. It makes an independent determination of its own.

There have been differences over the years, and we can speculate on a variety of factors that have led to that. But what we have found is, in the past, when we have recommended a country, the administration has sometimes followed. At the very beginning, the administration first named Burma and the commission didn't, but for – I'm giving you – it's worked both ways: They've identified countries that we haven't identified, but we identified Vietnam and North Korea and Saudi Arabia and they didn't. But they have followed on all of those. We identified Eritrea – same thing, the administration followed.

Sometimes it takes a little bit of time to get people to begin to recognize how serious a situation is; sometimes, there's private diplomacy going on that people are trying to work things out and they discover that, actually, there is no "there" there – there is no improvement taking place – and in situations like that, the State Department officials who have been designated by the president to carry out the designations have – they've decided to name the countries as well. So it's a fluid process, but that's what's special about the commission; we're independent and we're something of a gadfly. Yes?

Q: Joe Lucani (ph) with King's College in New York City. With regards to Iraq, not only the persecution of Christians, but other religious minorities there, does the commission feel that there's a problem with the constitution of Iraq – that there's a failure to offer equal protection under the law among religious minorities? And if so, is there a particular, specific, then, recommendation you'd have about what could change in the Iraqi constitution to help change that situation on the ground?

MS. GAER: I'll take one more question and then we'll answer the two. We'll do it in groups of two. Yes, sir?

Q: My name is Sidar Aguba (ph). I work for International – (inaudible). I would like to commend the commission for recommending Iraq to be a CPC. My question is, what does the commission recommend or think about the possible rising violence against Christians and other minorities in the event of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq? What should the U.S. government do to accommodate large-scale displacement, for instance, of Iraqis, if the violence increases like it has increased on other minorities?

MS. GAER: So we have two questions on Iraq, which was named a CPC in December. Commissioner Shea, would you speak to that? Thank you.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, Sidar, I'm not sure I understood your last question: Could you repeat it?

Q: If the violence increases against Christians and other minorities in Iraq, and if a large number of Christians – the remaining, I would say – Christians from Iraq are forced to leave the country, what should the U.S. government do in order to accommodate them or give them refuge?

MS. SHEA: Thank you. Yeah, Joe Lucani asked about the constitution, and the commission has been reporting on the constitution and critiquing it since it was adopted, before 2005. We are very concerned by the contradiction within the Iraqi constitution. On the one hand, religious freedom for everyone is stated, and for minority groups, and on the other hand, there can be no law that contradicts Islam. So there is a possibility that there isn't a right to have individual choice in religious freedom or to manifest your beliefs publicly. It's very questionable.

So we wanted to know what the – I think there's some language about the consensus on the agreed-upon tenets of Islam, that no law can contradict the agreed-upon tenets of Islam. But there really, in fact, is no consensus on Islam. There is two main branches of Islam in Iraq – Sunnis and Shiites; there are different schools; there are different commentaries on those schools. So there's many different points of view, so the constitution is not clear and it leaves in doubt the extent of religious freedom, particularly for minorities. The main problem we're seeing, though, is the extremists – not government violence, but extremist violence – and the failure of the government to protect or allow these minorities to develop and flourish and remain in Iraq.

So many of them – half of them – have left. And many of them continue to be in the region. The United States has been very dilatory in addressing this problem. It appears, now, that they're not eager to go back in great numbers – or they may be eager, but they're not going back in great numbers. And I think the United States has a responsibility to – and we make recommendations for this – that the United States has a responsibility to support these people and to help them find refuge, either in the United States or elsewhere.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. I want to go to this side of the room for a moment. I'm going to go to this side of the room. Harry Wu.

Q: I wish the commission paid more attention on China. China is the biggest communist country. There's no religious freedom at all over there. And they have the largest population of the world. Whenever you're talking Cuba or North Korea, there's only a couple of millions of people there, but Chinese do not allow Roman Catholic Church enter in China. And all that religion is today inside China, the so-called patriotic church, is entirely controlled by the communists. They set up their own church. For Catholic, they set up the – nominated a bishop. Maybe one day they will nominate their Pope. Okay, that's really kidding. But I really hope that the commission can focus on China in the near future. Thank you.

MS. GAER: I think that's an appeal. I think we all recognize it and I welcome your concern. I spoke about China at the end of the day and I said the situation has deteriorated. In some cases, it's the worst it's ever been, and it is one the countries of particular concern and it merits – and I spoke in particular about U.S. policy. Rather than reiterating all the problems that are well-described in the report, I wanted to make that point in those few minutes. But thank you for your comments.

MS. PRODRMOU: Regarding China – this relates to an earlier question as well – our policy recommendations on North Korea are also made to the Chinese government. The commission traveled to South Korea last year and we met with refugees from North Korea, who have made their way through China into South Korea. And so some of our recommendations address the concerns you have regarding China, but in particular, the way the Chinese government treats – or mistreats – North Korean refugees. So I would urge you to consult the report to look at that section on North Korea that relates directly, as well, to the Chinese government.

MS. GAER: Thank you. Yes, sir?

Q: I'm Adrian Westney. I host a program here talking about freedom. And I want to commend the commission for a very comprehensive report. But my question is, how is religious defined, and is it clearly understood by all who are involved?

MS. GAER: Well, let me just explain: In the International Religious Freedom Act, it isn't defined. And in the International – in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it isn't defined. There is a guarantee of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and in recent instruments, they've added "or belief" to that. Whether it's deist or non-deist religions, whether it's a spiritual movement like Falun Gong or a religious community like Islam, the commission addresses the full range of these issues. And we do so working with the understood international parameters with regard to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Yes, sir – you've had your hand up from the beginning.

Q: Richard Finney with Radio Free Asia. Could you say something about why Laos is now on the watch list? What are the commission's concerns about that country?

MS. GAER: Yes, we've brought Laos back on the watch list and Commissioner Eid will fill you in on that – no, not on Laos? Leonard, I'm sorry. Leonard Leo.

MR. LEO: Happy to address Laos for a moment. Thank you for the question. As you probably know, or may know, the commission did remove Laos from the watch list in 2005. And we've placed it back on the watch list because after a period of progress, there was an increase in religious freedom abuses that were occurring in the provincial areas, specifically targeting ethnic minority Protestants.

We had witnessed a growing number of arrests, detentions, forced renunciations of faith, forced evictions from villages. Now, to be sure, the central government reportedly intervened in some of these instances, but for the most part, we have seen an up-tick in this kind of repressive activity and we're very disappointed by it, because there had been some progress in the past and that's why we had taken them off the watch list in 2005.

MS. GAER: Now before I take further questions, I wanted to just take a moment to tell you that the commission and the commission's work has not been – didn't come out of the air. We work all year 'round. We have a dedicated staff that's headed by James Standish, who's sitting at the end of the table here. And the other members of the staff are scattered throughout the room here. I want to particularly acknowledge Knox Thames, the head of the policy division, and our other principal staff members who have joined us. So I just wanted to remind you that this doesn't happen by magic; it does happen by hard work, year 'round. Further questions? Yes ma'am?

Q: My name is Emily Belz –

MS. GAER: Wait for the microphone, please.

Q: Thanks. My name is Emily Belz. I'm with World magazine. I wanted to ask, on Nigeria, there are a lot of countries in the world where there's violence between Muslims and Christians, and I wondered if you could distill for me just why Nigeria and not other countries, where similar things are happening.

MS. GAER: Thank you. Commissioner Leo will discuss that. As you know, the commission traveled to Nigeria and we have listed Nigeria for seven years – or eight – in the report. There's nothing new about our interest, and it has been sustained. Leonard?

MR. LEO: Yes, as the chairman indicated, we have been monitoring developments in Nigeria for some time and it has been – Nigeria has been on watch list. Our reason for moving Nigeria onto the CPC list is that there has been an unbroken chain of sectarian and communal violence, which has not been addressed by the Nigerian government. And after our review of the

facts on the ground in Nigeria, we reached the conclusion that the government was tolerating these egregious and violent incursions on the freedom of religion in the country, the most recent incident, of course, being the violence in Jos, where there was at least several hundred, but according to other reports, close to 3,000 deaths.

And Jos, of course, is not the only incident. If you go back over the course of the last several years, there is sectarian conflict after sectarian conflict where not a single investigation or prosecution is undertaken by the government of Nigeria – not a single investigation or prosecution. We have a legislature in Nigeria which undertakes virtually no oversight, if any at all, of the ministry of justice. There is a human rights commission appointed entirely by the president, which has no effective authority and which we didn't see any activity on the part of regarding these critical issues.

When you couple that with the fact that the existence of such impunity provides an opening or leverage for states in the north to implement Sharia codes in ways that adversely affect Christians or non-conforming Muslims, you have a further catalyst for violence and social instability in the country. So those are the facts as we understood them – as we understand them – and it is our hope that the United States and Nigeria can work together through the binding agreement I mentioned, through the provision of various well-targeted forms of aid and programmatic assistance to address these problems. But there is a pattern.

Q: Can I ask a follow-up?

MS. GAER: Yes, but we have a lot of other hands, so do it quickly.

Q: I just wondered if you could also explain how the government in Nigeria might have the resources to go forward with the recommendations that you're making?

MR. LEO: Well, first of all, Nigeria is one of the most populous, if not the most populous, country in all of Africa. It has a diverse, highly talented, very motivated population – a religious population – a population that I think, at bottom, doesn't wish to see violence and sectarian conflict. So the human capital is there. It is one of the most economically productive countries in all of Africa – enormous natural resources. So it has the economic capacity, if it so chooses, to address these instances.

And of course, Nigeria has a rich tradition and history of maintaining very positive relationships with the United States and members of the European Union, and as a consequence, it is a country that can engage in the kind of bilateral negotiations that lead to forms of assistance that can improve the rule of law, can improve the indigenous economy in ways that facilitate greater harmony, can facilitate greater human rights protections or adequate training of police and other officials. This is a country that, in our view, has the capacity to do better. And it is our hope that the United States and other countries will join with our friends in Nigeria to achieve that.

MR. CROMARTIE: Could I just quickly add, Madame Chair, that this was not a unanimous decision by the commission. There were two dissenting votes.

MS. GAER: There's no dissent in the report. Yes, sir? We don't – yes, go ahead.

Q: Lukman Ahmad with BBC Arabic. I saw the report has a particular concern about Saudi Arabia and Sudan. I would like to ask the panel, what are these particular concerns in Saudi Arabia and Sudan? And also, the report has Egypt in its watching list; what are you watching in Egypt?

MS. GAER: I think that we've each made presentations on each of those countries – Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan. I'm not quite sure, to tell you the truth, what more you want to know from us.

Q: Especially the conflict of the Shia right to practice, and recently, last month, there was a report about the clashes in Saudi Arabia between the Shia and the government about their right to practice.

MS. GAER: Well, with regard to Saudi Arabia, as you know, there is a large Shia minority in the country. They have historically and traditionally complained of repression. They have complained of discrimination in terms of public office, in terms of what is taught in the schools about the Shia. And there have been imprisonments. And you heard us call us for the release of Shia and Ismaili prisoners who are in jail, we believe, because of their religious affiliation and their seeking to exercise those rights.

You know, as we do, that it was only in very recent times that they even permitted a Shia mosque to exist as such. This is largely due to the United States government's concern about freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia. I invite you to review the report; you'll see there's a great deal in there about the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia. Thank you. The gentleman with the elegant hat?

Q: Okay. Peace be on you. My name is Daud Ahmad Hanif. I am the deputy head of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in the U.S.A. And my – first, I commend the commission on the facts described in their report. And I reiterate that the rights of Ahmadis have been completely destroyed or taken by the government in Pakistan, and Ahmadis are – especially the blasphemy law is vehemently implemented against its members.

And even the name of the headquarters of the Ahmadiyya has been forcefully changed. So such are the things. And then one more important thing, which has been mentioned in your report, about the five minors who have been arrested on false charges on blasphemy. So I hope the commission will be further recommending about the laws to be repealed against the Ahmadis and minorities especially. Thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. Do you want to comment on that?

MS. PRODROMOU: The only follow-up is that, if you look at the commission's recommendations, one of the areas that we've focused on in particular is the judicial system in Pakistan – both the judiciary and the police practices. And we recognize that that's – it's those two environments in which minority communities, and in particular the Ahmadis, are subjected to violations of their religious and other forms of human rights. So I would strongly urge you to take a look at those two sections in particular of our policy recommendations on the judiciary and the police.

MS. SHEA: Felice, can I add something?

MS. GAER: Yes you can, and then I understand that because of this large post here, I've been ignoring some of our most activist audience members. So please continue and then we'll call on you behind the post.

MS. SHEA: Yes, I really welcome the question about the Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan because the United States is becoming Pakistan's largest investor and I think that it is incumbent on us to challenge both the blasphemy laws that have been abused in Pakistan against the Ahmadiyyas, against the Christians, against the others, who do not – whose testimony in court is not even given equal weight with their accuser. There is also a constitutional provision that has been added – amendment to the Pakistan constitution that bars, by law, the Ahmadiyyas from, quite, “posing as Muslims.”

And they may not call their places of worship mosques or worship in non-Ahmadiyya mosques or public prayer rooms or perform the Muslim call to prayer or quote from the Quran and so forth. There are about three to four million Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan, and it's something that the commission has been concerned with since it took up Pakistan years ago, and we must not drop this concern at this point. And we won't drop it. It's something that we urge the State Department to, now, use its leverage with Pakistan as we give aid to that country. To see religious freedom fulfilled, it's going to be absolutely necessary to repeal this blasphemy law and to amend the Ahmadiyya discrimination provision in the constitution and laws.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. Now, other than Faith, I'm not sure who else is back there that I can't see, but Faith, the floor is yours.

Q: Go ahead? Okay. This is Faith McDonald from the Institute on Religion and Democracy. Thank you so much, commission, for the work that you've been doing. And Felice, you mentioned that it's been 10 years; I don't remember the particular provisions in the International Religious Freedom Act, but my question is, can the commission go on indefinitely? Is there anything that the administration could do to put the kibosh on the commission? Do we need to get our grassroots mobilization to say, you know, we want the commission to continue – anything like that? Thanks.

MS. GAER: Well, my understanding is that the commission was reauthorized in 2003 or

2004. It was only originally created for four years and then it was reauthorized for another eight, which takes it to 2011. I don't think that there's any question but that in the last 10 years, the work of the commission has grown richer, deeper and been more widely recognized in the State Department and outside for its value. So I'm an optimist on this. Thank you for your concern on that.

MR. CROMARTIE: But we do give Faith McDonald the permission to organize the grassroots on the question.

(Laughter.)

MS. GAER: This is the dissenter! This is our dissenter! (Chuckles.)

Q: Allen Hertzke with the University of Oklahoma. Tom Farr, who is the former director of the State Department Office on International Religious Freedom, has written that in his view in violation of the law, the State Department office has been buried within the State Department bureaucracy. I'm wondering if the commission has offered a recommendation to the administration to elevate the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom, in particular, to have the ambassador report directly to the Secretary of State?

MS. GAER: My understanding is – of the act – is that the ambassador-at-large, who has not been appointed yet in this administration, is the principal advisor to the secretary of state and the president on religious freedom issues. The location of the office and the reporting internally for – not just for this ambassador, but for any number of ambassadors – often goes through assistant secretaries, even though the ambassador to India is the principal advisor on India, et cetera. They go through the assistance secretary in the regional bureaus.

So there is no recommendation other than that there be an appointment of an ambassador-at-large soon. But one could easily have, maybe at your institute, a debate on this subject as to what would be the most effective. People have different views on this. The original legislation suggested that all of this should be in the National Security Council and not even in the State Department. One can hope that, personality aside, that the impact of U.S. policy on all human rights issues, including religious freedom issues, will be strong, will be effective and will be vocal in this administration. Yes, ma'am?

Q: Hi, I'm Lindsay with Open Doors USA. My question is, now that the annual report has been published and you made your recommendations, what role, if any, does the commission have in working with the State Department towards imposing sanctions or working on the policy towards the CPCs? Because I believe you mentioned that the State Department imposed sanctions on Eritrea, but gave a pass to other countries, so I'm wondering, does the commission have a role in that?

MS. GAER: Well, just as Professor Hertzke indicated, we make recommendations. And our report is filled with recommendations. In fact, I don't think you'll find a report around town

that has a greater proportion of its report focused on recommendations. And the question is, how do you get those realized? And the commission operates, working with our legislative affairs director, Judy Golub, and the rest of the staff, including our executive director. We interact extensively with others in other parts of government – Congress, the executive branch, the White House staff and the like – to try to encourage specific proposals and recommendations.

You can't do everything all at once. You can have an impact on some issues. We've had that in the past. Some people have written about them. And some people have written about the act more broadly. There's an awful lot to do here, because each of these issues touches on something that's central, in terms of the foreign policy, the human rights policy, the religious freedom issues in country after country. We've named 28 countries today. There are 192. And we do get engaged in countries other than those that are on the watch list or the CPC list. So it's a big task. That's why we need all the NGOs and professors and journalists and others to pay attention to these issues. Yes, ma'am?

Q: Again, I'm Penny Starr with CNS News. I guess Nina could answer this: The Christians that you say have been displaced from Iraq – how do we track those? Do we have numbers of how many Christians have actually been killed and where these who have left Iraq are going so that, as you say, the U.S. could support them or offer them refuge?

MS. SHEA: Yeah, there are – the overwhelming number of them have not been killed; they've fled. And I think there is a number of several dozen – maybe several hundred – who have been killed, that's cited in our report, that we know of – that have been documented. A lot of times, there is a targeting of the prelates or the religious leaders or the directors of the churches. So it's also a terrorist tactic to show that even the most prominent Christian with the best protection is vulnerable. And that sets off an exodus.

And these people do not have militias. They are not part of tribes – tribal protection networks. So they're extremely vulnerable. And when there is targeted murders, like there has been in Mosul this past year, it sets off, you know, a stampede of people who want to leave. They see the writing on the wall and they feel that this is the last straw and they cannot survive. Many of them have migrated from the South – from Basra and Baghdad – to the North. In the North, when they're targeted for assassination, they are – they give up hope of finding any sanctuary within Iraq.

They go to these neighboring countries – and the commission delegation has visited them in Syria, in Jordan – some in Turkey – Lebanon. And there, they have a very hard time because they cannot work. They cluster around churches, which try to help them. They're not real camps – they're in apartments. They're crowded into peoples' homes. There's been – the international community – humanitarian community has tried to visit them and take their testimony and process their petitions to emigrate – to get asylum – so that there is some numbers there. And we give the numbers in our report as well.

MS. GAER: Now I'm being a bad chair: I've called on you twice and I've missed two

people whose hands have been up since the beginning. So I apologize. Yes, sir.

Q: Keith Pavlischek of Ethics and Public Policy Center. My question is another one about Pakistan that leads into, I guess, the process question. Obviously – it seems self-evident that things are bad and getting much worse in Pakistan, and you've recommended that it be designated a CPC. But the State Department says that they're not going to do that. I guess my question is, do they owe you an answer as to why they don't want to do that?

In other words, are they denying the claim that it's getting worse, or is there any justification? Because I mean, from everything we read in the news, things are obviously getting worse; religious liberty is not flourishing, it's getting worse. So do they owe you anything? Do they owe the American public anything as to why they think that this would be a bad idea – your recommendation would be a bad idea?

MS. GAER: Let me give you a couple of responses. First, as to, do they owe us anything, under the act, all they have to do is review our recommendations. They don't owe us an answer or anything like that, however, we have had a – first of all, the ambassador-at-large is a nonvoting member of the commission. And the ambassador-at-large has the capacity to listen and engage on these issues in the department, and also, to speak with us. And that is part of our process and we look forward to it being a lively part of our process.

I'm sure Tom has written about that, too. Secondly, the actual conversations and discussions that we do have with administration officials are part of our deliberative process and it's not something that we present to the press and the public. So in general, the deliberative process of the commission is not something that we present, although every member is free to prepare and add a dissent or an additional view to the annual report. As of today, there are none with regard to that, but we got some hints here that there may be one.

The third point on how do they judge it and what do they make their decisions and determinations on – everything. Everything comes into play in assessing whether it meets the standard of a CPC and whether a country should so be named – and that's why the foreign policy process is so interesting – you know it as well as I do. Yes.

Q: Kit Bigelow with the Baha'is of the United States; my question has to do actually with the multilateral arena. Within the next few weeks the United States will be running for a seat on the Human Rights Council and I noted that some of the recommendations are to the U.S. based on its activity in the United Nations and potentially at the council.

Has the commission had a chance to discuss whether or not this potential membership by the U.S. on the council could make a positive difference to the promotion of religious freedom, particularly with the defamation of religious resolutions that have been repeatedly passed the last few years at the council?

MS. GAER: Well, let me give you a short answer – and it's hard for me to be short when

I talk about the U.N. We have as a commission, since our inception, made recommendation after recommendation about levers – places and positions where the religious freedom can be advanced. And in that context we have repeatedly, since the beginning, identified a variety of United Nations actors: the special rapporteur on freedom of religion, the special rapporteurs on particular countries – whether it was Sudan or, when there was one, Iran or other countries.

We've identified these international actors as possible levers who could do something about policy and we've made recommendations on what the U.S. should do to try to keep the position existing, strengthen it, get these people into countries to conduct onsite evaluations and things of that sort. With regard to the Human Rights Council, per se, the commission has not had a debate on the question of what, where, how. There have been so many changes in the council – so much of this infrastructure has been destroyed in the three years existence of the council to date and we look forward to having that conversation in that regard.

One thing, though, that we have been quite active on in the past year or more, more than a year, has been the defamation of religions issue. This amounts to – well, you heard Elizabeth Prodromou talking about Pakistan as the leader of this initiative in the United Nations. Leonard Leo has traveled to Geneva to try to both observe what the U.S. government was doing on this issue and to, frankly, toughen their spine on this issue with considerable success I would add.

And today we have a situation where just last week in Geneva, in the Durban Review Conference, this issue – which was a core issue regarding the conference and President Obama has said this was one of our problem issues from the start – this language does not appear in that document. However, there is an awful lot of language about incitement that has created some concern.

The United States, as I understand it, is running without opposition, that is to say on a clean slate, so we can anticipate it will be elected and we can anticipate that there will be a vigorous suggestion coming from this commission, of one way or another to utilize that membership like all other levers that are out there, to help advance freedom of religion and belief.

Yes, ma'am: Am I tiring you out? There are fewer hands now. Are we okay? Okay, I hadn't seen that.

Q: Hi, Melina Seroka (ph) from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; and I was wondering if the commission intends to conduct an investigation of violations of human rights and religious freedom by Iranian proxy groups, particularly by Hamas in the Gaza strip?

MS. GAER: Richard, do you want to take that one?

MR. LAND: I would be one commissioner who would be happy to do that. And we have discussed that volatile region before on the commission both before my arrival and after my arrival. And the one time we did have a significant discussion on the issue of religious freedom

as an issue in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Hamas' and Hezbollah's and Iran's involvement in it, was that religion was not the major issue, that while religion plays a role – it was not the major issue in the conflict and it was also not an area or a situation that did not have the world's and the United States government's attention. But certainly we will continue to monitor that area of the world as well to see if religious persecution becomes a significant part of conflict.

Q: My name is Hend Eid (sp) from Massachusetts, Hend Eid. From what I listened to, you're doing marvelous job here and I guess I can advise my husband that comes in at 8:00, but I would rather say my advice to all of you here.

Understanding Muslims and Islam can help us achieve more effectively when dealing with concerning minority in Muslim population. To Muslims they don't see contradiction between the Iraq law and the Islam. Since Islam is a religion of peace, we can approach that from this angle and try to – there's people and governments who are violating also their own religion, Islam, and not implementing peace and tolerance to others.

When we reach this understanding, we can really do so many things differently and those governments won't feel like it is either we are coming after Shariah law or we are coming at civil rights or human rights violations. So it is really very important to take note for that. I appreciate your work; thank you.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much. I think that was more in the order of a comment than a question. And, thank you, and it's a pleasure to meet you. We've been working with your husband and it's a pleasure to meet you.

MR. LAND: And we've been very grateful to have him on the commission. We think it's important that we have diverse religious groups and particularly when you have as large a population of the world that are followers of Islam, it's important to have someone on the commission who can help us understand Islam and our fellow commissioners have done an excellent job.

MS. GAER: Yes, sir?

Q: Yes, Brent McBurnie (sp) with Advocates International. As we move forward with our global taskforce on religious freedom with attorneys around the world and as many other groups are doing activities, what specific things can we on the ground do to help the commission and to help further religious freedom?

MS. GAER: Well, I'll open that up to the entire commission if they'd like to comment. But it seems obvious to me that on the ground is the most important input we can receive: what is really happening on the ground, but also what is making a difference on the ground.

One of the things that the commission has not always addressed fully has been the role of the United States government in each of these countries. We try to, but we don't always have the

on-the-ground eyes for that. I would think an American organization on the ground looking at these issues and feeding back information to us would be an enormous additional resource to those that we already receive. Are there others who'd want to comment?

MR. LAND: I would just say information is, you know, as accurate information as you can to us to help us understand and to sensitize us to the situation.

MR. CROMARTIE: I would simply add that Advocates International has more contacts than most organizations of people on the ground, especially lawyers around the world. And we respect and appreciate what you do.

MS. PRODROMOU: I would reiterate what my fellow commissioners have said, but I would also add that I think if you look at our report, you'll see that one of the spaces in which violations of religious freedom occur with great frequency is in the space of the judicial system. And I think that, given your on-the-ground presence and also your expertise, you're eminently positioned to help the United States understand how it is that, through judicial practice, religious majority groups as well as minority groups are often deprived of their due process rights.

And the deprivation of due process rights that directly affect religious freedom conditions also have an impact – usually a deleterious one – on other fundamental civil liberties like expression, assembly and the like. So I would add that the judicial space, I think, is one of particular importance.

MS. SHEA: Felice, can I add something?

MS. GAER: Yes, please.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I direct the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute. And we are compiling cases of blasphemy in Muslim countries today and finding that – this grew out of the U.N. push to criminalize defamation against Islam, that the OIC, the Organization of Islamic Conferences, was leading – and we saw that many of the voices for religious freedom and tolerance in the Muslim community are often those very people who are targeted for blasphemy by their governments.

And it's done for political reasons and those people really need defense. So, you know, in Afghanistan, for example, there have been editors and journalists who have wanted to write about – and have written about – women's rights. And they were put on trial for their life for blasphemy. So you have Afghanistan.

Pakistan has another very big problem, Saudi Arabia, of course, Iran. Good luck in getting into Iran and doing this, but you might not get very far. We may be defending you. But, in any event, I think, you know, just to second the others, that information about these cases, keeping these people's names out there, is very, very important. They are the Sakharovs and the Sharanskys of this generation. They are the human rights defenders of this generation. Thank

you very much.

MS. GAER: We are coming to the close of the conference but, before we did that, I wanted to ask the staff members of the commission who are present – they are scattered all around – to just stand up so if you don't know them, you should know them. And I just wanted to, again, to acknowledge them for their excellent work on the annual report and all of the commission's activities year-round – (applause): Dave Dettoni, Dwight Bashir, Steve Snow – this is a test for me – Elizabeth Cassidy, Cathy Cosman, Tiffany Lynch. Did I miss anybody – Water DeSocio? Judith I mentioned before. Tom Carter who put the whole press conference together and who has joined us recently as our communications director.

Special thanks Knox Thames and also Kody Kness. I already did that. So thank you very much. And if there's anybody else here I can't see, it's my fault. Thank you all for joining us; thank you for your support, your concern and your questions.

(END)