

September 17, 2001: USCIRF Urges Bush to Raise Religious Freedom with Indonesian Pres. Megawati Sukarnoputri

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has written to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice asking her to urge President Bush "to raise prominently religious freedom concerns" in his upcoming meeting with Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri. The text of the letter follows: September 13, 2001 Dear Dr. Rice: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urges President Bush to raise prominently religious freedom concerns in his upcoming meeting with Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri. In the past two years, severe violence among religious communities has become widespread in Indonesia. Of particular concern to the Commission is the violence between Muslims and Christians in the Moluccan Islands, where since January 1999 between 5,000 - 8,000 people from both communities have been killed and 500,000 displaced. While the causes behind the violence are multi-faceted, the fighting almost immediately took on a sectarian character and the ensuing violence has been based principally on religious affiliation. Houses of worship have been pointedly targeted and hundreds of mosques and churches have been destroyed. In addition, thousands of extremist Muslim fighters ("Laskar Jihad") from outside the Moluccas arrived on the Islands soon after the outbreak of the conflict and raised the fighting to more deadly levels. Since the slaughter began, the Indonesian government has made inadequate efforts to halt the conflict and, indeed, has not given it serious attention. When she was vice-president, Ms. Megawati was appointed by then-President Abdurrahman Wahid to lead reconciliation efforts between Christians and Muslims in the Moluccas, but her efforts proved ineffective and little government action was taken. Moreover, there are numerous reports that the Indonesian military and local police forces have not done enough to stop the fighting and that some elements of those institutions may even be responsible for prolonging or participating in it. There are other tragic conflicts in Indonesia that are of concern to the Commission, in many of which religion or tension between religious communities plays a significant role. In Aceh, local support for a referendum to determine the region's political status has been met with violence from government forces. Indonesian security forces are also clashing with a movement for greater autonomy in the Papua region. And in Sulawesi, Christians and Muslims are killing each other in gruesome tit-for-tat battles. The Indonesian government has made some effort to halt the worst violence and promote reconciliation. Such efforts have not been sufficient, however, and the killing has continued. Moreover, the role of individuals or groups from the Indonesian military in provoking, prolonging, or participating in the fighting has not been adequately addressed. In light of the continued religion-based fighting in the Moluccas and the spreading sectarian violence in other areas of the country, the Commission recommends that the President offer Indonesia funding for reconciliation programs and the training of Indonesian police and prosecutors in human rights, the rule of law, and criminal investigation, as detailed in chapter IV of the Commission's report of May 1, 2001, a copy of which is enclosed (see also www.uscirf.gov). The Commission further recommends that you urge President Megawati to make much greater efforts to stop religiously-based violence, including: to ensure that those responsible for the killings in the Moluccas are brought to justice, including elements from the Indonesian military that may have been involved either in fomenting or exacerbating the fighting; to make more concerted efforts to pursue serious reconciliation programs between Muslims and Christians, especially in the Moluccas; to ensure that outside militia forces on the Moluccas, particularly Laskar Jihad forces, are removed from the Islands and disarmed and also that rogue elements in the Indonesian security forces be brought under control; to take effective steps to promote reform of the military in Indonesia, ensuring that the institution respects the rule of law and civilian control; and to ensure that all humanitarian relief and human rights organizations are permitted access to areas where sectarian violence has occurred. We take note of President Megawati's recent statements in which she acknowledges the human rights violations that have been perpetrated by the armed forces against citizens of Indonesia. The new president has also recognized the need for significant reform of the military. We hope that her visit to Washington provides an occasion for serious discussion of religious freedom and the urgent need to take steps to halt the sectarian violence in Indonesia. Respectfully,

U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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