



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Message from the Chair

Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief is universal in its importance and applicability. It is the freedom to assert an individual conscience or identity without fear, and is a foundational right of the post-World War II framework of international human rights. Promoting religious freedom and related human rights abroad is vital to U.S. foreign policy and to our strategic, as well as humanitarian, interests. When respected, freedom of religion or belief is one of the linchpins of stable, democratic, productive societies. When denied, generations of hatred may be sown. Throughout the world today, the religious and sectarian dimensions to human conflict cannot be ignored. Yet where governments protect religious freedom, and citizens value it, religious persecution and religion-based violence often find little appeal, and other fundamental human rights, the rule of law, and democracy are accorded greater value. Promoting the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief is in the national interest and central to maintaining universal principles of human dignity.

- Preeta
D. Bansal

A delegation of Commissioners visited Uzbekistan October 16-23, 2004. The visit to Uzbekistan took place as part of the Commission's annual review process to determine which countries will be recommended to the Department of State as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, as required by Congress in the International Religious Freedom Act. Due to concerns about serious abuses of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights taking place in Uzbekistan, the Commission has for several years placed Uzbekistan on its Watch List of countries which require close monitoring. The Commission had issued a report and recommendations on Uzbekistan in May 2002.

In Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, delegation members held an intensive series of discussions with senior government officials at the Ministries of Justice, Internal Affairs, and Foreign Affairs, as well as with the Committee on Religious Affairs and the Parliamentary Ombudsman; international and Uzbek human rights groups; religious communities; and U.S. Embassy personnel. In addition to Tashkent, the Commission met with regional officials, human rights groups,

Author Nafisi Speaks on Freedom and Tolerance

The Commission convened an event with the Folger Shakespeare Library on September 23, 2004, in Washington. A standing-room-only crowd greeted Dr. Azar Nafisi, the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*,

who was the keynote speaker. Dr. Nafisi was expelled as a professor from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear Iran's mandatory veil. Her presentation, "Imagining Freedom and Straining to Hear Voices for Tolerance in a Post 9/11 Age," was followed by a discussion on the need to encourage greater respect for freedom and human rights amid the rising religious repression in the world today. USCIRF held the event in conjunction with a Folger exhibit titled *Voices for Tolerance in an Age of Persecution*, which examines the story of those who argued for tolerance amid religious and political conflict in early modern Europe. These voices from the early modern past have particular resonance in today's world where the relevance of historical events to present conflicts is often little understood or even ignored.

In her opening remarks, USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal drew upon the Folger's exhibit to describe how "the struggle between tolerance and intolerance, between freedom and

Dr. Azar Nafisi addresses audience



see NAFISI on page 5

USCIRF Travels to Uzbekistan

and local religious leaders in Samarkand, Ferghana City, Margilon, and Andijan.

The Commission has concluded in the past that conditions for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief are very poor in Uzbekistan. In addition to a law on religion that severely limits the ability of minority religions to function, the Uzbek government in recent years has been harshly cracking down on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed ideas on how the Islamic faith should be practiced and expressed. Citing security concerns emerging from bombings and attacks by Islamically-identified extremists, the government crackdown has resulted in the arrests of thousands of persons, many of whom are denied the right to due process. There are credible reports that many have been and continue



Commissioner Bishop Ramirez with Imam Parsohan Hasanov

see UZBEKISTAN on page 6

President and House Minority Leader Appoint New Commissioners

President George W. Bush appointed Michael Cromartie to a two-year term on the Commission. Mr. Cromartie succeeds Commissioner Richard Land. Cromartie is Vice President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., where he directs the Evangelicals in Civic Life program and the Media and Religion program. He is the editor of 12 books on religion and politics including, most recently *A Public Faith: Evangelicals and Civic Engagement*

and *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*. He also is an adjunct professor at Reformed Theological Seminary.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) appointed Elizabeth H. Prodromou of Massachusetts to a two-year term on the Commission. Dr. Prodromou succeeds Commissioner Patti Chang. Professor Prodromou is the Associate Director of the Institute on Culture,

Religion and World Affairs and Assistant Professor of International Relations at Boston University. A regional expert on Southeastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, Prodromou's scholarship and policy work concentrate on religion and international relations, nationalism and conflict resolution, and non-traditional security threats. Their full biographies are available on the Commission's Web site at www.uscirf.gov. ♦

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USCIRF Chair Testifies on New CPC Designations

On September 15, the State Department released its 2004 *Annual Report on International Freedom* and announced the designation of three new countries—Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea—as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) for their ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. On October 6, USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal testified before the International Relations Committee (HIRC) of the U.S. House of Representatives at a hearing on the annual report and CPC designations.

Bansal welcomed the U.S. government's designation of Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea as CPCs—as well as the re-naming of Burma, China, Iran, North Korea, and Sudan—and noted that designation is one of the most significant human rights acts of the U.S. government. In addition, she underscored that designation is not an

end point, but the beginning of focused diplomatic activity required by IRFA from which important obligations in the form of consequent actions flow. She expressed concern that, since the passage of IRFA, for every country named a CPC in previous years, the only official action taken by any U.S. administration has been to invoke already existing sanctions rather than to take any additional action pursuant to IRFA. The U.S. government must do more than rely on pre-existing sanctions. Moreover, the State Department has not once to date submitted to the Congress the required evaluation of the effectiveness of prior actions against CPCs.

This is the first time countries have been designated as CPCs that do not have already existing sanctions assigned to them. Bansal testified that the Commission will issue recommended responses for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress pursuant

to the IRFA statute to follow up on the new CPC designations of Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Eritrea.

Bansal noted that six years after the passage of the IRFA, it has become abundantly clear that promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and related human rights abroad is vital to U.S. foreign policy and to our strategic, as well as humanitarian, interests. She said that the State Department's *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* provides Congress and the public an opportunity to assess not only the state of religious freedom around the world but also what the U.S. government is doing to promote this key U.S. foreign policy objective.

Commissioner Bansal's testimony is available on the Commission's web site at http://www.uscirf.gov/hearings/06Oct04/testimony_2004IRF.php3. ♦

Staff Contact: Patricia Carley

China Forum and Testimony on Capitol Hill

On November 9, the Commission held a China Human Rights Forum on Capitol Hill titled *Talking with China about Human Rights: Assessing the Future of Bilateral Human Rights Dialogues*. The Forum was convened in order to assess bilateral dialogues with China and to discuss their efficacy, as well as ways to improve and more

long stalled, was resumed shortly after the Commission's forum. In past years, the Commission has held China Human Rights Forums and roundtables on Xinjiang and on U.S. policy to promote religious freedom in China.

On November 18, USCIRF Chair Preeti D. Bansal testified at a hearing of the

As part of its November 18 testimony, the Commission issued specific recommendations for U.S. policy.



Commissioners hear from panelists at China Forum

thoroughly coordinate the various bilateral and multilateral dialogues in the future. The forum brought together U.S. government officials, international and academic experts, NGO representatives, and human rights activists for off-the-record discussions on human rights and U.S.-China relations. Speakers at the forum included former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Lorne Craner, Columbia University Professor Andrew Nathan, and representatives from the governments of Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Holland, Hungary, Norway, Switzerland, and the European Union. Participants from other bilateral dialogues compared substantive results and procedural approaches in beginning a discussion of how to make the dialogues more effective regarding human rights and religious freedom reform in China. The U.S. bilateral dialogue,

Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) on the current situation with respect to Chinese government repression of religion and belief. Bansal testified, "Advancing the freedom of religion and belief cannot be considered a marginal issue, but is foundational to a whole range of U.S. interests. Respect for the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief is a critical indicator of stable trading partners, stable allies, and stable regions. The government of China does not treat religion as a side issue, but views religious adherents, religious communities, and religious leaders through the lens of security. The United States should not ignore this fact and should fashion policies and actions that integrate the right of thought, conscience, religion, and belief with security and economic interests."

The Commission recommended that the U.S. Government should:

Strengthen bilateral human rights dialogues with China.

Advance a multilateral resolution at the UN Commission on Human Rights and work for its passage at appropriate and high official levels.

Organize regular meetings of involved nations to coordinate technical cooperation and capacity building programs in China.

Fund new legal reform and rule-of-law programs to advance religious freedom and related human rights.

Review all U.S. foreign aid funding and public diplomacy programs for China to include the promotion and protection of religious freedom, as required by International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

Establish an official presence in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Provide incentives for U.S. businesses to promote human rights in China.

The Commission twice had to cancel planned visits to China in 2003 due to unacceptable limits imposed on the Commission's itinerary by the Chinese government. The Commission visited Hong Kong in 2004, and continues to seek a visit to Mainland China.

Commissioner Bansal's testimony is available on the Commission web site at <http://www.uscirf.gov/hearings/18Nov04/testimony.php3>. ♦ Staff contact: Scott Flipse

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

- Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Letters from Congressional Members

Human Rights & Religious Freedom in Vietnam By Representative Loretta Sanchez

Recently, the Vietnamese government denied my request to travel there on U.S. government business. The official reason given was that my visit would not “serve U.S.-Vietnam relations.” The real reason is that the Vietnamese government did not want my visit to further expose Vietnam’s abuse of basic human and religious rights.

In September, the State Department released its Report on International Religious Freedom, adding Vietnam to the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC), or governments that engage in or tolerate gross infringements of religious freedom—a list that includes Burma, Sudan, North Korea, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and Eritrea. As the Congressional representative for one of the world’s largest Vietnamese communities outside Vietnam, I co-founded the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam to raise awareness about the very issues that led to Vietnam’s designation as a CPC.

Vietnam continues to detain political and religious freedom advocates like writer Nguyen Vu Binh, the Rev. Nguyen Hong Quang, and Dr. Nguyen Dan Que. On April 10, the so-called “Easter Crackdown” injured or imprisoned hundreds of Montagnards protesting religious repression. Meanwhile, the peaceful religious freedom advocate, Rev. Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, remains in prison, even in the face of a U.S. Congressional resolution—which I co-sponsored with Rep. Chris Smith—calling for his immediate release.

I am deeply grateful for the hard work done by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to bring these abuses to light. Through policy advice, press conferences, statements, research and reports, the Commission has aided the Congress and held Vietnam accountable for its repressive actions. The denial of my visa demonstrates that the Vietnamese government refuses to discuss these issues openly. Yet we can and will continue the struggle for a Vietnam that has no place on the CPC list, a Vietnam that respects the fundamental human rights and religious liberties of its own people. ♦

The North Korean Human Rights Act By Senator Sam Brownback

On October 18, 2004, President George W. Bush signed into law the North Korean Human Rights Act after it passed unanimously in both the United States House of Representatives and the Senate. The core of the Act, which I sponsored in the Senate and my colleague Rep. Jim Leach sponsored in the House, instructs the United States to make human rights a key element to negotiations on the current nuclear weapons crisis.

North Korea has one of the worst human rights situations in the world. The North Korean government under the leadership of Kim Jong Il has let its people starve while pursuing military might and weapons of mass destruction. There are no personal freedoms, and the government severely represses religious activities with penalties that reportedly include arrest, imprisonment, torture and sometimes execution. Many religious believers are reported to be serving long-term sentences in political prisoner camps.

For several years now, I have worked in the Congress to raise awareness of the plight of the North Korean people and to seek policies to help them. As Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, I have held hearings, participated in press conferences—including with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, and sought legislative changes to U.S. policy. One outcome was that North Korea was designated a Country of Particular Concern in 2001 under the International Religious Freedom Act.

With the enactment of the North Korean Human Rights Act, I am hopeful that the inherent soundness of the principles upon which the Act is built make the likelihood for its significant impact substantial. For too long, the international community has been duped and misled by the North Korean regime into focusing exclusively on the nuclear issue to a point where it is now almost treasonous if not shameful to talk bluntly about human rights in North Korea. My hope is that this Act will give North Korean human rights activists and others the courage to continue speaking the truth and that it will provide the support and encouragement they need to continue their important work. Certainly, the Act’s unanimous support by the U.S. Congress speaks as a manifesto for no longer tolerating the Kim Jong Il’s regime of horrendous excesses. ♦



Commissioners Visit Egypt

USCIRF Commissioners and staff traveled to Egypt in July. The purpose of the visit was to learn what the Egyptian government and its civil society are doing to promote freedom of thought, conscience,

religion and belief in accord with international standards embodied in the UN human rights instruments to which Egypt is a party. During their visit, the delegation met with a broad range of

individuals from Egyptian society, including government officials, religious leaders, human rights groups, scholars, educators, legal specialists, and others active in civil society in Cairo and Alexandria.

For the past three years, the Commission has placed Egypt on its Watch List because of serious problems of discrimination and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities. The Egyptian government has failed to take effective steps to halt repression of and violence against religious believers, or, in many cases to punish those responsible for serious violations of religious freedom.

The Commission remains concerned that, as a matter of policy, the Egyptian government views religious affairs as a security

issue, and the security services have the “religion portfolio.” Thus, the security services interfere in various aspects of freedom of religion or belief, including activities by both Muslim and Christian communities.



Commission meets with Saad Eddin Ibrahim (center), Director of the Ibn Khal Doun Center

Christians, Jews, and Baha’is all cite interference, harassment, and surveillance by the security services as major problems. Material vilifying Jews and other religious minorities continues in the media and education system. The majority of representatives of the various religious minorities in Egypt indicated that there is continual discrimination against them in law, in practice, and in society.

The USCIRF delegation found that there had been no substantial improvement in most areas of concern to the Commission. The delegation also found that there is a growing sense that Islamic fundamentalism was advancing in Egypt, with detrimental effects on the prospects for democratic reform, religious freedom, and the rights of women and girls. The Commission continues to monitor the actions of the government of Egypt to see if the situation rises to a level that warrants designation as a “country of particular concern.” ♦

Staff Contact: Dwight Bashir

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repression is an enduring reality of the human experience.” Bansal outlined how universally recognized documents like the UN’s Declaration on Human Rights and the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) serve as the linchpins for governments to recognize and ensure freedom for all, and described the work of the USCIRF in promoting religious freedom. USCIRF Vice Chair Commissioner Nina Shea introduced Nafisi as a “scholar, author, dissident, and advocate with a voice that transcends politics, cultures, and epochs.” Shea called Nafisi a “creative voice for toleration” whose “words reach far beyond the literary world.”

No one understands better the importance of fighting intolerance than Dr. Nafisi, who witnessed horrifying persecution firsthand in her native Iran. Nafisi reflected on those experiences through her writing, seeking to understand her persecutors and champion tolerance. “Through writing I understood how vulnerable these people who had been hurting and persecuting us are, how without language they are, how weak they in fact are because they cannot communicate except through violence,” said Nafisi. In an age where brutality is justified in the name of religion, Nafisi prescribed an antidote to intolerance through imagination and empathy:

“Imagine an Afghani woman taken to a stadium with a gun to her head because she’s disobeyed rules about her covering, imagine yourself as that woman at the point at execution and you won’t be able to tolerate what happened in Afghanistan.... Intolerance, totalitarianism takes away your sense of feeling, your senses, the sense to see, to hear, to touch, to become one with others,” Nafisi said.

USCIRF Vice Chair Felice Gaer moderated a dialogue with the audience which emphasized the themes of Nafisi’s book: control and exploitation of others, loss of dreams, and how personal acts are political in repressive societies. Commissioner Gaer encouraged the audience to continue, in churches, synagogues, and mosques, public debate on these themes in book groups, such as the one Nafisi led in Tehran. ♦

USCIRF Meets With UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance

Commissioners Bansal and Gaer met October 28 in New York with Ms. Asma Jahangir, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Ms. Jahangir, a Pakistani national, was appointed to a three-year term as Special Rapporteur in July 2004, replacing Abdelfattah Amor of Tunisia.

Commissioners and policy staff discussed with Ms. Jahangir countries USCIRF has designated as CPC and Watch List countries and raised mutual opportunities to further freedom of thought, conscience, and religion

or belief throughout the world. They discussed the need to protect such freedoms within individual rights frameworks and national constitutions, and to protect the rights of belief and conscience for all individuals to dissent within their respective traditions.

The Commission looks forward to sharing information and insights in the future with the Special Rapporteur in order to help protect individuals from violations of their internationally recognized human rights, and to promote compliance with the international norms in our respective mandates. ♦

Staff Contact: Tad Stahnke

Commission Visits Eritrea

A staff delegation from the Commission recently visited Eritrea, which was designated a “country of particular concern” (CPC) by the State Department for the first time in September 2004. The delegation discussed the religious freedom situation in formal meetings with senior Eritrean government officials, members of the U.S. and foreign diplomatic communities, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and leaders of the four major faiths sanctioned by the Eritrean government, as well as with unregistered religious groups.

In early 2004, the Commission recommended that the State Department designate Eritrea as a CPC. Following previous refusals to discuss religious freedom, citing national security concerns, the Eritrean government has recently agreed to do so. The Commission can only hope that this new openness will lead to improvements in religious freedom conditions in Eritrea. The Commission continues to monitor the situation closely as it begins its annual CPC deliberation process and will be developing appropriate policy recommendations to the U.S. Government. ♦

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to be tortured in detention, torture that in some cases has led to the death of the accused.

Despite some positive developments, including the opening up of the prison system to foreign monitors, promises to reform due process abuses, and a pledge to implement some of the OSCE-recommended revisions to the religion law, there are few signs of genuine reform in Uzbekistan. Religious freedom abuses reported in the past by the Commission and other U.S. government agencies continue to occur, including: the capricious application of an already burdensome law on religious organizations, resulting in the effective banning of numerous groups; violations of due process which include continued reports of the use of torture; and strict government control over Islamic worship and practice that reportedly increases the attraction of extremist alternatives. The Commission will continue to monitor the actions of the government of Uzbekistan.

USCIRF has issued policy recommendations on Uzbekistan for the U.S. government. These include that the U.S. government:

- strongly encourage the Uzbek government to establish a mechanism to review the cases of persons detained under suspicion of or charged with religious, political, or security offenses and to release those who have been imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association, as well as any others who have been unjustly detained or sentenced; and



(L to R) Shoazim Minovarov, Chair, Committee on Religious Affairs; Felice D. Gaer, USCIRF Vice-Chair; Preeta D. Bansal, USCIRF Chair; Zukhridin Husnitdinov, Inter-Confessional Council Chair and Presidential Advisor; Joseph R. Crapa, USCIRF Executive Director

- make contingent all U.S. assistance to the Uzbek government, with the exception of assistance to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, on that government’s taking a number of concrete steps to improve conditions for religious freedom for all individuals and religious groups in Uzbekistan, including:
 - a) releasing persons imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association;
 - b) ending torture;
 - c) halting the arrest and detention of persons because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association; and
 - d) refraining from using registration requirements to prevent religious groups from practicing their faith. ♦

Staff Contact: Catherine Cosman



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