

FOCUS

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



MESSAGE FROM CHAIR MICHAEL CROMARTIE: In its nine years of existence, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has worked to make protection of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief a central concern of U.S. policymakers. It has monitored the status of religious freedom abroad, produced authoritative analyses, and developed recommendations for the Executive Branch and Congress to advance that freedom. This year, among many other activities, the Commission has held timely hearings on China, Iraq, and Burma; sent delegations to Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam; issued a two-year progress report on its recommendations regarding the U.S. Expedited Removal program and its impact on would-be asylum-seekers; trained immigration judges, Foreign Service Officers, and border officials in dealing with immigrants claiming religious repression; and advised Congressional staff on the drafting of legislation. As we do every year, the Commission has made its recommendations on which countries merit the status of “countries of particular concern” and which should be placed on a Watch List for careful monitoring. We look forward to continuing this work into 2008 as we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act, legislation reflecting that advancing religious freedom the world over is not only the right thing to do but is in our national interest.

INSIDE

5

USCIRF Holds Public Hearing on Burma

5

USCIRF Delegation Travels to Saudi Arabia

6

USCIRF Explores Religious Freedom Issues in Turkmenistan

7

Late USCIRF Executive Director Joe Crapa Mourned

8

USCIRF Delegation Travels to Vietnam



visit our web site at
www.uscifr.gov

COMMISSION HOLDS TWO HEARINGS ON IRAQ

The Commission held two hearings on sectarian violence in Iraq and the refugee crisis. The hearing held in July focused on the threats faced by members of the smallest religious communities. Commissioners heard testimony of minority members viciously and deliberately victimized by militants—and, witnesses claimed, even members of the police and security forces—that included murder, torture, and abductions for ransom; of parishioners sleeping on the floors of churches to escape death squads and insurgents; of families being given just one hour to vacate their homes; of expropriated land, forced conversions and extortion in the form of taxes on non-Muslims.

“People are committing violence in God’s name, and they think they’re doing the work of God. We’ve got to seriously engage with this issue and enable this process of reconciliation to take

place,” said Rev. Canon Andrew White, Vicar of St. George’s Anglican Church in Baghdad.



From left, Rep. Christopher Shays (R-CT), the Reverent Canon Andrew White of St. George’s Anglican Church in Baghdad, and Rep. Anna G. Eshoo (D-CA) speaking at the July 25, 2007 USCIRF hearing, “Threats to Iraq’s Communities of Antiquity.”

Continued on page 2



COMMISSIONERS

MICHAEL CROMARTIE

Chair
Vice President,
Ethics and Public Policy Center

PREETA D. BANSAL

Vice Chair
Partner, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher
& Flom

RICHARD D. LAND

Vice Chair
President, Ethics and Religious Liberty
Commission of the Southern Baptist
Convention

DONALD H. ARGUE

Commissioner
Chancellor, Northwest University

TALAL Y. EID

Commissioner
Director of Religious Affairs, Islamic
Institute of Boston

FELICE D. GAER

Commissioner
Director, Jacob Blaustein Institute for
the Advancement of Human Rights,
The American Jewish Committee

LEONARD A. LEO

Commissioner
Executive Vice President, the Federalist
Society for Law & Public Policy Studies

ELIZABETH H. PRODROMOU

Commissioner
Assistant Professor, Department
of International Relations, Boston
University

NINA SHEA

Commissioner
Director of the Center for Religious
Freedom, Hudson Institute

JOHN V. HANFORD III

Ex-Officio, Non-voting Commissioner
Ambassador-at-large for International
Religious Freedom

PRESIDENT, HOUSE LEADERS APPOINT NEW COMMISSIONERS

President George W. Bush appointed Imam Talal Y. Eid and Leonard A. Leo to the Commission, and reappointed Michael Cromartie. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) appointed Dr. Don H. Argue to the Commission. The three replace departing Commissioners Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, Dr. Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, and Bishop Ricardo Ramirez.

Mr. Cromartie, currently Chair of the Commission, is Vice President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC, where he directs the Evangelicals in Civic Life and the Media and Religion programs. He is also a Senior Advisor to The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington and a Senior Fellow with The Trinity Forum.

Dr. Argue, Chancellor of Northwest University in Kirkland, Washington, and former President of the National Association of Evangelicals, was invited by then-President Bill Clinton to serve on the State Department's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad in 1996, where he chaired the subcommittee dealing with international religious persecution. Dr. Argue was also part

of the first official delegation of U.S. religious leaders to visit the People's Republic of China in 1998.

Imam Eid is Founder and Director of Religious Affairs at the Islamic Institute of Boston. A native of Lebanon, he served as Imam at the Al-Nasir Mosque in Tripoli for seven years and as Imam and religious director of the Islamic Center of New England from 1983-2005. In addition to his work at the Institute, he currently serves also as Muslim chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital and at Brandeis University.

Mr. Leo is Executive Vice President of The Federalist Society for Law & Public Policy Studies, where he manages the programs of the Lawyers Division and helps manage government, media, and corporate relations, as well as the organization's Supreme Court Project and International Law Project, among other special initiatives. Mr. Leo serves on the Board of Directors of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast.

IRAQ

Continued from page 1

The second hearing, held in September, examined the causes, dimensions, and patterns of intra-Muslim sectarian violence, including the extent to which individual Muslims are being targeted for killings and other violence on account of their religious identity and what role, if any, the Iraqi government played in that violence. It also examined U.S. policy in relation to Iraq's refugee crisis,

focusing on internal displacement and Iraqis sheltering in neighboring countries.

"The confluence of sectarian violence, religious discrimination, and other serious human rights violations has driven millions of Iraqis from their homes to seek refuge in the Nineveh plains in Northern Iraq, and in predominantly Kurdish regions, as well as in countries outside of Iraq," Com-

IRAQ

Continued from page 2



Members of Congress addressing the September 19, 2007 USCIRF hearing, "Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis," included Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA, pictured above), Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR), and Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY).

mission Chair Michael Cromartie said at the second hearing. "For the past few years, the Commission has drawn attention to the growing refugee crisis and continues to emphasize the plight of those fleeing religious violence in Iraq."

Assistant Secretary of State Ellen R. Sauerbrey told the hearing that the United States had provided nearly \$200 million this year to international organizations and non-governmental organizations to help Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Of about 10,000 Iraqis the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has referred to the United States, Washington had so far

admitted 990 refugees during Fiscal Year 2007, Sauerbrey said. She predicted that the admission of Iraqis in the next fiscal year "will be substantially higher," with resettlement figures nearing 1,000 per month.

"In many cases, if...you are a small minority, you are going to be taken; you are going to be questioned; and your lives are going to be threatened." – Rep. Christopher Shays (R-CT), July 25, 2007

LEGISLATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

Over the past year, the Commission has testified before and briefed Congress on numerous occasions about the conditions of religious freedom worldwide, including giving testimony at Congressional Human Rights Caucus Briefings on Tibet, China, Bangladesh, and Egypt. All Commission congressional testimony is available on the Commission web site at www.uscirf.gov.

The Commission's findings and recommendations have been included in over 25 bills in the 109th Congress. For more than a year, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government increase resettlement opportunities for Iraqi refugees from Iraq's smallest religious communities, including ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Mandaeans, and Yazidis, who are disproportionately represented among the refugee populations in neighboring countries. The Commission recommends that the State Department open a Priority 2 categorization for members of these particularly vulnerable groups and expand family reunification options for these refugees with relatives in the United States. These recommendations are included in several pending bills in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.



Commissioner Leo testifies before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus on religious minorities in Vietnam, Dec. 6, 2007.



Commissioner Shea testifying on Egypt before the Task Force on Religious Freedom of the U.S. House of Representative, May 23, 2007.



Commissioner Eid in Malaysia as a U.S. Presidential Delegate.

COMMISSIONER IMAM TALAL Y. EID JOINS U.S. DELEGATION TO MALAYSIA

Commissioner Imam Talal Y. Eid traveled to Malaysia in August as part of the U.S. Presidential Delegation to the 50th Anniversary Independence Celebration in Kuala Lumpur. Deputy Secretary of Energy Jeffrey Clay Sell led the delegation, which also included the U.S. ambassador to Malaysia, Christopher J. LaFleur, and Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Karan K. Bhatia.

COMMISSIONER FELICE D. GAER REELECTED TO UN COMMITTEE AGAINST TORTURE

Commissioner Felice D. Gaer was reelected in October to the UN Committee Against Torture, where she has already served eight years. “Her work on the Committee reflects her dedication to the global prevention of torture,” the U.S. Department of State said when announcing Ms. Gaer’s reelection. “She brings to the position the expertise needed to defend both the spirit and the law of the Convention Against Torture.”

COMMISSION DISCUSSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITH SECRETARY OF STATE RICE

The Commission met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on May 11, just over a week after issuing the 2007 Annual Report. Commissioners discussed religious freedom and associated human rights issues in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, China, Bangladesh, Turkey, and the 56-member Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Then-Vice Chairs Elizabeth Prodromou, Nina Shea, and Michael Cromartie and Commissioners Richard D. Land and Preeta D. Bansal attended the meeting.

HOMELAND SECURITY CHIEF MICHAEL CHERTOFF RESPONDS TO COMMISSION CONCERNS

The Commission met with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff in May to express its concerns over U.S. government implementation of the Expedited Removal program. In February, the Commission had issued a report card on the progress of the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) toward responding to its 18 recommendations made two years ago, and noted that little had changed. DHS had even widened

VICE CHAIR PREETA D. BANSAL RECEIVES AWARD



On September 12, the Hindu American Foundation presented Commission Vice Chair Preeta D. Bansal with the Mahatma Gandhi Award for Advancing Religious Pluralism. The award is presented to prominent Americans who have worked to protect and promote religious liberty and pluralism. Also receiving the award this year were U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Senators John Cornyn (R-TX), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH).

Expedited Removal—a process whereby border officials can promptly remove aliens without proper documentation to their country of origin—from specific points of entry to the entire border of the United States.

During the meeting with Secretary Chertoff and in a subsequent letter, the Commission expressed concern over the U.S. handling of Iraqi refugees, including the barring of entry to those found to have provided material support to terrorist organizations even if that support was coerced. The Commission requested clarification from DHS that material support would not be an obstacle to individuals who supported groups opposed to the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Secretary Chertoff responded in his letter that DHS, in consultation with the Departments of State and Justice, would consider the eligibility of groups that could be exempted from the material support bar, which has been done in the case of groups that oppose the authorities in Burma, for example.

USCIRF DELEGATION TRAVELS TO SAUDI ARABIA



Commissioner Gaer meets with Minister of Islamic Affairs Sheikh Saleh al-Shaykh in Saudi Arabia.

A Commission delegation traveled to Saudi Arabia in May-June, 2007. It visited three distinct regions of the country—Riyadh, Jeddah and the Eastern Province—to discuss religious freedom concerns and progress by the Saudi government in implementing its stated policies related to religious practice and tolerance. These include:

- halting the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology within Saudi Arabia and abroad;
- reviewing and revising educational materials and textbooks;
- protecting the right of private worship and the right to possess personal religious materials;
- curbing harassment of religious practice; and
- empowering indigenous human rights institutions.

Continued on page 6



Commissioners Eid, Land and Gaer during a Dec. 3, 2007 USCIRF hearing on Burma.

USCIRF Holds Public Hearing: "After the Saffron Revolution: Religion, Repression, and U.S. Policy Options for Burma"

On December 3, 2007, the Commission held a public hearing examining how religious freedom abuses perpetuated by the Burmese military junta contribute to the violent repression of peaceful dissent, ongoing abuses against ethnic minorities, and regional instability. Eyewitness reports of the September protests supplemented the testimony of U.S.-based experts representing a range of institutions, including the US Campaign on Burma and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Witnesses also described the junta's oppression of Burma's Rohingya Muslim and Chin Christians, two minority populations whose persecution under the junta often escapes mainstream press coverage.

USCIRF DELEGATION TRAVELS TO SAUDI ARABIA

Continued from page 5

The Commission also discussed the status of religious pluralism in the Kingdom, including freedom of religion and belief for followers of different schools of thought within Sunni and Shi'a Islam.

The Commission was informed of some institutional movement by the Saudi government to address human rights violations. On the eve of the Commission's visit, Saudi Arabia's National Society for Human Rights published its inaugural report, which calls for wide-ranging improvements in

human rights practices in the Kingdom. The issue of abuses by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV), known as the *mutawaa* or religious police, also received unprecedented exposure in the Saudi media while the delegation was visiting. The government has recently opened multiple investigations into alleged violations by members of the CPVPV; however, members have not been held accountable and the courts have dismissed several cases that have been prosecuted.

The Commission visit confirmed that in spite of its pledges to institute reforms, the Saudi government persists in severely restricting all forms of public religious expression other than the government's interpretation and enforcement of Sunni Islam. Although the Saudi government has permitted some nascent steps toward the development of civil society, policies that would advance reforms have not yet been realized.

USCIRF EXPLORES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES IN TURKMENISTAN



Commissioners Cromartie, Argue and Eid with Islamic religious leaders at a reception in Turkmenistan marking the release of former Chief Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah from prison

A Commission delegation visited Turkmenistan in August to examine the state of protections for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, under the new government of President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. Turkmenistan had been among the most repressive states in the world under the late President Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006. Since 2000, the Commission has recommended that the

State Department designate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern" for the government's systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom and related human rights.

Under President Niyazov, virtually no independent religious activity was allowed and severe government restrictions left most religious activity under strict—and often arbitrary—state control. In addition, Niyazov's

personality cult became a quasi-religion to which the population of Turkmenistan was forced to adhere. President Berdimuhamedov has initiated some changes, including the release, just prior to the Commission's trip, of the country's former Chief Mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, and 10 other prisoners of conscience. The Commission delegation traveled to Turkmenistan in part to ascertain whether these changes have made a significant difference in protections for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and whether further changes will be undertaken in the near future.

The delegation met with high-ranking government officials including the president, the ministers of foreign affairs and justice, and members of the Council on Religious Affairs, as well as with representatives of a variety of religious communities in Turkmenistan.

LATE USCIRF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JOE CRAPA MOURNED

Joseph R. Crapa, who led the Commission staff as Executive Director for five years, died of cancer on October 25. “Joe had sharp political instincts but a soft personal touch,” said Michael Cromartie, current Chair of the Commission. “He had an unwavering, principled commitment to advancing the work of this bipartisan Commission in protecting religious freedom worldwide. Everyone who knew and worked with Joe found him to be a remarkably committed public servant.”

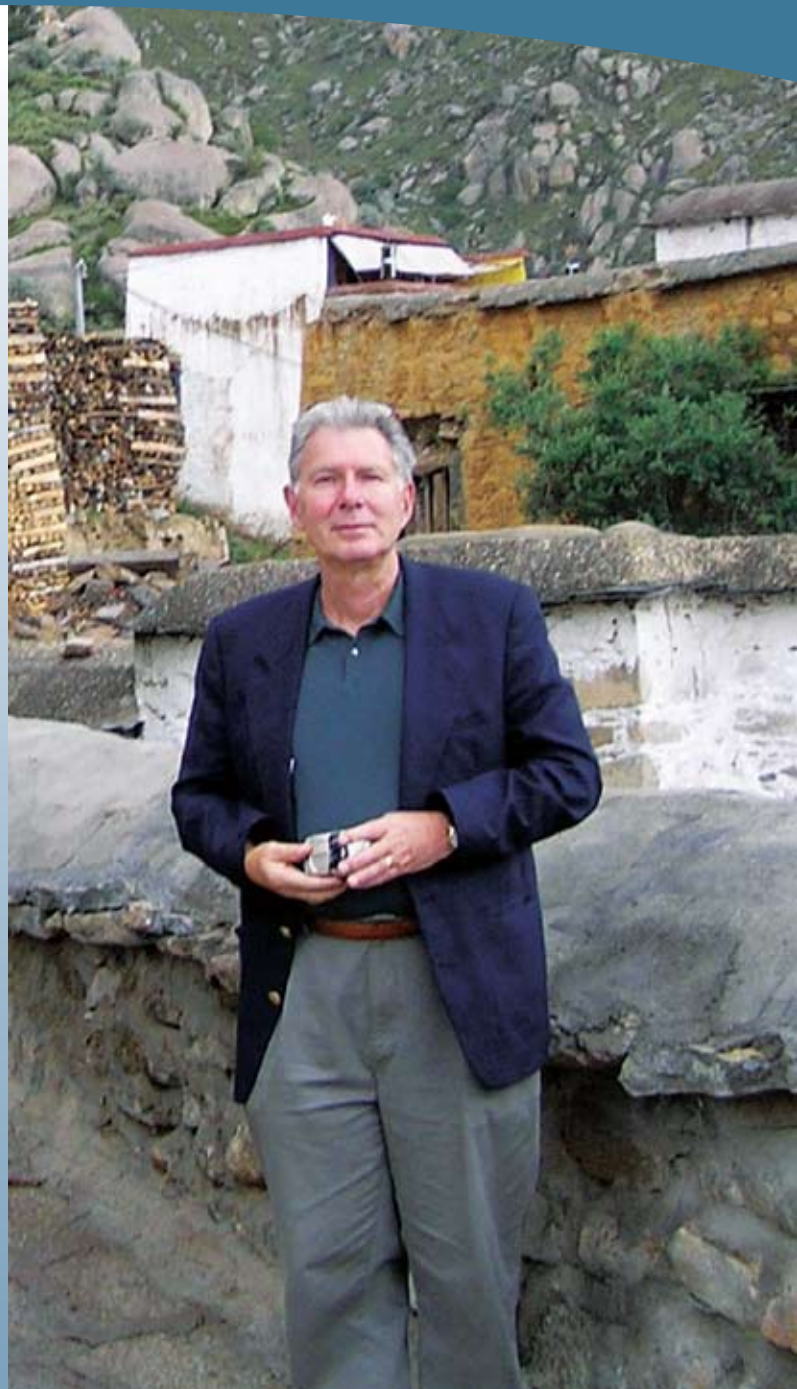


Prior to coming to the Commission, Mr. Crapa served as Chief of Staff to Senator Charles E. Schumer (D-NY). Mr. Crapa spent the four prior years as Assistant Administrator at the U.S. Agency for International Development. He also served as Assistant Secretary at the Department of Agriculture and Associate Administrator at

the Environmental Protection Agency, where his portfolio included Congressional Relations and Public Affairs.

For 10 years, Mr. Crapa served as Chief of Staff to Rep. David Obey (D-WI), currently the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, and also as counsel to the House Appropriations Committee. He was an Adjunct Professor of Government at Georgetown University (1990-1995) and was a Stennis Fellow of Congress (1995-1997). He also was a Lecturer for the Washington Campus, a consortium of universities where he lectured on Congress and the policymaking process.

“He passionately believed that every world citizen had a right to pursue their religious beliefs free from persecution or dictation,” Congressman Obey said in a eulogy at Mr. Crapa’s memorial service on Oct. 29. “He believed in a religion of tolerance and respect.”



USCIRF DELEGATION TRAVELS TO VIETNAM

A Commission delegation visited Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and the Central Highlands in October-November to discuss conditions for freedom of religion and related human rights in Vietnam. The Commission urged the government to undertake full, impartial, and effective investigations into reports of forced renunciations of religion. The Commission delegation also met with prisoners of concern and encouraged government officials to secure their release.

The Commission found that the zone of toleration for religious worship has greatly expanded for most of Vietnam's religious communities. Among ethnic minority Protestants, closed churches have opened and forced renunciations of faith have been greatly reduced. But the Commission remains skeptical of current conditions, particularly in the context of Vietnam's recent repression of peaceful political and religious dissent.

In some areas of the country, provincial officials are using their authority to restrict and abuse religious freedom. Central government authorities either ignore these problems or have not yet done enough to



From left, Commissioners Eid and Bansal, Deputy Chief of Mission Jonathan M. Aloisi of the U.S. Embassy, Hanoi, and Commissioner Cromartie with the Vietnamese Vice Minister for Public Security Nguyen Van Huong in Vietnam.

curtail them. In the Central Highlands and Central Coast, local officials have confiscated the land of ethnic minority Protestants. In the Central Highlands, provincial officials have been trained to deny medical, educational, financial and other government services to “religious families” or to deny them to the families of recent converts.

The Commission raised the issue of restrictions and abuses against Vietnamese Buddhists, and asked Prime Minister Dung to allow followers of the Unified Buddhist

Church of Vietnam, as well as Khmer and Hoa Hao Buddhists, to organize independently and carry out spiritual and charitable activities legally and outside the government-sanctioned Buddhist organizations. The Commission later met with the UBCV's spiritual leader Thich Quang Do in Ho Chi Minh City.



Commissioners Bansal, Gaer, Cromartie, Shea, Prodromou and Land at the May 2 press conference marking the release of USCIRF's 2007 Annual Report.

To Contact the Commission:

United States Commission on
International Religious Freedom
800 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 790
Washington, DC 20002

Web-site: www.uscirt.gov

E-mail: communications@uscirt.gov

Phone: 202-523-3240

Fax: 202-523-5020