

October 8, 2002: U.S. Should Promote Religious Freedom Abroad - Kansas City Star

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October 8, 2002 Secretary of State Colin Powell should adopt the new recommendations of a U.S. commission and name 12 countries as egregious violators of religious freedom. Designating them "countries of particular concern" would require President Bush to pressure violators through diplomacy or with such tools as economic sanctions. This year's list contains some of the usual suspects where repression is concerned - Iran, Iraq, China and North Korea - as well as Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Turkmenistan. For the first time, however, it adds India, Pakistan and Vietnam. And

with good reason. Each country has a sorry record in protecting freedom of worship. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom also created a "Watch List" of countries with problems that so far aren't serious enough to warrant inclusion on the "particular concern" list. The commission put Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria and Uzbekistan on the watch list, though a good case to put each on the "particular concern" list could have been made. The litany of acts of religious oppression in the 12 most problematic countries is long and disheartening. The commission, for instance, reports that the Chinese government's violent campaign has intensified against Christians, Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists and followers of the Falun Gong spiritual movement. In India, violence has been aimed at religious minorities and "those responsible ... are rarely ever held to account." Sometimes, the commission said, those responsible include government officials. Similarly, in neighboring Pakistan, members of religious minorities - especially Christians and Shiite Muslims - often fall victim to violence and repression. Vietnamese citizens suffer "severe violations of religious freedom," the commission reported. About 1,000 Protestants from Vietnam were granted asylum in the United States in the last year as they sought to escape repression. In Saudi Arabia, there simply is no religious freedom, the commission said, despite the large numbers of non-Muslims (including foreign nationals working there on contract) who live there. Freedom of religion is a basic human right. It's a value that was at the very heart of America's founders, and it remains a bedrock principle here. But it's not just an American or Western ideal. It is fundamental to human freedom everywhere. The Commission on International Religious Freedom is doing its job to monitor religious repression around the world. Now the Bush administration must pressure violators to change.