

Thank you for inviting the Commission on International Religious Freedom to participate in this important briefing. I plan to speak on religious freedom in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but I won't spend much of my time describing the appalling religious freedom conditions there, as that topic has been covered. Instead, I will focus on the Commission's mandate to make recommendations to U.S. policymakers. As many of you probably know, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is a U.S. government entity created by Congress to monitor religious freedom around the world and to make independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on how the U.S. can promote religious freedom in foreign countries.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has repeatedly expressed its concern that cooperation in the war against terrorism not be traded off for U.S. silence on religious-freedom and other human rights issues. We have expressed this both publicly to President Bush and in meetings with Secretary of State Powell, Under Secretary of State Dobriansky, and Assistant Secretary Jones. Reflecting what the Commission has said, the Administration has recently affirmed that the campaign against terrorism affords the United States a unique opportunity to encourage much-needed improvement by Uzbekistan's government in its abysmal treatment of religious exercise. In so doing, the United States demonstrates its commitment to its strongest principles and values, including the very rights and freedoms the terrorists would destroy. The upcoming visit to the United States by President Karimov is an opportunity for the Administration to demonstrate its commitment to advancing human rights during the campaign against terrorism by pressing for human rights improvements in Uzbekistan.

With regard to Uzbekistan, let me just briefly add to what my fellow speakers have said by noting that the Commission is extremely concerned about the conditions for religious freedom there, which we have judged to be poor. Generally speaking, the Uzbek government insists on exercising excessive control over all religious practice in that country. Despite the constitutional guarantee of the separation of church and state, the Karimov government strictly regulates Islamic institutions, beliefs, and practice through the officially sanctioned Muslim Spiritual Board. Certain underground groups in Uzbekistan, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, do pose a genuine security threat to the Uzbek government. But in recent years, the Uzbek government has arrested, tortured, and imprisoned thousands of Muslims who reject the state's control over religious practice. In addition, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations passed in May 1998 severely restricts the right of independent Muslims, as well as minority religious groups, to exercise their religious freedom. In short, the Commission believes that the government of Uzbekistan substantially violates the religious freedom of its people.

I should make clear that the Commission supports the Administration's strong response to the threat of terrorism. Moreover, we recognize that the government of Uzbekistan has cooperated

with the United States in the anti-terrorism campaign, resulting in stronger ties between the two countries. However, while the Commission acknowledges the threat of terrorism to the Uzbek government, virtually all observers (and many U.S. government officials) contend that the current government's extremely repressive policies are actively contributing to the growth of – and popular support for – radicalized groups there that the campaign against terrorism is attempting to counter. As Under Secretary Dobriansky told the Commission last December, “extremism in the name of religion tends to take root where religious freedom does not exist.”

The Commission has made a number of recommendations with regard to the United States' relationship with Uzbekistan. In particular, we strongly urge the Administration to take these recommendations into account during the upcoming visit of President Karimov to the United States. If the gross religious freedom violations are a neglected topic during that visit, American silence will only send the message that the U.S. accepts the Uzbek government's repressive—and counterproductive—policies.

In light of Uzbekistan's poor record on religious freedom, the U.S. government should continue to press forcefully its concern about religious freedom violations in Uzbekistan, consistent with the Uzbek government's obligations to promote respect for and observance of human rights. The U.S. government should also press the government of Uzbekistan to discontinue its practice of excessively regulating the free practice of religion in Uzbekistan, including the oppressive regulation of the Islamic clergy and the use of registration requirements to prevent minority religious groups from practicing their faith. Moreover, the Commission believes that the U.S. government should 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.

The Commission further recommends that all U.S. assistance to the Uzbek government, with the exception of assistance to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, should be made contingent upon that government's taking a number of concrete steps to improve conditions for religious freedom for all individuals and religious groups in Uzbekistan. In this case, the United States should not simply accept Uzbek government rhetoric about intended improvements in Uzbekistan; instead, there must be concrete and discernible changes in the current Uzbek government's policies. Such concrete steps could include: releasing persons imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association; ending torture; halting the arrest and detention of persons because of their religious beliefs, practices, or choice of religious association; and refraining from using registration requirements to prevent religious groups from practicing their faith.

The U.S. government should continue to develop assistance programs for Uzbekistan designed to encourage the creation of institutions of civil society that protect human rights and promote religious freedom. This assistance could include training in human rights, the rule of law, and crime investigation for police and other law enforcement officials. However, since such programs have been attempted in the past with little effect, they should be carefully structured to accomplish, and carefully monitored and conditioned upon fulfillment of, these specific goals. Again, if concrete steps indicating improvement are not taken, such assistance should be discontinued.

Finally, in view of the increase in U.S. economic and security assistance to Uzbekistan since last September, the U.S. government should be careful to scrutinize all such assistance to ensure that these programs do not facilitate Uzbek government policies that result in violations of religious freedom and other human rights. Two Uzbek institutions in particular that already receive U.S. security assistance, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Security Service (the former KGB), are cited by human rights groups as having a direct involvement in arresting, detaining, and even torturing a number of religious prisoners.

It should be reiterated here that, by implementing the Commission's recommendations, the U.S. government would not be interfering in the internal affairs of Uzbekistan but only urging the Uzbek government to adhere to its international commitments—commitments to which the government of Uzbekistan has voluntarily agreed—to protect human rights, including religious freedom, and to abide fully by the rule of law, including ensuring due process of law to all.

I'd like to point out that the full set of the Commission's recommendations on Uzbekistan were communicated to President Bush in October of last year and we ask that those recommendations be attached to this testimony as part of the record of this briefing. They can also be found on the Commission's website.

Next Tuesday's visit of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov affords President Bush and the Secretary of State the opportunity to express the U.S. government's concerns over that country's poor record on religious freedom and other human rights. The Commission has a mandate and responsibility to investigate religious persecution, and so it has asked the Secretary of State to help arrange a meeting of President Karimov with our Commission to discuss its concerns directly with him. The Commission awaits Secretary Powell's response and hopes that he will see the importance of including the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in such meetings with governments that are severe religious freedom violators.

The Commission also remains gravely concerned about the situation in Turkmenistan, where conditions for religious freedom are extremely bad. Only two religions are officially recognized, Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church, and even these two are highly restricted by the

state. Other religions are effectively prohibited from operating freely. The 1997 version of the religion law not only required all groups to re-register with the government, but also made registration considerably more onerous. Numerous churches and religious groups that had been registered for years suddenly found themselves “deregistered” and prevented from re-registering due to these deliberately onerous registration requirements. Most groups, no matter what their religious orientation, are now “deregistered,” and thus, in effect, banned and actively suppressed.

In view of the ongoing, egregious, and systematic violations of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, in 2000 and 2001, the Commission called on the U.S. Department of State to name Turkmenistan a country of particular concern, or CPC, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). However, the State Department so far has declined to designate Turkmenistan a CPC. Given that the State Department’s own report on religious freedom noted that the Turkmen government’s “respect for freedom of religion deteriorated” last year, it seems increasingly difficult to understand the U.S. government’s refusal to name Turkmenistan a CPC.

The Commission has formulated further recommendations on Turkmenistan, which we are releasing today. I will summarize them briefly now and ask that the Commission’s complete report and recommendations on Turkmenistan be made a part of the record of this briefing.

The Commission recommends that the U.S. government suspend all non-humanitarian assistance to the government of Turkmenistan, with the exception of programs that serve specifically identifiable U.S. national security interests in connection with the current campaign against terrorism, an exception that should, however, be very narrowly construed. Any remaining U.S. assistance should be scrutinized to ensure that these programs do not facilitate Turkmen government policies or practices that result in religious freedom violations. In addition, state visits between the United States and Turkmenistan should be suspended until such time as religious freedom conditions in the country have improved significantly.

The U.S. government should identify specific steps that the government of Turkmenistan must take in order to reinstate U.S. economic and security assistance, much of which is suspended due to the country’s poor human rights record. These steps should reflect a substantial improvement in the protection of religious freedom and should include, but not be limited to: the lifting of oppressive legal requirements on religious groups and allowing all such groups to organize and operate freely; the end to harassment and deportation of religious leaders; and the halting of unjust arrest, detention, imprisonment, torture and residential and workplace intimidation of religious leaders and their adherents.

Finally, the U.S. government should raise the issue of religious freedom violations in Turkmenistan at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The United States should

sponsor a resolution, which would, among other things, create a U.N. special rapporteur to investigate the situation in Turkmenistan.

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, thank you for the opportunity to discuss policy options for these important countries.