

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Executive Summary

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The International Commitment to Religious Freedom

The vast majority of the world's governments have committed themselves to respect religious freedom. Indeed, most have accepted one or more of the international instruments that explicitly protect that right. For example, 144 countries are parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which acknowledges the right of every human being "to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" and "either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching." All have pledged "not to discriminate on the basis of religion."

Notwithstanding the existence of this and other broadly accepted international instruments protecting religious freedom, there remains in some countries a substantial difference between promise and practice. Much of the world's population lives in countries in which the right to religious freedom is restricted or prohibited. This gap between word and deed has several causes.

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes remain determined to control religious belief and practice. The result--inevitably--is persecution. Other regimes are hostile to minority or unapproved religions. Some tolerate, and thereby encourage, persecution or discrimination. Although acts of violence against religious minorities may have several causes--for example, ethnicity, or a perceived security threat--multicausality does not necessarily diminish the significance of religion.

Still other governments--often either democratic or aspirants to democracy--have adopted discriminatory legislation or policies that give preferences to favored religions while disadvantaging others, in contravention of international instruments. Some democratic states have undertaken policies resulting in the stigmatization of minority religions--the result of identifying them indiscriminately and inaccurately with dangerous "sects" or "cults."

Occasionally a nation's policy on religious freedom can be better understood in the context of its history, culture, and tradition--a particular religion may have dominated the life of a nation for centuries, making more difficult the acceptance of new faiths that offer challenges in both cultural and theological terms. But tradition and culture should not be used as a pretext for legislation or policies that restrict genuine religious belief or its legitimate manifestations. Legal restrictions on religious practice--permitted under international covenants for the protection of public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others--should be applied scrupulously and fairly, in as limited a way as possible, without discriminating among religions. The practice of requiring religi-

ous groups to register before they can engage in activities such as worship is, by its nature, subject to abuse by local jurisdictions, even in cases where it is designed by central authorities to be applied in a nondiscriminatory fashion. Nor should a legitimate concern over the destructive and unlawful behavior of a small number of groups be employed so indiscriminately that new or minority religions--perhaps poorly understood or controversial but nevertheless posing no danger to public safety, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others--are wrongfully stigmatized.

In the end, every nation should meet the standards on religious freedom established by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and other international instruments and covenants that they have accepted. Each nation is accountable to the international community for its failure to meet these standards. The United States acknowledges and accepts its responsibility to meet these standards in the safeguarding and protection of religious liberty.

There are no good reasons for any government to violate religious freedom or to tolerate those within its warrant who do. There are, however, many good reasons to promote religious freedom (see Introduction, pp. 1-2). To that end, this Executive Summary identifies some of the barriers to religious freedom that exist, provides examples of countries where those barriers are in place, and describes actions that the United States has taken, is taking, and will continue to take as a means of fulfilling its responsibilities under its own law and to the human family of which it is a part.

Barriers to Religious Freedom

Totalitarian or Authoritarian Attempts to Control Religious Belief or Practice

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes are defined by the degree to which they seek to control thought and expression, especially dissent. It is not uncommon for such regimes to regard minority religious groups as enemies of the State because of the content of the religion, the fact that the very practice of religion threatens the dominant ideology (often by diverting loyalties of adherents toward something beyond the State), the ethnic character of the religious group, or a mixture of all three. When this association occurs, the result is often religious persecution directed by the regime.

Afghanistan lacks a recognized government, but is under the substantial control of the Taliban movement, which has engaged in persecution and killing of Afghan Shi'a in significant part because of their religious beliefs. The Taliban also has attempted to implement its version of Shari'a law by, inter alia, reliance on a police force that imposes severe physical punishment and imprisonment for deviations from codes of worship or dress. In Burma the Government continued systematically to arrest and imprison Buddhist monks who promoted human and political rights. There were unconfirmed reports that security forces tortured and killed four monks in 1997. There were credible reports that security forces destroyed or looted churches, mosques, and Buddhist monasteries in some insurgent ethnic minority areas. There were credible reports that security forces in some insurgent Chin ethnic minority areas used coercive measures, including exemptions from forced labor on the basis of religion, to induce Christians to convert to Buddhism, and detention and physical abuse of Christian clergy to prevent proselytizing.

In China government intolerance of unregistered religious activity has led in some areas to persecution of persons on the basis of their religious practice, through harassment, prolonged detention, and

incarceration in prison or "reform through labor" camps, and police closure of places of worship and other holy places. In other areas, government supervision of religious activity is minimal. There were credible reports of incidents of abuse or torture of Buddhist monks and nuns. Some members of the following religions have been subject to persecution--Tibetan Buddhists, Uighurs of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and Protestants and Roman Catholics who do not belong to the "official" churches.

While these practices are not uniform and do not affect all denominations at all times, the government of Cuba engages in active efforts to monitor and control religious institutions, including surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of clergy and members; evictions from and confiscations of places of worship; and preventive detention of religious activists. It also uses registration as a mechanism of control; by refusing to register new denominations, it makes them vulnerable to charges of illegal association. Although in 1991 the Government abolished prohibitions on religious adherents joining the Communist Party, it generally discourages members of the armed forces from permitting members of their households to observe religious practices.

The Government of Iran has implemented coordinated policies designed to eradicate the Baha'i Faith through prolonged detention and imprisonment of Baha'is because of their religious beliefs, confiscation and desecration of graveyards and other holy places, denial of the right to assemble and elect religious officials, denial of access to higher education, and denial of civil rights in general. The Government has executed Baha'is because of their religious beliefs. Other religious minorities, including Jews, Sunni Muslims, and Christians, suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned religious discrimination.

In Iraq the one-party Government controlled by Saddam Hussein has for decades conducted a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, and protracted arbitrary detention against the religious leaders and adherents of the Shi'a Muslim population. Security forces have murdered senior Shi'a clerics, desecrated mosques and holy sites, arrested tens of thousands of Shi'a, and forcibly prevented Shi'a from practicing their religion. The past 18 months have seen an acceleration of a systematic campaign to eliminate the senior Shi'a religious leadership. There is also systematic repression of Iraq's more than 350,000 Christian Assyrians and Chaldeans, especially forced movements of these groups from northern areas and denial of their political rights.

The Government of Laos attempted to supervise and limit religious freedom among the majority Buddhist population, including mandatory Marxist-Leninist training for monks. It was unable to control harsh measures taken by some local and provincial authorities against minority religious groups, including detentions without charge and, in isolated cases, forced renunciations of faith. The Government of North Korea persecutes all perceived opponents, including those engaged in religious practices deemed unacceptable to the regime. Other harsh penalties--including imprisonment--reportedly result from unauthorized religious activity. Credible reports indicate that prisoners held on the basis of their religion are regarded by those in authority as insane, and are, because of their religion, sometimes treated worse than other prisoners.

The Government of Vietnam uses a registration process to control and monitor religious activity, severely restricting any practice by groups other than officially sanctioned organizations. Clergy from many religious groups--including Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Protestant, and Roman Catholic--reportedly

have been detained arbitrarily without charge. Perhaps 30 to 50 persons are imprisoned in Vietnam because of their religious beliefs.

State Hostility Toward Minority or Nonapproved Religions

Some governments, while not necessarily determined to implement a program of control over minority religions, are nevertheless hostile to certain religions and implement policies designed to intimidate them, cause their adherents to convert to another religion, or cause their members to flee.

In Pakistan discriminatory legislation has encouraged an atmosphere of religious intolerance, which has led to acts of violence by extremists against members of religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Zikris. A colonial-era blasphemy law in recent years has been sharpened to include the death sentence for acts considered blasphemous. While no one has been executed under its provisions, some persons have been sentenced to death, and authorities and private citizens have used the law to threaten and intimidate Ahmadis, Christians, and some orthodox Muslims. Extremists have killed persons accused under the law with impunity. The Government severely restricts Ahmadis from practicing their religious beliefs in public. Ahmadis and Christians in particular face harassment and intimidation; the generalized atmosphere of religious intolerance has led to false charges against both groups.

The Government of Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni majority, and some instances of arbitrary detention, travel restrictions, and political and economic discrimination against members of the Shi'a minority have occurred. Non-Muslims are required to worship privately in Saudi Arabia, and any attempt to convert a Muslim to another faith is subject to criminal prosecution. Public religious worship by any non-Muslim is a criminal offense, as is any attempt to convert Muslims to a non-Muslim religion. In Serbia, a predominantly Christian Orthodox country, authorities employed killing, torture, rape, and forced mass emigration against Kosovar Albanians, who are overwhelmingly Muslim, in an effort to drive them from the country. In Sudan an ongoing civil war provided the context for severe abuses against religious minorities by the controlling regime. Christians, practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, and Muslims who deviate from the Government's interpretation of Islam are subject to severe limits on religious freedom, including killing, prolonged arbitrary detention or imprisonment, threats, violence, and forced conversion to Islam. The Government's support of the practice of slavery and its bombing of villages in the Nuba mountains are due in significant part to the victims' religious beliefs.

State Neglect of the Problem of Discrimination Against, or Persecution of, Minority or Nonapproved Religions

In some countries governments have laws or policies to discourage religious discrimination and persecution but fail to act with sufficient consistency and vigor against violations of religious freedom by nongovernmental entities.

The attitude of the central Government of Bulgaria has been increasingly positive in encouraging religious tolerance, and harassment of minority religions tended to decrease during 1998 and the first half of 1999. However, local authorities continue to subject unregistered or unpopular religious groups to harassment. In Egypt members of the non-Muslim minority generally worship without in-

terference, but there is some societal and governmental discrimination. There remain some discrepancies between official and unofficial accounts of a 1998 incident of police brutality in the village of al-Kush, in which some assert that there were troubling religious elements. The Government has since reopened the investigation. Human rights activists and the U.S. Government continue to watch the situation closely. President Hosni Mubarak has delegated the authority to approve church repairs, and the approval process is becoming less cumbersome.

In India state governments initially downplayed a sharp upswing in violence perpetrated by extremists against religious minorities and their places of worship. Responses by state and local prosecutors to these events often were inadequate. In some cases, local police and government officials abetted the violence. In Indonesia, while the central Government's policy is to promote religious tolerance, there have been incidents of violence between groups of believers that have gone unpunished by local authorities. While these incidents often involved long-standing disputes between communities or ethnic groups, extremists have used them to stir up interreligious tensions.

The Government of the Maldives does not permit places of worship--other than in private homes--for religions other than Islam. Authorities detained foreigners, including children, for proselytizing, and expelled them for life. The Government of Uzbekistan adopted a new law that restricts religious activity and implemented registration requirements enabling the Government to maintain control over religious groups. Uzbek law criminalizes certain legitimate religious activities, and authorities have used it to harass, arrest, and imprison some religious believers. There are widespread, credible reports of authorities planting narcotics on clergy and members of unapproved religious organizations to create false criminal charges leading to prolonged imprisonment.

Discriminatory Legislation or Policies Disadvantaging Certain Religions

Some governments have implemented laws or regulations that favor certain religions and place others at a disadvantage. Often this circumstance is the result of the historical predominance of one religion in a country and may reflect broad social skepticism about new or minority religions. Sometimes it stems from the emergence of a country from a long period of Communist rule, in which all religion was prohibited or at best out of favor. In such countries, skepticism or even fear of certain religions or all religions lingers within segments of society. This has led in some cases to a curtailment of religious freedom.

In Armenia the Armenian Apostolic Church, the national church, is not subject to some restrictions on religious freedom that are imposed on members of other faiths. All other faiths must register; of the groups that had applied by June 30, 1999, all except Jehovah's Witnesses were granted registration. The Government denied registration to Jehovah's Witnesses because, authorities contend, proselytizing is central to their activity. In Azerbaijan the Government limits religious activity by foreigners and Azerbaijani members of what the Government considers to be nontraditional religious groups. Restrictions include burdensome registration requirements, limitations on freedom to proselytize, and interference with dissemination of printed materials. Authorities have broken up meetings of Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, who have faced harassment, arrest, detention, restrictions on preaching, fines, and in the case of foreigners, deportation. Most of the groups affected by these restrictions note that they have been applied sporadically and that most groups operate freely.

A 1995 cabinet decree by the Government of Belarus regulating religious workers continues to be enforced, reflecting an attempt by the Government to protect and promote one religion while placing others at a disadvantage. Some religions that the Government considers to be "nontraditional"--including some Protestant denominations and the Belarus Orthodox Autocephalous Church--are prohibited from registering and having foreign leaders or clergy.

The Government of Eritrea has singled out members of Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than members of other faiths who refuse mandatory national service, including detention without charge for more than 4 years. Government entities in Jordan harassed evangelical Christian groups, by, for example, detaining and deporting noncitizen Arab Muslim students of the Jordanian Evangelical Theological Seminary while the school awaits accreditation by the Ministry of Education. The school has been granted permission to purchase land for a seminary and campus on condition of accreditation. The Government of Kazakhstan requires religious organizations to register in order to receive legal status. Evangelical Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have encountered government harassment in some localities. The Government tabled a restrictive religion law but later withdrew it. In Nepal conversion and proselytizing are constitutionally prohibited, and punishable by fines or imprisonment, or, in the case of foreigners, expulsion from the country.

In Russia a restrictive 1997 law on religion replaced a 1990 law that had encouraged religious freedom. The new law creates categories of religious communities with differing levels of legal status and privilege. Communities that cannot prove their existence in Russia for 15 years are placed at a disadvantage in status and rights, according to the law; however, in practice, implementation of this provision varies widely around the country. Central authorities have pledged to implement the law in a manner consistent with religious freedom and have diminished the impact of some of the law's most troubling provisions. However, local authorities have not always implemented the law in a manner consistent with religious freedom. The vagueness of the law and regulations, as well as contradictions between interpretations of the 1997 law and other federal and local laws, have permitted discriminatory practices at the local level. Federal authorities have not taken sufficient action to reverse discriminatory actions taken at the local level or to discipline those officials responsible. Other nations in central Asia and eastern Europe have looked carefully at, and some appear to be adopting, this Russian model of handling religious minorities.

The Government of Turkey has supported a ban on the wearing of religious head garments in government offices and state-run facilities for 50 years. In June 1999, 75 defendants went on trial for protesting Inonu University's ban on headscarves. Of these, 51 defendants, including 4 women, could face the death penalty on charges of attempting to change the constitutional order by force. However, in August 1999 the new Ecevit-led Government introduced amnesty legislation that would allow those students expelled for wearing headscarves and beards to reapply. The Parliament also in August 1999 amended the political parties law in order to make it more difficult for the courts to outlaw parties.

The Government of Turkmenistan has a religion law that provides for significant government control of religion and religious organizations. Only two religious groups--Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians--have enough members to meet the threshold for registration under the law. This requirement has disadvantaged several minority religions, especially the Baha'i Faith, whose adherents have been prevented from conducting services since 1997. Religions other than those officially

approved by the Government, i.e., Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Pentecostals, face official harassment, including the seizure of religious materials.

In Ukraine a 1993 amendment to the 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion restricts the activities of nonnative, foreign-based, religious organizations (defined as other than Orthodox, Greek Catholic, or Jewish), although the Government generally respects freedom of religion for native religions. The Government's protection of religious freedom for nonnative religious organizations has deteriorated in recent years, but in 1999 nonnative religions reported less difficulty in obtaining visas and registering. Individual believers do not experience discrimination. However, the organizations continue to face difficulties in carrying out some of their activities such as registering, buying, or leasing property.

Stigmatization of Certain Religions by Wrongfully Associating Them with Dangerous "Cults" or "Sects"

During the past decade, governments and parliaments in a number of countries have focused their attention on the growth of new cults, in particular a number of dangerous organizations such as Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, or the Solar Temple in Canada and Switzerland. Since 1995 the parliaments or governments of Belgium, France, and Germany, as well as Sweden, and the Swiss canton of Geneva have produced parliamentary reports on new cults and religions, and on elements of longstanding religions.

In the French and Belgian reports, the terms "sects" or "cults" were used to describe the groups at issue. The 1995 French parliamentary report admits that the French term "secte" is a pejorative word that evokes negative stereotypes in the popular mind, but nevertheless used the word to describe a broad range of groups. The Belgian parliamentary report also noted that the word has assumed pejorative connotations in modern usage, but stated that it employed the term in the traditional sense--a group of organized persons espousing the same doctrine within a religion.

Both reports attached a list of groups; the lists have been used inside and outside the government as "sect lists." In preparing these lists, neither parliamentary commission made a serious attempt to permit the groups to respond to the allegations made about them. The Belgian parliamentary report's list did not characterize the groups listed. The Belgian Commission stated that sects and new religious movements are neither intrinsically dangerous nor harmful. The Belgian Parliament adopted the report's recommendations but not the list of sects.

The Swedish report, issued in 1999, criticized the absence of objective methodology in the French and Belgian reports and asserted that the French commissioners had conducted their efforts in "common cause" with biased private antisect groups. The European Union, in its statement on religious freedom to a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), stated: "The legitimate concern over the proliferation of dangerous sects should not lead to the indiscriminate labeling of all new religions as sects or cults, as this engenders distrust, and can influence the belief that all new religions threaten society."

The Swedish report identifies these groups by the more objective term of "new religious movements." The Swedish report's evidence was derived from public (rather than secret) hearings and interviews

with a wide range of persons. The German parliamentary commission's interim report, issued in 1997, bore a significant resemblance to the French and Belgian reports. However, the final report, issued in 1998, presented a more balanced and objective assessment of the situation. It concluded, for example, that the new religious movements do not present a threat to society and that their activities are not cause for political concern. The report nevertheless urged continuing surveillance of the Church of Scientology.

In response to the concerns about new religious movements, the governments of Austria, Belgium, and France adopted new laws or established commissions and interministerial bodies to address the issues raised by such groups. These commissions and bodies include, among their enumerated responsibilities, "monitoring" the activities of sects, combating groups that engage in harmful or illegal practices, and coordinating intergovernmental actions against sects. The term "sect" in recent years has, on occasion, taken on a pejorative connotation. In one form of usage, the closest equivalent in English is "cult." When used without specificity, the term permits authorities to blur distinctions between new religions and illegitimate groups and can focus attention on groups that appear to be different or unusual, rather than on illegal activities.

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U.S. ACTIONS TO PROMOTE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ABROAD

Introduction

The promotion of religious freedom involves far more than public airing of violations. The most productive work often is done behind the scenes, for a very simple reason: no government or nation is likely to respond with alacrity when publicly rebuked. It is, of course, sometimes necessary for the United States, and the international community, openly to denounce particularly abhorrent behavior by another nation. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act mandates presidential action in cases of particularly severe violations of religious freedom, although it grants considerable flexibility in deciding on what action to take.

Religious freedom is one of the fundamental human rights provided for international covenants. In general the best public method of promoting religious freedom is to advocate the universal principles--in particular the inviolable dignity of the human person--that are nourished when religious freedom is valued and protected. This approach increasingly is being integrated into public U.S. foreign policy channels, through international exchanges, Worldnet and VOA broadcasts, a religious freedom website within the homepage of the Department of State, conferences, public opinion polling, congressional hearings, and speeches and press conferences by senior U.S. foreign policy officials. Much remains to be done in our public diplomacy, but the following pages indicate some of the progress that has been made.

Central to the integration of religious freedom into the fabric of U.S. policy is the training of U.S. officials most likely to encounter those persecuted because of their religious beliefs: The consular officer in a U.S. embassy who interviews a refugee applicant; the U.S. political officer seeking information on a prisoner; the asylum official at a U.S. airport hearing the plea of a woman fleeing religious persecution, and the interpreter who must render her foreign tongue into English with precision

and sympathy; and the U.S. immigration judge who must hear the case of the alien in danger of being returned to his country, and into harm's way, because of his religious beliefs.

It is in part with these U.S. officials that the success or failure of our religious freedom policy lies. Some of their efforts are highlighted in the following pages; others can be found in the Appendices to this report, which detail the initial efforts of the Departments of State and Justice to institutionalize training for their personnel in areas critical to promoting religious freedom abroad.

Finally, it bears repeating that the United States seeks to promote religious freedom, not simply to criticize, or to make headlines. There are many paths to this end, some of them involving the difficult work of scrutinizing legal documents and draft legislation, mastering the history and culture of diverse societies, and understanding religious beliefs and practices alien to our own. Some paths involve risk, particularly when the objective is to liberate the prisoner, to stop the torture, or to stay the execution. Such vital work usually is done out of the limelight, often without acknowledgement, occasionally without knowing its result.

But the work must, and does, take place. It happens when a Foreign Service Officer, sometimes at the risk of safety, presses authorities to know where the priest has been taken and why. It happens when an ambassador, after discussing with a senior official his country's important strategic relationship with the United States, raises that "one more thing"--access to the imprisoned mufti, or information on the missionary who has disappeared. It happens when senior U.S. officials, responsible for balancing and pursuing all of America's vital national interests, make it clear that a single persecuted human being, perhaps obscure and insignificant in the grand affairs of state, matters to the world's most powerful nation.

The Year in Review

During the period covered by this report--1998 and the first 6 months of 1999--the United States has engaged in a variety of efforts to promote the right of religious freedom and to oppose violations of that right. Its front line in pursuing these goals has been our overseas Missions--the embassies, consulates general, and consulates of the United States. Frequently the Chief of Mission has led the way, as have other members of the country team.

U.S. Mission efforts inevitably are centered on human rights officers, as well as consular officers, who serve as the eyes and ears of the mission in its search for information, and its voice in the advocacy of religious freedom. Their work is facilitated by the wisdom and practical knowledge of local national embassy staff colleagues, whose contributions to international religious freedom frequently advance the interests of the United States. Public affairs officers coordinate the vital work of public diplomacy in order to present U.S. policy with accuracy and thoroughness. This work requires clear explanations both of the "American approach" to religious freedom in the United States, and of the U.S. practice of applying only international standards in its assessment of foreign governments.

No less important is the tone and context set by senior U.S. officials when they speak publicly on the subject of religious freedom, or privately with foreign heads of government and other policy makers. The President, the Secretary of State, and many of her senior staff have addressed the issue in venues throughout the world. Within the United States, a critical role is played by the Department of Justice

and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the agencies responsible for dealing with refugees and asylum seekers who are fleeing religious persecution. The Department of State is responsible for training some officials who interview refugee applicants; the Department of Justice is responsible for training officials who interview both refugee and asylum applicants, and those who adjudicate their cases (see Appendices).

The fulcrum of the effort to promote religious freedom lies in a State Department office established in the summer of 1998, and further mandated by the International Religious Freedom Act--the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. The office is headed by an Ambassador at Large who serves as a principal advisor to the President and the Secretary of State on religious freedom. As such, the Ambassador at Large recommends U.S. policies on religious freedom and oversees the implementation of those policies, both in the United States and worldwide. The Secretary of State has instructed the Ambassador to integrate U.S. policy on religious freedom into the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy, and--at the same time--into the structure of the Foreign Service and the Department of State.

The Secretary of State, through the Offices of International Religious Freedom and Country Reports and Asylum Affairs (both in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor), is responsible for preparing the annual report to Congress on the status of religious freedom worldwide. In carrying out this task, the Bureau draws on U.S. mission reporting, visits by the Ambassador at Large and his staff to individual countries, participation in multilateral meetings and conferences, and on evidence provided by religious and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), religious organizations and individuals. In the future, the work of monitoring and reporting also will be guided by the recommendations and annual report of the Commission on International Religious Freedom established in the 1998 Act.

The following section summarizes some of the many efforts undertaken by various elements of the U.S. Government's foreign policy community to promote religious freedom. It is by no means exhaustive, but endeavors to provide by way of example a realistic portrait of U.S. actions. Further details may be found in the individual country reports.

U.S. Missions Abroad: Ambassadors

Responsible for balancing and implementing the full range of U.S. foreign policy interests in their respective countries, U.S. ambassadors frequently have been called upon to explain and advocate American policy on religious freedom. Our Chiefs of Mission in countries throughout the world have discussed with a variety of senior officials the U.S. commitment to freedom of religion, the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, and U.S. policies designed to advance religious freedom.

U.S. ambassadors have been involved personally in individual cases of religious persecution. For example, when underground Chinese Catholic Bishop Su Zhimin disappeared in late 1997, our Ambassador in China began a mission campaign to determine his whereabouts--an effort that continues. The Ambassador, and in his absence the Charge d'Affaires, have pursued with Chinese authorities at the highest levels this and many other individual religious freedom cases involving disappearance, imprisonment, and persecution.

The U.S. Ambassador to Eritrea repeatedly raised cases involving religious minorities with senior officials, as did our Ambassadors to India and Jordan. The U.S. Ambassador to Egypt maintained a regular dialog with senior religious and government leaders, including the President, on human rights and religious freedom issues that has sensitized authorities on U.S. concerns about treatment of Coptic Christians and other religious minorities. In Kazakhstan following reports of government harassment of six groups of legally registered Jehovah's Witnesses, the Ambassador raised U.S. concerns with senior officials. Our Ambassador in Laos made repeated demarches to senior government officials to release Christians jailed in Vientiane, to release others detained for their religious beliefs, and to relax restrictions on freedom of religion.

Immediately after the May 1998 Marina Roshcha synagogue bombing, our Ambassador to Russia publicly criticized the act and visited the site. In Uzbekistan the Ambassador has discussed with the Foreign Minister the disappearance of Imam Abidkhon Nazarov, and both the Ambassador and Charge have met with the Foreign Minister to discuss religious detainees and prisoners.

In countries where restrictive laws or policies are proposed or implemented, Chiefs of Mission have involved themselves in the delicate process of discussing domestic legislation with government officials. For example, in Austria the American Ambassador met with senior government officials and parliamentarians to express U.S. concerns about new religion legislation. The Ambassador also has written to the Austrian president concerning the legislation. In Azerbaijan the Ambassador urged the spiritual leader of the Caucasus Muslims to adhere to their commitments to support religious freedom. The Ambassador also met with the Deputy Prime Minister on behalf of the Catholic Church, which had been seeking registration unsuccessfully since November 1997. As a result of this and other efforts, the Catholic Church was registered officially in Azerbaijan.

In a series of private meetings in early 1999 with senior Kazakhstani officials, our Ambassador raised concerns about the restrictive draft amendments to a religion law. Following the June 1998 expulsion of foreigners from the Maldives, the U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka (responsible for the Maldives) repeatedly stressed to the Government the importance of freedom of religion as a basic human right.

In Russia the American Ambassador regularly raises religious freedom issues with senior officials in the Government and in the Presidential Administration. In Saudi Arabia the U.S. Ambassador, the Deputy Chief of Mission, and the U.S. Consuls General in Jeddah and Dhahran raised issues of religious freedom on numerous occasions. The U.S. Ambassador in Uzbekistan met with the Foreign Minister to point out shortcomings in a new and restrictive law on religion and to discuss cases of individuals whose right to religious freedom has been restricted by implementation of the law.

Chiefs of Mission also devote considerable time to hearing the views of local religious leaders. For example, the U.S. Ambassador to Greece held a reception for the head of the Orthodox Church in North America, to which leaders of all faiths in Greece were invited. The Ambassador also participated in the inauguration of a Holocaust Memorial in Thessaloniki and the newly located Jewish Museum in Athens. In Israel the Ambassador and other officials routinely met with Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i leaders at a variety of levels. In Turkey the U.S. Consul General in Istanbul maintains a close relationship with the Ecumenical Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate, and other religious minorities. In Ukraine our Ambassador has met with the local Roman Catholic Archbishop to discuss his church's restitution claims and has spoken at a founding

conference of the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine, an umbrella organization composed of over 250 Jewish organizations from across the country.

U.S. Missions Abroad: Embassy Officers

Below the level of Chief of Mission, there are scores of Foreign Service Officers worldwide whose portfolios include religious freedom and other human rights concerns. Their truly remarkable efforts in pursuing those concerns are recognized in the Department of State's Human Rights and Democracy Achievement award, given annually for outstanding reporting on human rights issues, including religious freedom. While it would be impossible, even in the individual country reports, to catalog all their activities to promote religious freedom, a few examples, listed alphabetically by country, will highlight the kind of work being done.

While the U.S. Embassy in Kabul has been closed for the past 10 years, the United States maintains contact with all factions in Afghanistan. U.S. officials have raised religious freedom issues with representatives of the factions, including the Taliban, and have called for the protection of the rights of religious minorities. In Armenia embassy officials met with the Chairman of the President's Human Rights commission and the military prosecutor on the issue of Jehovah's Witnesses. In Austria embassy officials met with representatives of the Government, Parliament, NGO's, and religious groups to convey U.S. concerns that the country strictly observe its commitments to religious freedom.

In Belarus the U.S. Embassy has raised religious freedom with the Government in the context of frequent demarches on human rights. It has contacts with minority religious groups, and the Belarusian Interconfessional Association. Our Embassy in Belgium has discussed religious freedom with officials from the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs as well as with Members of Parliament. An ongoing dialog exists between the Embassy and the Ministry of Justice at the cabinet level regarding the implementation of recommendations of the 1997 parliamentary report on sectarian organizations. The U.S. Embassy in Bulgaria regularly monitors religious freedom with government officials, clergy, lay leaders of minority communities, and NGO's. Embassy officers have met with Orthodox clergy from both sides of the schism, the new chief Mufti of the Muslim community, Jewish leaders, the Catholic Archbishop of Sofia, and Protestant leaders.

Our Embassy in Rangoon has advocated U.S. policy to the Government of Burma both informally and through repeated formal demarches, as well as to the public, to representatives of the governments of other countries and of international organizations, to international media representatives, to scholars, and to representatives of U.S. and international businesses. Embassy staff have met repeatedly with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious groups, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religious-affiliated organizations and NGO's.

In China U.S. Embassy officials protest when there are reports of religious persecution or discrimination. If the facts are incomplete or contradictory, they press for further information. When underground Catholic Bishop Su Zhimin of Hebei province disappeared, the Embassy immediately began efforts to ascertain his status and whereabouts, requesting information from Chinese officials in Beijing and Hebei province. Chinese officials claimed that the Bishop was free but rejected embassy requests to see him. Over the next year and one-half, there were conflicting reports about Bishop Su's status, and the Embassy continued to press his case. Embassy officers also regularly raised with Chi-

nese officials the cases of other religious prisoners and reports of religious persecution, including Pastor Xu Yongze, the boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama, Abbot Chadrel Rimpoche, Tibetan monks and nuns reported to have been beaten in prison, and Pastor Li Dexian.

The U.S. Interests Section in Cuba maintained regular contact with the various religious communities in the country, and supported NGO initiatives to aid religious groups. The U.S. regularly seeks to facilitate the issuance of licenses for travel by religious persons and for donated goods and materials for religious organizations. The Interests Section reports on cases of discrimination and harassment, and the U.S. Government continuously marshals international pressure on the Cuban Government to cease its repressive practices.

In Egypt the issue of religious freedom was raised by embassy officials at all levels of government. The Embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and conducts regular discussions with governors, Members of Parliament, local religious leaders, academics, businessmen, and citizens outside of the capital area and from a lower-income background. The Embassy's expression of interest resulted in the release from temporary detention of two Muslim converts to Christianity and the lifting of outdated travel restrictions on these men and two other colleagues. Our mission staff in Eritrea met regularly with leaders of all faiths, including Eritrean delegates to Norwegian-sponsored talks between Ethiopian and Eritrean religious leaders.

The U.S. Embassy in France has met several times with the interministerial commission that deals with sects. By raising concerns about some French official statements and policies toward religious minorities, the Embassy seeks an understanding with the Government on acceptable actions under international agreements, and to ensure that groups labeled as "sects" have an opportunity to address French officials about their situation. In Germany embassy officers have been involved in an ongoing effort to promote a dialog between German authorities and representatives of the Church of Scientology.

The U.S. Embassy in Greece regularly met with officials responsible for religious affairs in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education and Religious Affairs, and with representatives of various religious groups. It also has sponsored events to foster understanding between Orthodox and non-Orthodox religious groups. In India embassy officers met with government officials on a regular basis to monitor religious freedom issues. The Embassy maintained contacts with American residents, including the NGO and missionary communities.

The American Embassy in Indonesia publicly calls on the Government to restore order in communities torn by violence, including in areas where tensions between groups with different religious affiliations have led to bloodshed. It repeatedly urged the Government to take all appropriate measures to halt interreligious killings in these and other areas, and to prevent its recurrence or repetition elsewhere. The U.S. has provided significant funding for NGO's implementing projects to promote religious tolerance.

Embassy representatives in Laos discussed cases of religious persecution with the Human Rights Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and established an ongoing dialog with the Department of Religious Affairs in the Lao National Front and with other high-ranking officials in the National Front. Embassy officials met with all religious leaders in the country, including well-placed Theravada Bud-

dhist monks. In coordination with the Embassy, visiting U.S. officials raised the question of eight Christians who remained imprisoned until June 1999. In Nepal the U.S. Embassy raised with the Government its denial of permission for a Good Friday ceremony. When a Seventh-Day Adventist aid organization came under government scrutiny after rumors that it proselytized, the Embassy raised the matter with government and Hindu officials.

The U.S. Embassy and consulates in Pakistan closely monitor the status of religious legislation, Muslim and non-Muslim minority religious groups, and individual cases in which religious discrimination or persecution is alleged. Embassy officials repeatedly have urged the Government to alter the harsh effects of its blasphemy law or to repeal it altogether. They also maintain regular contact with major Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups and with local and international human rights organizations.

In Romania embassy officers lobbied consistently in government circles for fair action in property restitution, including religious and communal properties. The Embassy has a core group of officials that focuses on fostering good ethnic relations, including between religious groups. Embassy officials participated in Pope John Paul II's visit and a conference sponsored by the Community of St. Egidio.

The U.S. Mission in Russia has engaged a broad range of Russian officials, representatives of religious groups, and human rights activists. An embassy observer was present every day during the Moscow municipal court trial of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1999, and a State Department officer traveled to the Russian far east city of Magadan to investigate allegations of religious persecution of Pentecostals. The Embassy's political section works with the consular section, officers from the Agency for International Development, and representatives of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to gather information on religious freedom in the country.

In Saudi Arabia the Embassy arranged meetings for Senator Arlen Specter with American, Indian, and Filipino representatives of various Christian denominations, and with a senior government official. The Embassy also facilitated meetings between an assistant to Senator Sam Brownback and officials of the Ministry of Interior, foreign diplomats, and representatives of a variety of Christian groups. The meetings followed the detention of foreign citizens for distributing Christian religious literature, and intensive efforts by the Embassy to ascertain the facts of the case. The Embassy arranged the visit of Senator Brownback, including a discussion with the Foreign Minister about religious freedom.

In Serbia-Montenegro U.S. Embassy staff met regularly with representatives of various faiths until the rupture of relations in March 1999. In Montenegro the United States has provided significant support to the reform-oriented Government, which seeks to ensure respect for human rights, including religious freedom.

In Sudan, although U.S. efforts were limited by the nonresident status of our diplomats since 1996 and the evacuation of the Embassy's staff in August 1998, embassy officials raised religious persecution issues at all levels of government, including with the Foreign Minister. The Embassy focused on specific cases, including the arrest of Archbishop Zubeir, the detention of Faki Koko, and the detentions of Muslim cleric Imam Ahmed Yussuf. Embassy officials met with leaders of the religious communities, including many of the Islamic orders, and Archbishop Zubeir. Embassy staff briefed international NGO representatives, United Nations Human Rights Commission Special Rapporteur Leo-

nardo Franco, and representatives of the Sudan Council of Churches. In Turkey Embassy and consular staff monitored and reported on incidents of detention and proselytizing, and remained in close contact with local NGO's that monitor freedom of religion.

Our Embassy in Ukraine raised with a regional government the issuing of the proper religious worker visa to missionaries. The Embassy monitors anti-Semitism and maintains close relations with local Jewish organizations. It holds regular meetings with Jewish community representatives; in 1998 an officer traveled to the city of Uman to observe the annual pilgrimage of Bratslav Hasidic Jews to a founder's burial site and to verify that authorities had taken appropriate measures. Embassy officials in Uzbekistan made frequent demarches on particular cases of disappearances, the treatment of Muslims, religious detainees, and registration procedures for religious groups.

In Vietnam our Embassy regularly raised concerns with government officials in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and provincial capitals, emphasizing that progress on religious issues and human rights has an impact on the full normalization of relations. They have raised the detention and arrest of religious figures, and restrictions on church organizational activities, such as training religious leaders, ordination, church building, and foreign travel of religious figures. In several cases, the Embassy's interventions on issues of religious freedom have resulted in improvements. The release of eight religious prisoners in the fall of 1998, including Thich Quang Do, Thich Tue Sy, Father Nguyen Chau Dat, and Hoa Hao Buddhist Tran Huu Duyen, as well as other prominent advocates of human rights, including Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que, followed long-term and direct advocacy on their behalf. Embassy advocacy on behalf of detained Protestant Christians in the northwest provinces may have contributed to the release of some.

Actions by Other U.S. Officials and Agencies

Senior U.S. officials also have been active in advancing religious freedom abroad. For example, U.S. officials have spoken out publicly on Afghanistan. On January 9, 1998, the Department of State Deputy Spokesman issued a statement describing the Taliban blockade of central Afghanistan and bombing of Bamiyan as indications of abuses directed against Afghanistan's Shi'a population. The Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs raised reported Taliban persecution of the Shi'a in Senate testimony on October 8, 1998; March 9, 1999; and April 14, 1999. The United States also has criticized Taliban persecution of religious minorities in international forums and has voted in favor of U.N. Security Council and General Assembly resolutions criticizing persecution of the Shi'a.

In 1998 Department of State officials met with Belgian officials in Washington and Brussels to alert the Government of Belgium to U.S. concerns regarding Belgium's fulfillment of its OSCE obligations on religious freedom. Similar meetings were held in Brussels in March 1999, following the Vienna International Helsinki Federation meeting. At the 1998 OSCE Human Dimension meeting in Warsaw, the U.S. delegation expressed concern over growing intolerance toward minority religious groups in several countries, including Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany.

With respect to religious persecution in Burma, the U.S. Government has supported annual resolutions by U.N. bodies criticizing Burma's lack of respect for human rights and religious freedom and has imposed comprehensive sanctions. At their October 1997 summit, the President secured agreement from President Jiang Zemin of China that a delegation of U.S. religious leaders could travel to China

to begin a bilateral dialog on religious freedom. Bishop Su's case also was raised during the President's state visit to China in July 1998 and by the Secretary of State in her meetings with senior Chinese officials. The U.S. regularly seeks to facilitate the issuance of licenses for travel by religious persons to Cuba, and for donated goods and materials for religious organizations. It continuously marshals international pressure on the Cuban Government to cease its repressive practices.

In Egypt the President, the Secretary of State, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs have discussed issues of religious freedom with their counterparts. The President raised the issue of Coptic Christians with the Egyptian President, who since has initiated a high-level investigation of the al-Kush incident. Several members of Congress also met with the Egyptian President. In France a visiting delegation from the State Department, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Helsinki Commission met in 1999 with French officials from the Foreign and Interior ministries, antisect groups, and members of the National Assembly. Several other visiting officials--including the President, the Secretary of State, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL)--also have discussed the religious freedom issue with their French counterparts.

Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth met twice with senior officials to raise the issue of persecution of Christians in India, as did Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Harold Hongju Koh. The President has made a number of public statements regarding the treatment of religious minorities in Iran, including a statement criticizing the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani, a member of the Baha'i Faith, in June 1998, and a statement calling on the Government of Iran to release 13 members of Iran's Jewish community accused of espionage in June 1999. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk, in testimony before Congress on Iran, highlighted the plight of Iran's religious minorities.

The U.S. Government has cosponsored each year since 1982 a resolution on human rights in Iran offered by the European Union at the annual U.N. Commission on Human Rights. The United States has supported a similar resolution offered each year during the U.N. General Assembly. The U.S. has supported strongly the work of the U.N. Special Representative on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran and called on the Iranian Government to grant him admission--he has been denied entry visas since 1996--in order to conduct his research.

The State Department spokesman on numerous occasions has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in Iran, notably following the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani in June 1998, following the Government's actions against the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education in September 1998, and following the arrest of 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community in March 1999. The U.S. has encouraged other governments to make similar statements and has pressed them to raise the issue of religious freedom in discussions with the Government of Iran.

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with Iraq, but the U.S. makes its position clear in contacts with other states. The President regularly discusses the trauma experienced by Shi'a, Assyrian, and other religious groups in his periodic reports to Congress on Iraq. The Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, in testimony before Congress on Iraq, has highlighted the plight of persons in the south. The State Department spokesperson issued statements criticizing the deaths of Ayatollahs al-Gharawi, al-Borojourni, and as-Sadr, and the attempt on the life of Ayatollah al Hussaini. He also noted particularly egregious instances in which villages and marsh areas were destroyed in southern

Iraq. The Voice of America has broadcast several editorials dealing with the human rights abuses committed against religious groups in Iraq.

In March 1999, for the seventh consecutive year, the United States joined other members of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), to call on the U.N. Secretary General to send human rights monitors to "help in the independent verification of reports on the human rights situation in Iraq." However, the Iraqi Government continued to ignore these calls. As in the past, it did not allow the U.N. Special Rapporteur to visit, nor did it respond to his requests for information. It continued to defy calls from various U.N. bodies to allow the Special Rapporteur to visit the southern marshes and other regions. Denied entry to Iraq, the Special Rapporteur based his reports on the Government's human rights abuses on interviews with recent emigres from Iraq, interviews with opposition groups with contacts in Iraq, other interviews, and on published reports.

On March 26, 1998, a U.S. State Department spokesman publicly criticized the decision of a court in Laos to convict 13 Lao who had participated in a week-long Bible-study session in Vientiane on charges that they were assembling to create social turmoil (a violation of the Penal Code). Three of the 13 prisoners were released for time served. Noting that the conviction cast serious doubt on the protection of religious freedom in the country, the U.S. spokesman called on the Government to find a means under the law to release the 10 persons remaining in jail. By mid-1999 all the remaining prisoners had been released on probation, by decision of prison authorities.

The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs raised the subject of religious freedom in the Maldives with Foreign Minister Fathulla Jameel in Washington in October 1998 and later sent him a copy of the new International Religious Freedom Act. The Assistant Secretary again addressed the issue during his February 1999 visit to the Maldives, when he met with President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and the Foreign Minister.

The President, Vice President, and Secretary of State have raised Russia's 1997 law on religion with their Russian counterparts. Senior State Department officials met regularly with human rights groups and religious leaders concerned about religious freedom in Russia. In November 1998, the Ambassadors at Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF) and for the Newly Independent States (NIS), together with a senior White House official and Senator Gordon Smith, chaired a roundtable discussion that helped refine the policy that successfully urged the Russian Government to reregister Jehovah's Witnesses. During a speech to Moscow civic activists, the only public event of her January 1999 visit to Russia, the Secretary of State pressed for Russia to promote a culture of tolerance. She criticized anti-Semitism and encouraged Russians to build a society where "all are free to worship God in whatever way they choose." In March 1999, our Ambassador at Large for the NIS, with Senators Orrin Hatch and Gordon Smith, cochaired another roundtable discussion of issues related to religious freedom in Russia.

In Serbia Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Bishop Artemije--a leading anti-Milosevic official of the Serbian Orthodox Church--in the summer of 1999 at Gracanica. Other visiting senior U.S. officials--including the Assistant Secretary for DRL--have urged religious leaders to initiate interfaith programs to build trust and tolerance. In 1999 the Ambassador at Large for the NIS and our Ambassador to Turkmenistan raised the issue of religious freedom with President Niyazov. In Ukraine the U.S. has advocated just restitution of religious property confiscated by the Nazi and Commu-

nist regimes. In a September 1998 visit to Kiev, the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs raised the issue of restitution in several high-level meetings with government officials, and with Ukrainian Jewish leaders. The State Department's Senior Advisor for Property Restitution toured Lviv and Kyiv in 1999 and discussed restitution issues with government officials and community leaders.

In Uzbekistan the Assistant Secretary for DRL discussed the arrests in the Ferghana Valley with the Foreign Minister at the U.S.-Uzbek Joint Commission in 1998. Congressman Bob Livingston discussed religious freedom with the President of Uzbekistan in 1998, as did Senator Sam Brownback. Congressman Joseph Pitts expressed U.S. concerns to the chairman of the National Center for Human Rights in 1998. The Ambassador at Large for the NIS discussed the religion law and issues of religious freedom with the President and Foreign Minister in November 1998. The Deputy Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for the NIS met with the Foreign Minister in February 1999 to discuss religious detainees and religious freedom.

The Department of State has commented publicly on the conditions for religious freedom in Vietnam on several occasions.

Actions by the Office of International Religious Freedom

Robert A. Seiple was sworn in as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF) in May 1999, having served as the Secretary of State's Special Representative on IRF since August 1998. During the past year, Seiple or his staff have traveled to China, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Russia, Laos, Vietnam, Belgium, Austria, Germany, and France. In each of these countries they explained the purposes of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. Noting the importance of religious liberty in the American experience, they also underlined the Act's reliance on international norms of religious freedom as the standards to which all countries--including the United States--must be held accountable.

Located within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the Office of International Religious Freedom seeks to advance religious freedom in the most effective way possible. This requires a constant focus on the victims of discrimination or persecution and tailoring U.S. actions to improve their circumstances in a fundamental and enduring fashion. In most cases, achieving these results necessitates quiet diplomacy, in which host officials are urged to adhere to those universal principles of religious freedom to which they have committed themselves in international covenants. In some cases, it means private but candid talk about the consequences of particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

In a January 1999 visit to China, Ambassador Seiple explained in some detail to Chinese officials the new International Religious Freedom Act. He also raised a number of cases of religious prisoners, including Protestant minister Xu Yongze, Bishop Su Zhimin, and Catholic priest Li Qinghua, and asked that an embassy official or an independent third party be permitted to visit Bishop Su and Father Li. To date the Chinese Government has not responded to these requests but has expressed willingness to continue its dialog with the Ambassador, who intends to return to China and to visit Tibet as well. The Ambassador and his staff visited Indonesia, where they expressed deep concern about interreligious violence, as well as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where they met with government and reli-

gious leaders. In April they traveled to Russia and expressed U.S. views about the 1997 law on religion, noting that many states of eastern Europe and central Asia were looking to Moscow's treatment of religion as a model for their own policies.

In May 1999, the Ambassador and his staff traveled to Kazakhstan, where they urged the President to avoid infringing on religious liberties as he sought to address concerns over extremism and subversion. In Uzbekistan they emphasized to senior government officials the importance of religious freedom in Uzbek-U.S. relations, and raised a number of human rights cases, met with leaders of Uzbek Christian groups, and discussed religious freedom issues with NGO's. In July 1999, they discussed in Vietnam that country's approach to religious freedom with senior government and party officials, focusing on religious prisoners and detainees, as well as the draft religion law, which is to be presented to the National People's Assembly in October. They offered U.S. assistance in crafting a fair law that includes all religious groups in Vietnam.

Much of the work of the office of International Religious Freedom involves hearing directly the views of human rights and nongovernmental organizations, religious groups, and individuals. By providing evidence to supplement reports from U.S. posts abroad, these organizations constitute a valuable and prolific resource on the status of religious freedom worldwide. Their data and reporting are of particular importance in countries where the United States has no direct diplomatic presence, or where governments restrict the access of U.S. diplomats to persecuted groups or individuals. Required by the International Religious Freedom Act to consult NGO's as sources for the annual report, the IRF office has endeavored to meet with every group or individual seeking access--a demanding and rewarding task. The evidence provided by these groups and individuals has been weighed and incorporated into the report.

An additional and noteworthy product of these discussions has been the submission of program proposals to the Office of International Religious Freedom by private organizations seeking to promote interfaith dialog and ethnic tolerance abroad. Two such proposals--for Indonesia and Lebanon--have been approved for funding through the Human Rights and Democracy Fund of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Another result has been the initiation of outreach programs to American religious communities, many of which have enormous--and in some cases untapped--potential for constructive engagement with their coreligionists abroad. For example, the Office has initiated the Islamic Roundtable--a periodic gathering of American Muslim leaders to discuss issues of mutual concern. Such programs have the added advantage of deepening the Department of State's understanding and appreciation of America's own rich religious heritage and how it might be enlisted in the cause of advancing religious freedom worldwide.

Finally, the Office of International Religious Freedom has an important relationship with the independent Commission established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Commission is composed of nine eminent Americans from a variety of faiths and backgrounds; their mandate is to monitor religious freedom worldwide and to recommend policies to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress. The Ambassador at Large serves ex officio on the Commission as a non-voting member. His role is, in part, to participate in their deliberations as an advisor and colleague. Just as importantly, he and his staff serve as a liaison between the Commission and the executive branch, providing information and advice as appropriate, and benefiting from the wisdom and experience of its members.

The ultimate objective of the Office of International Freedom is to help those persecuted because of their religious faith. One important means to that end is emphasizing the value of religious freedom in articulating and safeguarding the dignity of the human person. All men and women, whether religious or not, have a stake in protecting the core truths expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: each of us is "born free and equal in dignity and rights" and is "endowed with reason and conscience." To preserve religious freedom is to reaffirm and defend the centrality of those truths-- and to strengthen the very heart of human rights.

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