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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are no good reasons for any government to violate religious freedom or to tolerate those within its warrant who do. However, there are many good reasons to promote religious freedom. To that end, this Executive Summary identifies some of the barriers to religious freedom that exist and provides examples of countries where those barriers are in place. It also catalogs some of the improvements in religious freedom that occurred during the period of this report. Finally, it 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.

This Executive Summary is divided into three sections:

I. Barriers to International Religious Freedom

II. Improvements in International Religious Freedom

III. U.S. Actions to Promote International Religious Freedom

PART I: BARRIERS TO INTERNATIONAL 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 and can be analyzed in various ways. While no analysis is perfect, a system of categorization follows that we believe is useful for understanding religious persecution and discrimination.

Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes are characterized by a determination 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 diminish necessarily 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 understood better 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. However, 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, 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 religious 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.

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. Afghanistan still does not have a recognized government, and most of the country remains under the control of the Taliban, which has engaged in persecution and killing. The Afghan Shi'a minority has been the victim of Taliban abuses, in significant part because of their religious beliefs. As in previous years, the Taliban enforced its strict interpretation of Islamic Shari'a law and, according to reports, public executions, floggings, and amputations took place weekly against those who violated the law. In September 1999, the Taliban issued decrees aimed at the small non-Muslim minority population, forbidding them from building places of worship, banning them from criticizing Muslims, ordering them to identify their houses, precluding them from living in the same residence as Muslims, and requiring non-Muslim women to wear special identifying clothing.

Burma. The Government of Burma continued to repress systematically members of both minority faiths and the majority Buddhist population. Buddhist monks who promoted human and political rights were arrested, and some Buddhist monasteries were destroyed. Government security forces frequently employed coercion to induce Christian members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism. Chin Christians were conscripted for forced labor, required to desecrate their own churches and graveyards, and were subjected to government discrimination. Members of various faiths reported harassment of religious leaders by government authorities.

China. Government respect for religious freedom in China deteriorated over the reporting period as the persecution of several religious minorities increased. While membership in many faiths grew rapidly and government supervision of religious activity was minimal in some regions, government officials in other regions imposed tight regulations, closed houses of worship, and actively persecuted members of some unregistered religious groups. Members of such groups were subject to harassment, extortion, prolonged detention, physical abuse, and incarceration in prison or in "reeducation through labor" camps. There were credible reports of religious detainees being beaten and tortured. The Government increased restrictions on members of many minority groups, including Tibetan Buddhists, Muslim Uyghurs, members of Falun Gong and other "heretical cults," and Protestants and Roman Catholics not belonging to the official churches.

Cuba. While some observers have noted a greater acceptance of religion in Cuba in recent years, the Government continued to engage in active efforts to monitor and control religious institutions, including the surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of clergy and church members. The Government has refused to register new denominations, thereby making them vulnerable to charges of illegal association.

Laos. The Government attempted to supervise and limit religious freedom among the majority Buddhist population, imposing mandatory Marxist-Leninist training for monks. In some instances, local and provincial authorities used harsh, extraconstitutional measures against minority religious groups, including detentions without charge and, in the case of hundreds of Christians, forced renunciations of faith.

North Korea. Religious adherents in North Korea deemed unacceptable to the regime are treated harshly; many were imprisoned and some reportedly executed. (However, these reports cannot be confirmed or disproved, given the tight control the regime exercises over information. Also, these reported executions appear to have involved Christians with links to missionary groups active along the Chinese border. The Government suspects such groups of attempting to overthrow the regime.) Unauthorized religious activity, especially when occurring near sensitive border areas, sometimes was subject to severe repression by North Korean officials. Credible reports indicate that some prisoners were beaten and treated as if they were insane because of their beliefs.

Vietnam. The Government uses a registration process to control and monitor religious activity, severely restricting any practice by groups other than officially sanctioned organizations. The Government allows only one organization per religious denomination, and members of nonregistered organizations may face arbitrary harassment and arrest. Clergy from many religious groups, including Cao Dai, Buddhist, Hoa Hao, Protestant, and Roman Catholic organizations were detained arbitrarily without charge. According to credible reports, at least 20 persons remain detained or imprisoned 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, nevertheless are hostile to certain religions or to elements of religious groups identified as "security threats." These governments implement policies designed to intimidate certain religious groups, cause their adherents to convert to another religion, or cause their members to flee.

Iran. The Government continued to abuse the religious freedom of minority groups. The country's religious minorities, including Baha'is, Jews, Christians, and Sunni Muslims, reported intimidation, harassment, and imprisonment on account of their beliefs. Persecution remains a problem. Baha'is are singled out by the Government, and at least 11 Baha'is were imprisoned. On July 1, 2000, 10 Jewish and 2 Muslim defendants were convicted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 4 to 13 years on charges of spying. The Revolutionary Court deprived the accused of almost all legitimate means of defense, and its conduct worsened societal attitudes toward the Jewish community.

Iraq. The Government for decades has conducted a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, and protracted arbitrary detention against

the religious leaders and adherents of the majority Shi'a Muslim population. Security forces 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 Government also targeted the country's Christian Assyrians and Chaldeans by denying members their political rights and forcibly removing them from certain areas of the country.

Pakistan. In spite of promised improvements following the October 12, 1999, military coup, the Government continued to enforce discriminatory legislation. Some of the legislation directly targeted Ahmadis, who also face severe societal discrimination. Christians, Hindus, Zikris, and other religious minorities also are subject to widespread discrimination and harassment. The so-called blasphemy laws have been used by authorities and private citizens to threaten and intimidate both members of religious minorities and members of the Muslim majority. Sectarian violence, mostly between rival Sunni and Shi'a Muslim groups, frequently occurred. The Government did not encourage violence; however, there were instances in which the Government failed to intervene in cases of sectarian violence.

Saudi Arabia. The Government supports the Sunni majority, and members of the Shi'a minority are subject to officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination. In some cases, they have experienced arbitrary detention and other more severe forms of discrimination. Religious freedom does not exist in the country, and non-Muslims may not worship publicly. However, they may engage in nonpublic worship if they do so discretely. Any attempt to convert Muslims to a non-Muslim religion is a criminal offense. In particular, Catholics and Protestants from Asia have been subject to discrimination and deportation for violating the Government's strict religious regulations.

Serbia. Slobodan Milosevic continued to exploit ethnic, religious, and political divisions to maintain his rule. While religion and ethnicity in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia are intertwined closely, the Government continued to suppress religious minorities and provide preferential treatment to the Serbian Orthodox Church. In Serbia's sister republic, Montenegro, tensions between the ecclesiastically unofficial Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the officially recognized Serbian Orthodox Church worsened and were politicized by the opposing political factions.

Sudan. Against the backdrop of an ongoing civil war, the Muslim-dominated regime continued to persecute members of religious minorities. Christians, practitioners of traditional indigenous religious, and Muslims who deviate from the Government's interpretation of Islam were subject to arbitrary arrest and detention, threats, violence, and forced conversion to Islam. The Government's support of slavery and its continued military action in villages in the Nuba mountains, which resulted in numerous deaths, are due in part to the victims' religious beliefs.

Turkmenistan. The Government places significant limits on freedom of religion and religious organizations by requiring that religious groups have 500 members before they may be registered with the Government. Only Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians have enough members to be registered officially, and all other religious groups, including Baha'is, Baptists, Hare Krishnas, Seventh-Day Adventists, some Muslims, and Pentecostals, face official harassment. Government interference in unregistered religious activity increased, as officials harassed group members, deported foreigners, denied visa renewals, confiscated religious materials, demolished a Hare Krishna temple and a Seventh Day Adventist church, and allegedly tortured some religious detainees.

Uzbekistan. The Government continued a harsh campaign against unauthorized Islamic groups, often failing to distinguish between Islamacist terrorist groups that seek to overthrow the Government by force and other devout Islamic groups, often part of the political opposition. Labeling them a threat to national security, the Government indiscriminately arrested hundreds of members of such groups and sentenced them to lengthy jail terms. Officials frequently used registration requirements to restrict the activity of various religious groups, including some Christians and some Muslim groups. Law enforcement officials harassed and tortured prisoners, including members of unapproved religious organizations, and manufactured false evidence against them.

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 or local law enforcement officials.

Egypt. In Egypt members of the non-Muslim minority generally worship without interference, but there is some societal and governmental discrimination. Almost 100 persons, including members of the Faramawy religious group, were arrested and charged with heresy against Islam. Some were convicted and sentenced. Violent exchanges between Christians and Muslims in Al-Kush, culminating in early January 2000, resulted in the death of 21 Christians and 1 Muslim; many more were wounded. The Government indicted 135 people for the violence and took steps to compensate the victims. Some members of the Christian community acknowledge that the Government has become somewhat more responsive but still argue that, despite improvements, the approval process for church construction remains slow and cumbersome.

India. Attacks on religious minorities were less intense during the reporting period but more widespread. They included assaults on Christian clerics and pilgrims and bomb and arson attacks on churches. Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh villagers and Hindu pilgrims and laborers

were killed in conjunction with the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. The central Government condemned the attacks and called for tolerance, but the response of local law enforcement officials often was inadequate.

Indonesia. Religious intolerance contributed to intercommunal violence in several regions, particularly in the Maluku provinces (also known as the Moluccas) and Central Sulawesi. Official statistics record that over 2,470 persons were killed in the Moluccas strife since violence erupted in January 1999. The victims were divided about equally between Christians and Muslims. The Government responded slowly and ineffectively, and many accuse the military and police forces of bias (against both Christians and Muslims, respectively) and complicit in the violence in Maluku.

Churches and other Christian facilities continued to be attacked in Java, where Muslims are a majority, although not to the extent experienced in 1996-97.

Nigeria. The new civilian government's ability to enforce respect for religious freedom and to prevent violence between Muslims and non-Muslims was tested in January 2000 when some northern states began formally adopting Islamic law, or Shari'a, as their legal system. The adoption of Shari'a triggered interreligious violence in February and March, during which hundreds of Christians and Muslims were killed. The central Government continued to work with the northern states and with the various factions to foster religious freedom, but the potential for further violence remains great.

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 the fear of certain religions or all religions lingers within segments of society. This circumstance led in some cases to a curtailment of religious freedom.

Armenia. The national church in Armenia--the Armenia Apostolic Church--is not subject to some of the restrictions on religious freedom that are imposed on other religious organizations that must register with the Government. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to have their application for legal recognition rejected because of their "illegal proselytism." Members report individual acts of discrimination, although there is no discernable pattern of persecution.

Belarus. The Government openly favors the Belarusian Orthodox Church (which was designated as an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989) and has stepped up its harassment of all other religious

groups. Some of these "nontraditional" religions, including many Protestant denominations, some Eastern religions, and the Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church, repeatedly have been denied registration by the Government, effectively denying them the ability to obtain property on which to conduct religious services. The Government promulgates false accusations against some minority faiths through state-owned newspapers and places restrictions on and regularly intimidates domestic and foreign religious leaders.

Bulgaria. The attitude of the Government generally has been positive in encouraging greater religious tolerance since early 1998. Although religious freedom improved for some nontraditional groups, others faced official disfavor and persistent government refusal to grant registration. Some groups also continue to face discrimination and antipathy from some local governments. The national government has not taken any action to dissuade local governments from such infringements of religious freedom. There also was concern about a new law on religion introduced into the National Assembly, which was in committee in the summer of 2000. Some religious groups and the U.S. Government have urged the Bulgarian government to revise those provisions that have the potential to give the Government excessive control over religious affairs.

Eritrea. The Government singled out members of Jehovah's Witnesses for harsh treatment because of their refusal to participate in national service and other civic duties. Jehovah's Witnesses and others, including some Muslims, were subject to imprisonment for refusing to perform national service; however, only members of Jehovah's Witnesses are subject to dismissal from the civil service and often are denied identification cards, exit visas, trading licenses, and government housing.

Israel. Most non-Jewish citizens are Arab Muslims, and they are subject to various forms of discrimination. The Government does not provide Israeli Arabs with the same quality of education, housing, employment opportunities, and social services as Jews. Government spending and financial support are proportionally far lower in predominately non-Jewish areas than in Jewish areas. Evangelical Christians and other religious groups have complained in the past that the police have been slow to investigate incidents of harassment, threats, and vandalism directed against their meetings, churches, and other facilities by two ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups.

Jordan. Government officials in Jordan still have not registered the Jordan Evangelical (Christian) Theological Seminary. Pending such registration, authorities suspended the renewal of the residence permits of all of the seminary's 36 foreign students (who come from 10 foreign countries), and 2 members of the faculty.

Malaysia. The Government significantly restricts the Shi'a minority from practicing its faith and places some restrictions on the activities of political opponents in mosques. It is very difficult for Muslims legally to change their religion. In April the state of Perlis passed a Shari'a law

subjecting Islamic "deviants" and apostates to 1 year of "rehabilitation."

Romania. The Government generally does not impede the observance of religious beliefs. However, several religious groups allege that the Government delayed or impeded their attempts to acquire property, building permits, and other documents and to register as a religious group. According to Jehovah's Witnesses' organization, some local officials in Romania provided tacit support to Orthodox Christian clergy intent on barring Jehovah's Witnesses from practicing their faith.

Russia. National and local officials are working to enforce a restrictive 1997 law on religion that replaced a more liberal 1990 law; however, there is some confusion regarding the new law, and its provisions have been applied inconsistently. The 1997 legislation distinguishes between religious organizations and groups, affording each a separate legal status that in effect created a hierarchy of religions and restricted the rights and privileges of newer and small religious communities. The required registration of religious groups and organizations at the local level is progressing slowly in some regions. Moreover, those that have not registered by December 31, 2000, are subject to organizational liquidation by the Government. Uneven implementation of the law and contradictory interpretations of the law and of other federal and local regulations permitted discriminatory practices by some regional and local governments. Many religious groups and organizations, both registered and unregistered, face discrimination and harassment by some government authorities. Federal officials, for the most part, have not taken sufficient action to address these concerns. For example, measures were taken to restrict the activities of a number of foreign missionaries and congregations associated with them. Four U.S. missionaries were refused visas to return to the country. Dan Pollard (formerly of the Vanino Baptist Church in the Khabarovsk region) was banned from receiving a visa on allegations that he violated customs regulations and evaded property taxes, a questionable charge given the role of local authorities in preventing him from complying with the law.

Turkey. The Government continued to impose some restrictions on religious minorities and on religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions, including universities. A 50-year-old ban on the wearing of religious head garments in government offices and other state-run facilities continued to be enforced. Police detained or stopped Christians holding services in private apartments and those considered to be proselytizing. The Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary has remained closed since 1971, when the state nationalized all private institutions of higher learning.

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

Austria. The Government of Austria intensified its ongoing information campaign against religious groups that it considers to be harmful to the interests of individuals and society. A brochure issued by the Government in September 1999 described several nonrecognized groups, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, in decidedly negative terms that

many found offensive.

Belgium. In 1998 the Parliament adopted several recommendations from a Commission report on government policy toward "sects," including the creation of a center that would report on "Harmful Sectarian Organizations." Even though the word "sect" has assumed pejorative connotations in modern usage, the report noted that it employed the term in the traditional sense--a group of organized persons espousing the same doctrine within a religion.

Czech Republic. In August 2000, the Government approved a proposal for a new bill on the registration and status of religious organizations that copies the restrictive Austrian model.

France. A 1996 National Assembly report, as well as a followup 1999 parliamentary report, labeled 173 groups as "sects" (a more precise English translation of the French in this instance would be "cults"), actions which contributed to an atmosphere of intolerance toward minority religions. A few of the groups on the list are clearly dangerous, but most are merely unfamiliar or unpopular. Members of some groups that appear on the list continue to allege government and societal discrimination. Private legislation to update and toughen existing laws invoked to deal with cults, including a controversial provision defining the crime of "mental manipulation," was introduced in the Senate in December 1999 and passed in amended form on a first reading by the National Assembly in June 2000. The competing versions of the bill have to be reconciled before final passage, although this action may not occur before mid-2001, given the current legislative calendar. The Minister of Justice further requested that the Senate, when it takes up the bill in the fall of 2000, consider a parallel reflection on how this legislation affects the constitutionally protected freedom of belief and the country's obligations under European and other international human rights conventions.

Germany. Many officials in the Government believe that the Church of Scientology is a money-making scheme rather than a religion, and they have continued to investigate the Church and to warn of its "totalitarian tendencies." The continued official "observation" of the Church by the Government, without any resulting legal action, created an environment that encourages discrimination. Some employers refuse to hire Scientologists, and government procurement procedures sometimes include so-called sect filters designed to screen out members of the Church.

Part II: IMPROVEMENTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The International Religious Freedom Act prescribes a section of the Executive Summary that identifies foreign countries in which there has been a "significant improvement in the protection and promotion of" religious freedom and includes a description of the nature of the improvement as well as an analysis of the factors contributing to it. This report identifies two countries in which improvements during the

reporting period have been significant and several others in which improvements have been noteworthy.

It also should be noted that, as elaborated elsewhere in the Executive Summary and in the country report chapters, there remain significant problems of religious discrimination or abuse in some of the countries in which improvements have occurred. It is our hope that such countries will intensify the kinds of improvements cited in this section.

Further information on actions by the U.S. Government in these countries also may be found in the respective country chapters.

Significant Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

Two countries have shown "significant" improvements in religious freedom. In neither of these countries do the improvements represent a fundamental alteration in what otherwise remains a poor human rights record. However, in both the improvement has been striking enough to raise the hope that it represents the first step in a more systematic change. The improvements for these two countries are highlighted in order to encourage additional positive steps.

One country where religious freedom made significant improvement is Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan. Since the end of the Cold War, many countries of the former Soviet Union sought international integration, while simultaneously addressing problems of internal and external security. These countries understand that their goals of democratic and economic development necessitate not only "membership-in-good-standing" in such institutions as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union, and the Council of Europe, but also adherence to international norms of human rights. These goals are threatened by government-sanctioned or tolerated abuses of human rights, including religious freedom. Moreover, in an age of global communications, where news of arrests, imprisonment, beatings, and torture are instantaneously communicated around the world, governments no longer control information. The misdeeds of officials are phoned, faxed, e-mailed, and sometimes broadcast to an interested foreign and domestic public.

Unfortunately, such communications continue to be necessary. Some countries of the former Soviet Union have failed to cut their ties to antidemocratic institutions and practices inherited from the Soviet system. In these nations, many local and regional officials tend to be unimpressed with the value of membership in the international community. Sometimes real security problems have led to excesses against religious minorities. However, in some countries the national leadership increasingly sees the advantages of improvements in religious freedom. At least some of the elite realizes not only that religious persecution is incompatible with international norms, but that foreign companies will not invest where employees and families are at risk of abuse because of their religious practices. This realization has

apparently led to improvements in some countries, although it has not necessarily been reflected in improvements in other areas of respect for human rights.

Until the late fall of 1999, the Government of Azerbaijan and local law enforcement officials frequently used the Law on Religious Freedom and other laws to restrict religious activity by foreigners and nontraditional religious groups. For example, in the early fall of 1999, police and security officials detained, imprisoned, and beat clergy, threatened to deport foreign religious workers, and used the forum of an assembly at a state factory publicly to humiliate and fire workers of a nontraditional religion.

The Ambassador and other officials of the U.S. Government and the international community called this situation to the attention of President Aliyev and other high-level officials. Aliyev consulted his ministers and then publicly pledged to improve the status of religious minorities and to adhere to the country's own constitutional standards and international commitments. Since the President's announcement in November 1999, deportation orders and other charges against clergy and groups of religious minorities have been overturned, many religious groups have been allowed to register for the first time, the factory workers were reinstated in their jobs, and respect for religious freedom has improved. Further, a local law enforcement official was punished for his role in abuses against a religious minority. Although problems remain, Azerbaijan's willingness to adhere to its constitutional and international commitments to respect religious freedom represents a significant improvement in the status quo.

Laos. After the end of the Vietnam War, the Communist authorities imposed a repressive regime that severely limited basic human rights. Because believers of a number of minority faiths historically had opposed the Communist takeover and sometimes continued to oppose the Government, such faiths were viewed with suspicion as security threats. This attitude was true particularly in the case of a number of minority ethnic groups living in strategically sensitive border areas. Members of these ethnic groups often belonged predominantly or significantly to minority religions. Furthermore, Christianity was viewed as a remnant of the former colonial power and Christians were considered to be agents of suspect "Western" influences. These attitudes, coupled with standard Communist ideological opposition to religion, contributed to widespread oppression of the religious faithful. Independent religious structures were suppressed as possible sources of organized opposition to the Government.

More recently, economic stagnation and the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union encouraged economic liberalization. Longstanding hostility to the United States began to ebb, and there was increased interest in attracting economic assistance and private investment from the West in general and from the United States in particular. Economic liberalization led to better communications with the outside world, including via the Internet. Human rights abuses were more apt to be publicized abroad. Many abuses were committed by local and regional

authorities with varying degrees of independence from the central Government. Increasingly, the central government was willing to engage in human rights dialogue with other countries on the basis of international standards and agreements. All of these forces--economic liberalization, better communications, human rights dialogue--fostered improvements in human rights and religious freedom.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met during 1999 with high-ranking officials of the Government in Vientiane and with the Laotian Ambassador in Washington to express concern at the plight of Christians who were imprisoned because of their faith. Embassy officers in Laos also held discussions on the matter with their counterparts. In mid-2000 many of the prisoners were released. While serious impediments to religious freedom remain in Laos, their release constitutes a significant improvement and demonstrates a willingness on the part of the central Government to intervene with local and provincial authorities when the latter abridge the religious liberties of minorities.

Noteworthy Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

There have been other improvements in religious freedom worldwide which merit attention. They are as follows:

Bulgaria. The Government officially approved registration of the Nazarene Church, which had been attempting to register for over 5 years.

Chile. On July 6, 1999, the Senate approved a new religious law ("ley de culto"). Among other provisions, it bestows the same legal status ("derecho publico") on all other faiths that the Catholic Church previously enjoyed. The legislation entered into effect in March 2000. The revision removed the legal possibility of other faiths having their status challenged administratively.

Croatia. The Government enacted constitutional amendments in May that added Bosnian Muslims and Albanians to the list of officially recognized minorities. Muslims were removed from the list by the previous government in 1998. The newly elected Government has shown an interest in improving religious freedom, and, to date, religious leaders are cautiously optimistic.

Czech Republic. A new draft bill on religion was pending in the legislature of the Czech Republic in mid-2000. The bill, which was drafted with the input of various church representatives, would facilitate the ability of religious groups to be recognized legally. It would lower the number of signatures required to grant a religious organization legal status from 10,000 to 300.

Dominican Republic. Church leaders report that they have noticed increased political freedom for religious minorities. In particular the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses report improved relations with the Government.

Egypt. Egyptian Copts were appointed to senior political party positions during the reporting period, and some observers noted an increased representation of Christians in public and political life. A December 1999 decree by President Hosni Mubarak provided that all places of worship be subject to the same civil construction code. The decree has had the effect of facilitating church repairs. The Government's response to sectarian violence against Christians also improved. After an outbreak of sectarian violence in the village of Al-Kush over the New Year, the Government responded quickly to restore order. A criminal court in Sohag city indicted 135 people for the violence, and the trials are ongoing.

France. The highest administrative court in France, the Council of State, ruled in June 2000 that Jehovah's Witnesses qualify as a religion. The ruling exempted Jehovah's Witnesses from property taxes levied against their houses of worship. The Government also acknowledged Islam as a state-recognized religion, a status which is expected, among other things, to lead to the release of state funds for building mosques.

The Gambia. In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of persecution against members of the Ahmadis or against any other religious group.

Germany. The Government enacted a series of positive legal reforms. The Federal Administrative Court ruled that the public law corporation status of a religious community may not be used to deny it the right to provide religious instruction in public schools, nor religious chaplaincies in the military, in hospitals, or in prisons.

Ghana. The Government was more active in addressing religious conflicts than in past years. In addition to outlawing religious slavery, the Government sponsored an interfaith forum to address religious conflicts and has taken a more active role in mediating interreligious disputes.

Greece. In June 2000, the Parliament approved a bill allowing the construction of the first Islamic cultural center and mosque in modern times in the Athens area. In July 2000 the Government completed plans to eliminate references to religious affiliation on official identification cards, which may help to protect individuals from discrimination.

Indonesia. In January 2000, President Wahid issued a decree lifting restrictions in effect since 1967 on the practice of Confucianism. For the first time in over 30 years, Confucianists--mainly Indonesians associated with the Chinese minority--were permitted to celebrate the Chinese New Year publicly and to practice openly their religious customs.

Iran. The Government announced that couples may register their marriage without declaring their religious affiliation. This is the first major step made by the Government toward religious freedom since the 1979 revolution. Members of the Baha'i community are likely to benefit

most from the change.

Israel. The successful March 2000 visit of the Pope contributed to increased religious tolerance in Israel. In March the High Court of Justice ruled that the Government's use of the Jewish National Fund to develop public land was discriminatory; that organization's bylaws prohibit the sale or lease of land to non-Jews. In June 2000, the Government proposed a plan to redress spending for non-Jewish areas, which was substantially below that in predominantly Jewish areas. Finally, harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses declined in 2000.

Kuwait. The Government agreed to allow the Vatican to establish a permanent mission in the country. The Catholic Church views the approval as a significant development and indicative of increased tolerance of Christianity by the government of Kuwait.

Latvia. The government effectively has eased visa restrictions on foreign missionaries. New visa regulations came into effect in July 1999, and the Government has cooperated to resolve several difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers.

Malaysia. Charges were dropped against Muslim women who were arrested for being on premises where liquor is served. While it is an offense for a Muslim to drink liquor, it is not an offense to be in a place that serves liquor. The central Government strongly criticized the arrests.

Netherlands. The Equal Opportunities Committee took several steps to reduce employment discrimination on the basis of religion. The Committee ruled in July 1999 that wearing headscarves for religious reasons may be banned only on serious grounds, such as security considerations. The Committee also ruled that employers must take account of reasonable religious demands from their employees, such as requests by Muslims for leave on Fridays or by Christians for leave on Sundays.

Philippines. There was enhanced cooperation between Christian and Muslim leaders in Mindanao. This cooperation gained more publicity because of the upswing in violent clashes between militant Muslim insurgent groups and government security forces. Religious leaders hope to contribute to a climate of peaceful resolution of the underlying economic and ethnic problems in Mindanao.

Qatar. The construction of the first Christian church in Qatar was approved. Previously, the Qatar authorities prohibited the public practice of any religion except the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

Romania. Foreign religious representatives experienced less discrimination in the processing of visa extensions. The State Secretary for Religious Denominations made it much easier for religious associations and foundations to receive building permits. A government decree effective May 2000 promises to reduce substantially bureaucratic hindrances to the registration of religious organizations by removing

minimum requirements for numbers of members necessary to establish religious associations and foundations. A law was adopted entitling religious denominations to reclaim by legal means property seized during the Communist era. Three court rulings upheld the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists to build places of worship and practice their faith. The Government sent a new, restrictive Draft Law on Religions to Parliament in September 1999. Responding to concerns by the Department of State and the international community, the Government formally withdrew the legislation in January 2000. The Government currently is engaged in discussions with a wide range of religious representatives to formulate a new law based on democratic principles.

Russia. Responding to concerns by the Department of State, one of Russia's regional governments decided in November 1999 to allow the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to take part in the official registration process. This action followed repeated denials of the church's petition for registration by the regional government. Several weeks later the Government announced that it would register all religious groups under their present charters, including the local Roman Catholic parish.

Saudi Arabia. Government officials reaffirmed publicly, in domestic and international forums, e.g., at the 56th session of the U.N. Committee on Human Rights in April 2000, the right of non-Muslims to worship privately. These statements, published in the local press, created a greater societal awareness of the Government's decision to allow non-Islamic private worship. Observers note that, in spite of several recent actions by the Government against Christians engaged in private worship, non-Islamic freedom to worship privately received more attention and greater respect than in the past.

Slovakia. The Government took modest steps to improve religious freedom through changes in primary and secondary educational curriculums designed to combat anti-Semitism and through a national conference on racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and intolerance.

Sudan. Some religious prisoners and detainees were released, including Faki Koko, who allegedly was held for apostasy, Father Hillary Boma, and Father Lino Sebit. The Public Order Courts were abolished, the enforcement of public order law was relaxed, and women imprisoned under that law were released. Restrictions on religious visitors and gatherings were eased. The Government's Committee for the Eradication of the Abduction of Women and Children identified hundreds of abductees (mostly Christians or practitioners of traditional indigenous religions) and returned many of them to their families.

Taiwan. The Government no longer places restrictions on registering new religions if they meet the legal requirements for civic organizations. Under the new rules, three religions were registered in 1999. A new law allows a civilian alternative to military service for those who are conscientious objectors. In the past, Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious adherents were imprisoned for failing to follow

orders while in military service.

Tajikistan. A national referendum amended the Constitution to allow for religiously oriented political parties. Two representatives of one such party were elected to the new parliament.

Turkey. In June 2000, Ankara's Supreme Court approved the establishment of a Christian foundation for a Turkish Protestant church.

Ukraine. The Government revised its visa policy in May 2000, announcing that invitations are no longer required for visa issuance to citizens of the United States, Canada, the European Union (EU), and Japan. While the change greatly simplifies religious tourist travel to Ukraine, religious workers still must obtain special visas that are issued only by invitation. The Government continued its plan to return properties that had been seized during the Communist era to religious groups. In addition some nontraditional religious organizations reported an increase in government cooperation, especially in regards to registration. President Kuchma made a number of symbolic gestures promoting religious freedom. He spoke frequently and publicly about the need for ethnic and religious tolerance, spoke out against anti-Semitism, and attended several high-profile religious services.

Uzbekistan. Until August of 1999, six Christians--in cases receiving a high profile in the international religious press--were imprisoned on fabricated narcotics charges because of their religious activities. Also, some 20 congregations of religious believers were unable to register because of obstruction by local officials. Moreover, throughout the reporting period, the Government arrested hundreds of alleged members of unauthorized Islamic groups. Beginning in August 1999, the Government responded to international diplomatic engagement and began to make a concerted effort to improve respect for the religious freedom of Christians and members of other minority religious groups. However, respect for unauthorized Muslim groups worsened, as the Government intensified its harsh campaign against such groups, which it perceived as a continuing security threat. There is little question that some devout Muslims, identified as dangerous solely because of their religion, were adversely affected.

In contrast to the government's treatment of unauthorized Muslim groups, members of most Christian communities reported a significant increase in government cooperation and tolerance, although there were still reports of harassment by local officials against some Christian communities. The President pardoned the six imprisoned Christians. The Government also registered over 25 non-Muslim religious groups whose applications were blocked by local officials, including several that were technically below the required membership level to qualify under the restrictive religious freedom law. In the latter case, the groups were sought out and "invited" to register, an unprecedented show of goodwill.

Finally, the Government held an international conference of experts to examine the shortcomings of the law on religion, indicating its intention

to use this as a basis for corrective legislation based on the recommendations of the conference. On May 25, the day after the Ambassador at Large met with Uzbek officials, President Karimov suggested that the Parliament consider improvement of the religion law.

Vietnam. Most of the serious restrictions of religious freedom in Vietnam remained in place. However, there was a decrease in official interference with religious practice, especially for officially recognized groups, such as Catholics and Buddhists. Most of the imprisoned 25 Christian Hmong church leaders were released, as were 3 Catholic priests. Officials of the central Government demonstrated some willingness to investigate reports of abuses by local and provincial authorities and to take action against those authorities.

Part III: U.S. ACTIONS TO PROMOTE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

As noted in the 1998-99 report, 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 positively when publicly rebuked.

However, it is sometimes necessary for the United States, and the international community, to denounce particularly abhorrent behavior by another nation openly. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act mandates certain actions in cases of particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In October 1999, the Secretary of State (acting under the authority of the President) designated five countries as "countries of particular concern" under the Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations. They are Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan. In addition the Secretary identified Serbia and the Taliban regime of Afghanistan (not "countries" under the Act) as having committed particularly severe violations.

Religious freedom is one of the fundamental human rights provided for in 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 continues to be integrated into public U.S. foreign policy channels, through international exchanges, Worldnet and Voice of America broadcasts, a religious freedom web site in the home page of the Department of State, conferences, public opinion polling, congressional hearings, and speeches and press conferences by senior U.S. foreign policy officials. While U.S. public diplomacy efforts will continue to develop, 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 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 abroad, 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, and 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, while discussing with a senior official his country's important strategic relationship with the United States, seeks 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--July 1999 through June 2000--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" (when asked or when useful) 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, the Department of Justice and the Immigration and Naturalization Service play a critical role as 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, Robert Seiple, who serves as the 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 abroad and oversees the implementation of those policies. The Ambassador has begun the task of integrating 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. Monitoring and reporting are also guided by the recommendations and annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 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 it endeavors to provide by way of example a realistic portrait of U.S. actions. Further details may be found in the individual country reports.

The following acronyms are used in the text: IRF, International

Religious Freedom, and USCIRF, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Armenia. In September 1999, embassy officials met with the Military Prosecutor to discuss, among other topics, hazing of minority conscripts and the status of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Embassy also maintains regular contact with traveling regional representatives of foreign-based religious groups like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and raises their concerns with Armenian officials.

Austria. The Ambassador and other members of the Embassy met regularly with religious and political leaders to reinforce the U.S. Government's commitment to religious freedom and tolerance. They have met repeatedly with the leader of the Jewish community in Austria and the head of the Lutheran church in Burgenland regarding the threats against them and their concerns about the new Government. Following these threats, the Ambassador met with Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel to convey the concerns of the U.S. Government. The Ambassador also raised concerns about a government Minister's intentions to enhance the role of the office on sects. In May 2000, the Ambassador participated in the annual commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust at Matthausen concentration camp. She followed this with a speech on diversity and tolerance at a program for second-generation immigrants. In April the Ambassador hosted an event at the residence featuring Congressman Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor. This included members of the government, religious leaders, and other opinion makers. It focused on religious and racial tolerance, including a screening of a documentary on holocaust survivors. In February the Ambassador hosted a benefit conference to raise money for the renovation of St. Stephen's cathedral, at which she focused on ecumenical partnerships to combat intolerance. Following a December 1999 unveiling of a statue symbolizing tolerance, the Ambassador hosted a reception for government officials and representatives from NGO's concerned with minorities, tolerance, and issues of genocide prevention.

In addition, in June 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before House International Relations Committee about religious freedom issues in Austria, including concerns about the Government's information campaign against religious groups that it considers harmful to the interests of individuals and society.

Afghanistan. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated the Taliban regime, which controls most of Afghanistan as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Azerbaijan. U.S. engagement was significant in the fall of 1999 in response to a crackdown on religious activity by government officials. After police broke up a Baptist service in Baku and detained 60 congregants, on September 5, embassy officials were called by local worshipers to meet with detainees, police, and security officials at the police station. Throughout the ensuing week, embassy officers attended

court hearings for two Azerbaijani pastors and eight foreigners arrested as a result of the police action. Other religious groups quickly reported similar incidents of harassment, and the Embassy carefully pursued each report with those groups and with the central Government. Throughout the fall, the Embassy maintained regular contact with government officials and local religious groups to monitor the situation and promote a resolution consistent with the country's constitutional standards of religious freedom. In addition, in October 1999, an IRF office staff member visited the country to express U.S. concern to the Government and to the local groups affected by the arrests and harassment.

The U.S. Ambassador met with the Ministers of Interior, Justice, and National Security, as well as the Prosecutor General, to express U.S. Government concerns over this pattern of incidents, characterizing them as violations of standards of religious freedom of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as well as of the Azerbaijani constitution. On November 3, Ambassador Escudero personally delivered a letter from several Congressmen to President Aliyev expressing concern over the incidents. On November 8, President Aliyev publicly reiterated his country's full commitment to constitutional and OSCE standards of religious freedom and ordered his government to resolve immediately all reported problems.

Belarus. On April 13, the Ambassador sent a letter to the governor of the Brest Oblast and the Ministry of Foreign affairs urging a resolution of the conflict concerning Catholic priest Zbeigniew Karoljak, following a meeting in Brest with Karoljak's parishioners.

Belgium. Embassy officers met with high-level government officials and conducted active measures to assist in resolving outstanding complaints of religious discrimination. In June 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before the House International Relations Committee about religious freedom issues, including the Belgian Government's policy towards "sects" and the creation of a "Center for Information and Advice on Harmful Sectarian Organizations."

Bosnia and Herzegovina. In March 2000, Ambassador Seiple visited Bosnia and Herzegovina and met with Government officials, NGO's, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues.

Bulgaria. The Ambassador, embassy officers, and visiting State Department officials met with a diverse cross-section of relevant government officials and Members of Parliament to advocate a liberal approach to religious freedom under a new law on religion. In March an IRF officer visited Sofia to meet with NGO's and with embassy officers regarding the draft law. Embassy officers have kept in close touch with human rights and religious groups to remain attuned to their concerns about the proposed law. The U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE raised this point with Bulgaria's OSCE ambassador, and the State Department also raised this issue in the context of the Stability Pact. Embassy officers have met with Orthodox clergy from both sides of the schism, with the chief mufti of the Muslim community, with religious and lay leaders of the Jewish community, as well as with the leaders of numerous

Protestant denominations.

Burma. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated Burma a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Since 1988 a primary objective of U.S. Government policy has been to promote increased respect for human rights, including the right to freedom of religion. The United States discontinued bilateral aid to the Government, suspended the issuance of licenses to export arms to Burma, suspended the Generalized System of Preferences for Burma, suspended tariff preference for imports of Burmese origin, and suspended Export-Import Bank financial services in support of U.S. exports to Burma. The U.S. Government also has not provided any Overseas Private Investment Corporation financial services in support of U.S. investment in Burma, suspended active promotion of trade with Burma, suspended issuance of visas to high government officials and their immediate family members, banned new investment by U.S. firms, opposed all assistance to the Government by international financial institutions, and urged the governments of other countries to take similar actions.

The U.S. Government actively supported the decision of the International Labor Organization (ILO), in June 1999, to suspend the Government of Burma from participation in ILO programs, based in part on an August 1998 ILO Commission of Inquiry report that the Government systematically used forced labor for a wide range of civilian and military purposes.

The U.S. Embassy has promoted religious freedom in the overall context of its promotion of human rights generally in numerous contacts with government officials (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 members 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 as part of their reporting and public diplomacy activities.

China. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated China as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The U.S. Embassy and consulates collected information about abuses and maintained contacts in China's religious communities with a wide spectrum of religious leaders including bishops, priests, ministers of the official Christian churches, and Taoist and Buddhist leaders. Embassy officials continued, for example, to seek clarification about the status of Roman Catholic Bishop Su Zhimin. On numerous occasions, senior U.S. Government officials in Washington and in China protested government actions taken against Falun Gong followers, including the

temporary detention of thousands of adherents in July 1999 and the sentencing of four group leaders later in that year. In May 2000, senior embassy officers urged the Chinese to release Pastor Xu Yongze, whose "reeducation through labor" sentence expired in March 2000. Consulate Guangzhou officers also protested to local officials the detention and harassment of Pastor Li Dexian. State Department officials met with senior Chinese Embassy officers in Washington to protest the January detention of Roman Catholic Bishop Yang Shudao. Diplomatic personnel also traveled to Tibet to monitor conditions, including the status of religious freedom. Cases raised by the Embassy include those of Gendun Choekyi Nyima, the boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama; Abbot Chadrel Rinpoche; Ngawang Sangdrol; and other Tibetan monks and nuns. Other embassy officers raised specific cases in meetings with officials from the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Work Department.

The Department of State sent Chinese religious leaders and scholars to the United States on international visitor programs to see first hand the role that religion plays in the United States.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom took a number of actions during the reporting period to express its concerns about religious freedom in China. These included: A press release noting increasing religious persecution in China--including cases of persecution of Muslim Uighurs; public calls on the Chinese Government to end persecution of Falun Gong adherents; urging Chinese cooperation with the Vatican in naming Catholic bishops; and testimony before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, the House Ways and Means Committee, the House International Relations Committee, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In October 1999, Ambassador Seiple testified before the House International Relations Committee and in May 2000 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee concerning the religious freedom of Tibetan Buddhists and the Christian and Muslim communities in China. In March 2000, Ambassador Seiple, accompanied by Rabbi David Saperstein, Chairman of the Commission on International Religious Freedom, held bilateral meetings at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, seeking support for the U.S.-proposed resolution criticizing China's human rights record, including its religious freedom practices.

Cuba. The U.S. Interests Section supported various religious leaders and communities in the country and supported NGO initiatives that aid religious groups. The U.S. Government regularly sought to facilitate the issuance of licenses for travel by religious persons and for donated goods and materials. The U.S. Interests Section raised issues of human rights, including religious discrimination and harassment, with government officials. However, the government dismissed these concerns. The Interests Section reported on cases of religious discrimination and harassment, and the U.S. government continuously urged international pressure on the Cuban government to cease its repressive practices.

Czech Republic. The Embassy, the Department of State, and the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad devoted considerable efforts beginning in December 1999 to facilitate a mutually acceptable settlement of the longstanding dispute over a medieval Jewish cemetery (believed to be the oldest in the Czech Republic) in downtown Prague.

Egypt. The U.S. Embassy maintained an active dialog with the leaders of the Christian and Muslim religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists and has investigated every complaint of religious discrimination brought to its attention. The Embassy discussed religious freedom issues with other groups, including academics, businessmen, and lower-income citizens. The Embassy worked to strengthen civil society, including training for nongovernmental groups that promote religious tolerance and provided training to Egyptian police in human rights practices and community policing techniques.

In March 2000, an NGO service center funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) began operating to provide training and technical assistance to local NGO's. The Embassy nominated participants interested in advocacy for the International Visitor Program and invited U.S. specialists in this subject as part of the State Department's speakers program. Other embassy initiatives included activities designed to strengthen the rule of law and promote civic education. The public affairs section of the Embassy supported the development of materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curriculums.

USAID, in collaboration with the Children's Television Workshop, developed an Egyptian version of the television program *Sesame Street*, which is designed to reach isolated households and to promote tolerance. The show was scheduled for airing beginning in the summer of 2000. USAID also supported private voluntary organizations that are implementing innovative curriculums in private schools. The public affairs section of the Embassy spearheaded an effort to increase the professionalism of the press, with an emphasis on balanced and responsible coverage. Finally, USAID worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

Eritrea. The Ambassador and other embassy officers raised the special case of Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials in the President's office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the High Court, the Ministry of Justice, in media interviews, and in the State Department's human rights report. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor also raised the issue with the Eritrean Ambassador.

France. In October 1999, Ambassador Seiple and an IRF officer visited France and met with government officials, NGO's, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues. In addition, in June 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before the House International Relations

Committee regarding religious freedom issues in France, including concerns about the creation of the "sect lists." *Germany.* The U.S. Government has expressed its concerns over allegations of infringement of individual rights because of religious affiliation and over the potential for discrimination in international trade posed by the screening of foreign firms for possible Scientology affiliation. U.S. government officials discussed with state and federal German authorities U.S. concerns about the violation of individual rights posed by the use of declarations of Scientology affiliation. U.S. officials frequently made the point that the use of such "filters" to prevent persons from practicing their professions, solely based on their beliefs, is an abuse of their rights, as well as a discriminatory business practice. In June 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before the House International Relations Committee about the treatment of German Scientologists and the use of "filters."

India. The U.S. Embassy continued to promote religious freedom through contact with the country's senior leadership, as well as with state and local officials. The Embassy and consulates regularly report on events and trends that affect religious freedom.

During his state visit, President Clinton spoke about the massacre of Sikhs in Kashmir on March 20, 2000, and called for an end to the violence. In August and September 1999, the U.S. Consul in Chennai expressed concern to Kerala state government officials about the status of Father Anthony Raymond Ceresko's visa application to the chief secretary of Karnataka and about the cancellation of the conference of the Anglican Church (see Section I). In January 2000, Senator Tom Daschle and his delegation raised the issue of religious minorities with Home Minister L.K. Advani during a visit to New Delhi. In February a representative of the State Department discussed minority issues with the National Human Rights Commission in New Delhi. On June 23, 2000, the U.S. Ambassador noted to the press that attacks against Christians are a serious concern.

Embassy officers meet with religious officials to monitor religious freedom on a regular basis. U.S. embassy officers traveled to Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh to assess the situation of religious minorities in those states. Embassy and consulate officials maintained contact with senior leaders of all minority communities. The Embassy also maintains contacts with U.S. residents, including those in the NGO and missionary communities. The NGO community is extremely active with regard to religious freedom, and embassy officers meet with local NGO's to obtain information on religious freedom developments.

Indonesia. The U.S. Government publicly expressed concern regarding the intercommunal violence that occurred in various parts of the country. U.S. statements urged the Government to take all necessary measures to prevent bloodshed; to take action against those who initiate violence, while adhering to international standards for the protection of human rights; and to resolve their differences through dialog and negotiation.

With respect to the violence between Christian and Muslim communities in the Moluccas and elsewhere, President Clinton and other senior government officials raised their concerns with their Indonesian counterparts on numerous occasions.

The Ambassador and embassy officers routinely conveyed to government officials at all levels the U.S. view that religious freedom must be respected and fostered. In addition the Ambassador and embassy officers regularly met with leaders of religious communities and traveled widely throughout the country to keep abreast of developments affecting religious freedom.

The public affairs section of the Embassy funded the travel of several persons under the International Visitor Program, as well as exchange visitors, who studied human rights and religion in the United States, among other topics. They included religious and student leaders and legal activists from Aceh, Papua, East Timor, and other locations. The Fulbright Commission in Indonesia funded one senior U.S. scholar to teach comparative religion at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) in Jakarta and a senior U.S. scholar-researcher who studied and taught the role of women in Koranic verse at the same institution.

The U.S. Government also provided significant funding for NGO's that implement projects to promote religious tolerance in various parts of the country.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom took a number of actions during the reporting period to express its concern about religious freedom in the country. These included publicly calling on the Government in January 2000 to restore order in the Maluku's after outbreaks of Muslim-Christian strife; Commissioner Archbishop Theodore McCarrick's visit to East Timor and Jakarta in February; and the Commission's July public expression of "deep concerns" about religious violence.

Iran. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated Iran as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

President Clinton made a number of statements regarding the treatment of Iranian religious minorities. The statements included one criticizing the execution of Ruhollah Rowhani, a member of the Baha'i Faith, in June 1998 and a statement calling on the Government to exonerate 13 members of the Jewish community arrested in June 1999. The Secretary of State also called on the Government to release and drop charges against the 13 Jews, 10 of whom were still in prison as of June 2000. In February the USCIRF publicly called for the nullification of death sentences for three Baha'is in Mashdad.

Iraq. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated Iraq as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Israel. In December 1999, Ambassador Seiple visited Israel and met with Government officials, NGO's, religious leaders, and others to discuss a number of religious freedom issues including allegations of persecution of Christians, intrareligious conflicts in the Jewish community, and the concerns of the Islamic community.

Jordan. In February 2000, Congressman Charles Canady forwarded a letter signed by 63 Members of Congress to King Abdullah, encouraging the Government to grant Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary's (JETS) request for registration with the Ministry of Education. In April 2000, Ambassador Seiple and members of the IRF office traveled to Jordan and met with religious leaders and officials regarding government delays in the registration of JETS. Ambassador Seiple also met with Queen Rania, who heads a new royal Human Rights Commission, and with Prince Hassan to promote interfaith dialog.

Kazakhstan. In May 2000, Ambassador Seiple visited Kazakhstan and met with government officials, NGO's and religious leaders. Government officials were receptive to Ambassador Seiple's offers of assistance in drafting the drafting of new religious legislation.

Laos. During his second visit in February 2000, Ambassador Seiple presided at a group meeting of religious leaders and officials where he emphasized the importance of religious freedom. Although the presence of government officials did not encourage frank dialog, the meeting was unprecedented and produced demarches to the Government. Ambassador Seiple met on several occasions with the Laotian Ambassador.

Lebanon. In April 2000, Ambassador Seiple visited Lebanon and discussed Islamic-Christian dialog with local lawyers and activists.

Nigeria. In July 2000, the USCIRF expressed publicly its "deep concerns" about religious violence in the country.

Pakistan. On an informal basis, the Embassy has assisted some Christian-affiliated relief organizations in guiding paperwork through government channels. The Embassy also assisted local and international human rights organizations in following up on specific cases involving religious minorities. In meetings with cabinet officials and National Security Council members, the Ambassador raised the issues of the blasphemy laws, separate electorates for minorities, and the seeming impunity with which sectarian groups operated. The Embassy assisted with other high-level visits--including that of four senators led by Senator Thomas Daschle, a delegation led by Senator Sam Brownback, and a congressional staff delegation--which raised religious freedom issues with senior officials.

The Embassy also conducted a number of public diplomacy programs on religious issues (e.g. "Islam in America" on Worldnet) designed to promote interfaith harmony and understanding. Expressions of concern

over the blasphemy laws by the Embassy, together with the human rights community and other U.S. agencies, contributed to government efforts to implement administrative changes in application of the laws.

Ambassador Seiple and an IRF office staff member visited Pakistan during the reporting period. They met with government officials, NGO's, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues.

Poland. One embassy officer devotes the vast majority of his time to questions of Polish/Jewish relations. The Embassy and Consulate General worked to facilitate the protection and return of former Jewish cemeteries throughout the country and to play a continuing role in ongoing efforts to establish an international foundation to oversee restitution of Jewish communal property.

The public affairs sections of the Embassy and the Consulate in Krakow provided continuing support for activities designed to promote cultural and religious tolerance. Such activities included a digital videoconference linking young Poles with U.S. participants in the March of the Living; a 2-week voluntary visitor program for senior administrators at the Auschwitz-Birkenau state museum; and ongoing press and public affairs support for the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation and its project to renovate the last remaining synagogue in Oswiecim.

Romania. U.S. embassy officials have lobbied consistently with government officials for fair treatment on property restitution issues, including religious and communal properties. The Embassy has a core group of officers who focus on fostering good ethnic relations, including relations between religious groups. The Embassy lobbied against a draft religion bill and encouraged other Western embassies and religious groups in Romania to do likewise. Secretary Albright also raised the issue with the Foreign Minister. The bill eventually was withdrawn in February 2000, following which Ambassador Seiple and USCIRF Chairman Saperstein visited Bucharest in March 2000 to confirm the Government's position and discourage attempts to resurrect the law.

Russia. The Ambassador publicly and strongly criticized the attack on Jewish leader Leopold Kaymovskiy and the attempted bombing of the Bolshaya Bronnaya Synagogue, calling on the Government to investigate these crimes vigorously.

The Embassy in Moscow and the Consulates General in Yekaterinburg, St. Petersburg, and Vladivostok actively investigated reports of violations of religious freedom, including anti-Semitic incidents. Embassy officials at the Chief of Mission level discussed religious freedom with high-ranking officials in the presidential administration, Government, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs approximately every 6 weeks, raising specific cases of concern. Federal officials have responded by investigating those cases and keeping embassy staff informed on issues they have raised.

Embassy representatives maintained close contact with Jewish leaders

throughout the aftermath of two crises. After the attempted bombing of a synagogue, the Embassy's regional security officer also visited two other Lubavitcher synagogues to advise them on physical security. The Embassy closely followed and reported on the progress of the amendment to the 1997 religion law and related Constitutional Court rulings. The Embassy played a role in resolving registration problems of two religious groups in Samara and in Tatarstan and maintains contact with Tatarstan authorities in an effort to resolve a third case. As implementation of the 1997 religion law continues, the Embassy maintains semiweekly contact with working-level officials at the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In May 2000, an embassy official attended a 4-day religion law seminar hosted by the Russian State Academy for Public Service, consulted with Russian and foreign religion law experts on the seminar results, and also met with representatives of religious groups at a subsequent briefing organized by the Esther Legal Information Center.

The 1997 law on religious freedom was the subject of numerous high-level communications between members of the U.S. executive branch and the Russian Government, involving the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, and other senior U.S. officials. For example, at the U.S.-Russia Summit held in Moscow on June 10-11, 2000, President Clinton discussed religious freedom in his meetings with President Putin and other government officials. On September 14, 1999, the Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for the New Independent States, Ambassador at Large Stephen Sestanovich, cochaired a roundtable meeting with representatives of religious communities at the State Department together with Senator Gordon Smith, Ambassador Seiple, and an National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director. On April 13, 2000, Ambassador Sestanovich cochaired another roundtable discussion on religious freedom in Russia with Senator Smith, Ambassador Seiple, and an NSC Senior Director.

In February 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before the Helsinki Commission about the 1997 law. In addition he addressed the harassment of Muslims stemming from the Caucasus conflict and the case of Reverend Dan Pollard in Khabarovsk Krai. In May 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee expressing concerns about the 1997 law and other religious freedom issues in Russia.

The USCIRF took a number of actions during the reporting period to express publicly its concern about religious freedom in Russia. These included: In December 1999, the Commission noted that the war in Chechnya was fed by religious bigotry; in May 2000, the Commission testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House International Relations Committee.

Saudi Arabia. An embassy officer held meetings during October, November, December, February, and March with Philippine embassy staffers during the period of detention and deportation of persons suspected of involvement with Christian proselytizing groups. On March 5 embassy officers conducted a meeting with and delivered a

demarche on religious freedom to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs official in charge of human rights, including freedom of religion. In May 2000, senior embassy officers and the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, David Welch, held a meeting with the Assistant Deputy Foreign Minister regarding religious freedom and human rights issues. Also in May, a meeting was held with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal that included Assistant Secretary Welch and an embassy officer regarding religious freedom and human rights issues. The Embassy held another meeting in May with the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs official in charge of human rights, which included discussions of freedom of religion. Ambassador Seiple also visited Saudi Arabia during the reporting period to discuss a range of religious freedom issues with government officials.

Serbia-Montenegro. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated the Milosevic Government of Serbia as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

In the summer of 1999 and again in February 2000, Secretary of State Albright met with Bishop Artemije, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, who expressed concern about the safety of the Serbs still living in Kosovo. During visits to Kosovo in July and November 1999, the Secretary delivered strong messages of ethnic tolerance in Kosovo. President Clinton also appealed for tolerance in the region on his visit in November 1999. U.S. Kosovo Force peacekeeping troops have worked to prevent ethnic and religious violence and have guarded some religious sites. The U.S. is involved actively in the U.N. Mission in Kosovo, the interim administration, which is aimed at securing peace, facilitating refugee return and reconstruction, laying the foundations for democratic self-government in the province, and fostering respect for human rights regardless of ethnicity or religion. In Montenegro the U.S. Government has provided significant support and assistance to the reform-oriented republic government, which also seeks to ensure respect for human rights, including religious freedom.

In May 2000, an IRF office staff member visited Kosovo to address religious freedom issues, including protection of minority populations and places of worship.

Sudan. In October 1999, the Secretary of State designated Sudan as a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

In May 2000, Ambassador Seiple testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and expressed concern about the significant religious dimension of government forces targeting the mostly indigenous and Christian southern population. The USCIRF took a number of actions during the reporting period to express publicly its concern about religious freedom in Sudan. These included: In January 2000, Commission member Elliot Abrams visited Sudan; in February the Commission held hearings in Washington; in May the Commission testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House

International Relations Committee; and in July the Commission noted ongoing severe religious freedom violations in Sudan.

Turkey. In December 1999, Ambassador Seiple visited Turkey and met with Government officials, NGO's, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues.

Turkmenistan. In May 2000 the Ambassador raised the issue of the onerous registration requirements with the Deputy Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs. In November 1999, the Ambassador and other embassy officials went to the site of the destruction of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church to condemn the decision of the Government to tear down the church. Embassy officials assisted the congregation in removing some of its religious materials from the church for storage elsewhere. In July 1999, an embassy officer attempted to attend the trial of Shageldy Atakov but was not allowed into the courtroom. In September and December 1999, embassy officers met with the head of President Niyazov's Institute for Democracy and Human Rights and members of the Council on Religious Affairs to press for reducing the onerous registration requirements for minority religions. In the course of a discussion with the Foreign Minister on U.S.-Turkmen relations in December 1999, the Charge raised the issue of religious freedom and prisoners of conscience and urged that the latter be included in an upcoming presidential amnesty. In October 1999, a USCIRF Commissioner visited Turkmenistan and in March 2000 testified before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. In May 2000, Ambassador Seiple and an IRF office staff member met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss how to make progress in the registration of religious groups.

Ukraine. Since most religious freedom problems in the country stem from the relationship between foreign missionaries of nonnative religions and local authorities, and most of the foreign missionaries—approximately 55 percent—working in the country today are U.S. citizens, the Embassy has intervened as necessary to defend their interests. Responding to complaints by the missionaries that Ukrainian embassies and consulates were not issuing religious worker visas, the consular section raised the importance of honoring visa reciprocity in several 1999-2000 meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These meetings did not result in tangible improvements in the Government's visa practices toward prospective religious workers; however, the Embassy plans to continue to stress the issue with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Embassy repeatedly recommended eliminating the Soviet-era requirement for an invitation to receive a Ukrainian visa. As of May 2000, invitations were no longer required for citizens of the U.S., Canada, the EU, and Japan, a change that will benefit religious workers.

The U.S. Government also has been active in advocating just restitution of religious property confiscated by the Nazi and Communist regimes. Embassy officers raised the issue in a February 2000 meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ambassador stressed the importance of a transparent and nondiscriminatory process for property restitution at

the May 2000 meeting of the joint U.S.- Ukraine Cultural Heritage Commission in Kiev. A U.S. Commissioner and the Deputy Minister of Culture agreed to cooperate on drafting legislation that would prohibit construction and privatization on previous and current cemeteries of all religious denominations. The Embassy assisted in the April 2000 renewal of the Ukraine-Israel student exchange agreement which governs the actions of the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAI) in the country. An embassy officer met with the Director General of the JAI, Aaron Abramovich, in August 1999. The Ambassador raised the issue in a September 1999 meeting with presidential foreign policy advisor Anatoliy Orel and Deputy Foreign Minister Oleksandr Chaliy. The Ambassador also discussed the issue with Abramovich in a January 2000 meeting. The Ambassador and his deputy raised the issue during meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Embassy officers discussed the issue several times with the Israeli Embassy: a meeting was held with the Israeli Embassy in February 2000 to discuss renewal of the Agreement. The Embassy places a high priority on monitoring anti-Semitism and maintaining close relations with local Jewish organizations. In August 1999, the Embassy hosted a meeting of Jewish community leaders with Senator Arlen Specter. Two embassy officers and a representative of the State Department's Office of Religious Freedom attended the October 1999 induction ceremony of Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny as the progressive rabbi of all Ukraine. Embassy officers also attended the March 2000 rededication of the Kiev grand synagogue. An embassy officer held regular meetings with a variety of Jewish community representatives.

In October 1999, the NSC Director for Russian, Ukrainian, and Eurasian Affairs met with representatives of religious organizations in Kiev to discuss religious freedom and property restitution. An IRF office staff member also visited Ukraine to address religious freedom issues.

Uzbekistan. The Ambassador delivered a speech calling for improved respect for religious freedom at the Ombudsman's February 29 roundtable on amending the religion law. The Ambassador and other embassy officers raised issues of religious freedom on at least 10 occasions in meetings with the Foreign Minister and other government officials, as well as in the context of the U.S.-Uzbek human rights working group. An embassy officer regularly discussed religious freedom with the deputy director of the Committee on Religious Affairs in the Cabinet of Ministers. There are no registered nongovernmental organizations in the country that deal specifically with issues of religious freedom. An embassy officer maintains regular contact with religious leaders and unregistered human rights activists on these and other issues.

The U.S. congressional chief of staff of the Commission for Security and cooperation in Europe, along with several staff members, held a series of meetings in Tashkent with Uzbek officials in December 1999. Issues of religious freedom were a prominent part of the agenda. In February 2000, the Assistant to the Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for the Newly Independent States gave a major address on

religious freedom at the Tashkent University for World Economy and Diplomacy. Together with the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, he discussed the religion law and issues of religious freedom with Uzbek officials, religious leaders, and human rights activists. The Deputy Assistant Secretary held additional separate meetings on these topics with both officials and activists. The Secretary of State met with President Karimov in Tashkent in April 2000, and raised U.S. concerns on these issues, particularly calling for amendments to the religion law. During her visit, the Secretary also visited Muslim and Jewish places of worship. The Deputy Assistant Secretary returned with the Secretary's party in April 2000 to follow up on his previous meetings with a separate series of discussions with Uzbek officials. He also met with the families of victims of the repression of independent Muslims as well as with human rights activists.

Ambassador Seiple and IRF office staff met with the Uzbek ambassador in July and August 1999 to encourage improvement in the Government's respect for religious freedom. Ambassador Seiple and staff members visited the country and met with foreign ministry and other officials in May 2000 to press for progress in amending the religion law, improved treatment of imprisoned Muslims, and tolerance with regard to proselytism. He also met with religious leaders of minority faiths, including the Russian Orthodox Church, with the families of victims of the repression of independent Muslims, and with human rights activists.

Vietnam. The Ambassador raised religious freedom issues with senior cabinet ministers including the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, senior government and communist party advisors, the head of the Government's office on religion, deputy ministers of foreign affairs and public security, and the chairperson of provincial people's committees around the country.

Embassy officers informed government officials that progress on religious issues and human rights has an effect on the degree of full normalization of bilateral relations. The Embassy's public affairs officer distributed information about U.S. concerns about religious freedom to Communist Party and government officials. In their representations to the Government, the Ambassador and other embassy officers urged that recognition of religious groups be spread more broadly to other groups of peaceful religious believers, such as members of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam and the Protestant house churches. In general, representations by the Embassy and Consulate have focused on specific restrictions of religious freedom. These issues include detention and arrest of religious figures and restrictions on church organizational activities, such as training religious leaders, ordination, church building, and the foreign travel of religious figures. In several cases, the Embassy's and the Consulate's interventions on issues of religious freedom have resulted in improvements. The release of several religious prisoners during amnesties in 1999 and 2000 followed long-term and direct advocacy on their behalf by the Embassy. Releases of some 20 Hmong Protestants detained in 1999 by authorities in Lai Chau province followed advocacy by the Embassy. One foreign NGO told the U.S.

Embassy that officials in Lai Chau had complained that, following the visit of the Ambassador to the province in the spring of 1999, during which he had presented a list of Hmong religious prisoners, the provincial officials had been told by Hanoi authorities to ease up on their treatment of the Hmong. An embassy officer visited Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) Supreme Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Quang Ngai province in December 1999, his first visit from a Westerner in 18 years. Following the visit, Thich Huyen Quang was featured on national television for the first time in years, was moved from his pagoda during flooding (unlike the previous year), and received improved medical care. On several occasions, embassy and consulate officers met with prominent religious prisoners after their release from prison. Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City officers maintained an ongoing dialog with Thich Quang Do and other UBCV monks, with officially recognized Buddhists, and also maintained wide contacts within the Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Muslim communities. In March the USCIRF publicly condemned the Government of Vietnam for its interference in a Hoa Hao commemoration. A Consulate General officer attended the first officially recognized Hoa Hao festival in Giang in July. Consulate General and embassy officials worked closely with Assemblies of God Pastor Tran Dinh "Paul" Ai to obtain a passport and then a religious worker's visa to go to the United States, following months of ongoing harassment by the police.

In July 1999, Ambassador Seiple visited Vietnam for discussions with officials and leaders of several religious bodies. He raised U.S. concerns about expanding conditions of religious freedom with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government Committee on Religion, and other government offices.

Other Actions: U.S. Government efforts included actions that were not specific to individual countries. Selected examples include: The Secretary of State's speech on May 4, 2000, in Washington to the American Jewish Committee; the Secretary's hosting of a December 21, 1999 "Iftaar" Dinner with American Muslim groups at the State Department; and President Clinton's frequent remarks on the status of religious freedom, especially in such countries as Vietnam, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and other countries.

The Office of International Religious Freedom hosted in May 1999 a conference in Washington on "Religion and Foreign Policy;" attended a U.S. Catholic Conference Bishops' International Policy Meeting to explain the administration's concerns about religious freedom issues; participated in a review of the USCIRF's first report by the Institute on Religion and Public Policy; and met with dozens of religious groups from many different countries who were concerned about persecution or discrimination. In October 1999 and March 2000, Ambassador Seiple and members of his staff visited the Vatican to discuss religious freedom issues. The Office continued its program of outreach to the U.S. Muslim community and has plans to expand the program to other religious communities. It also continued its support of NGO-managed reconciliation programs in Lebanon and Indonesia.

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