

U.S. allies among worst on freedom scorecard: Commission identifies 11 "Countries of Particular Concern"

by [Robert Marus ABP](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

Several of the United States' allies remain among the world's most egregious violators of human rights, according to a recent report from a nonpartisan federal panel, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Not only that, two nations whose oppressive governments the American forces have helped overthrow since 2001—Iraq and Afghanistan—are in danger of joining the infamous list.

The commission made public its 2006 annual report and recommendations during a May 3 press conference in Washington.

The 1998 law that created the panel requires it to report annually on the status of religious liberty worldwide and recommend that the State Department name nations that commit or tolerate "severe and egregious" violations of religious freedom as "Countries of Particular Concern," or CPCs. Administration officials retain ultimate authority to make those designations and impose appropriate sanctions.

Commissioners recommended the same 11 nations for CPC status that they did last year—Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

Though the panel has long recommended most of those nations for CPC status, the State Department has failed to apply that designation to Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and has been slow to act against Saudi Arabia.

In September—a year after the State Department declared oil-rich Saudi Arabia a CPC—Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice placed a 180-day waiver on implementing any sanctions against the Saudi government.

"This waiver expired in late March 2006," said Nina Shea, the commission's vice chair and director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom. "As of today, no action with regard to Saudi Arabia has been announced by the U.S. government. . . . Since religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia have not substantially improved in the last year, the U.S. government should not hesitate in taking significant action."

Shea said Saudi Arabia has not shown significant improvement on religious freedom since the State Department's 2004 CPC designation. "It's really one of the dozen countries in the world that are among the worst persecutors, most egregious persecutors of religions of all kinds, including Muslims," she said. The Saudi government bans public worship by religious groups of any sort other than those following the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam. Shea said government officials occasionally raid even private Christian worship services, which are supposed to be legal.

Officials from the State Department did not return an Associated Baptist Press reporter's phone message May 3 inquiring about the commission's report.

In regard to Pakistan, the panel's 250-page report said, "Sectarian and religiously motivated violence persists, . . . and the government's response to this problem, though improved, continues to be insufficient and not fully effective."

The commission also called special attention to the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. "In these two countries, where the United States is directly engaged in political reconstruction, the universal right to religious freedom is imperiled," wrote Michael Cromartie, the commission's chair, in a letter to Rice accompanying the report. He noted several recent incidents in which Afghan citizens were charged with crimes—some carrying the penalty of death—for contradicting Islam.

Cromartie also pointed out that lawless conditions in Iraq have led to sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites, as well as an atmosphere of fear that is causing many Christians and other religious minorities to flee the country in "an exodus that may mean the end of the presence in Iraq of ancient Christian and other communities that have lived on those same lands for 2,000 years."

Commissioner Preeta Bansal, a human-rights attorney, told reporters that the new Afghan constitution, the make-up of the nation's judiciary, and the government's inability to impose order in large parts of the country outside Kabul have combined to worsen the situation there. "Although conditions [favoring] freedom of religion or belief have certainly improved since the fall of the Taliban, they have become increasingly problematic over this past year." Bansal added that the nation's charter does not contain adequate safeguards for religious freedom—which endangers both minorities and the nation's religious majority.

Southern Baptist commissioner Richard Land said that the U.S. needs to take special care to avoid similar problems in Iraq. "The commission has concluded that, because the United States has been so directly involved in Iraq's political reconstruction, it has a special obligation to act vigorously . . . to identify and promptly remedy the systemic flaws that continue to undermine the protection of fundamental human rights in Iraq," he said, noting the regularity of attacks there against religious minorities as well as secularists, women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities.