

State Dept. chides eight countries on religious freedom

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The State Department on Tuesday (Sept. 13) designated eight nations as the most serious violators of religious freedom, naming the same countries as the Bush administration.

The list of "Countries of Particular Concern" includes Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan; all but Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan also received sanctions.

While Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has issued previous reports on religious freedom, Tuesday's report represented the first time the Obama administration has published its list of the world's worst violators.

The mid-year report focused mostly on problems and progress during the second half of 2010. But it also included more recent developments, including the assassinations of prominent critics of Pakistan's blasphemy law and the bombing of a church in Egypt that killed 22 people and injured about 100 more.

"It is our core conviction that religious tolerance is one of the essential elements not only of a sustainable democracy but of a peaceful society that respects the rights and dignity of each individual," Clinton told reporters at a press briefing.

The independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom hailed the department's CPC designations while reiterating its longtime calls to consider expanding the list.

"Repeating the current list continues glaring omissions, such as Pakistan and Vietnam," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair.

Last April, the bipartisan watchdog panel called for six additional countries to be added: Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam.

Asked about USCIRF's concerns, Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner said the list is "subject to constant review."

"We've also identified some other countries where we have concerns and we're going to work with governments but they're not on the list as of yet," he said.

The Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook, the administration's new ambassador at large for religious freedom, said her upcoming trips will include visits to two countries on the CPC list -- China and Saudi Arabia. She also plans to gather international and interfaith leaders to work on implementing a U.N. resolution that calls for countering religious intolerance with education, interfaith dialogue and public debate. "Everyone must have the right to believe," she said, "as well as the right to manifest their belief."