



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Religious Liberty February 2008

Peace is based on respect for the rights of all. Conscious of this, the Church champions the fundamental rights of each person. In particular, she promotes and defends respect for life and the religious freedom of everyone.

--Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 2007

BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, the place of human rights in U.S. foreign policy has stirred vigorous debate. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has worked to make religious liberty an important part of this debate. Religious liberty is a core American value that should help shape U.S. foreign policy. Significant developments include:

- Since 1999, the State Department has submitted a comprehensive annual report to Congress cataloging religious freedom in each foreign country, government policies violating religious beliefs, and U.S. policies to promote religious freedom as mandated by the 1998 *International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)*. IRFA, which USCCB supported, makes promotion of religious freedom an explicit U.S. foreign policy goal, provides policy options to respond to the most serious violations, and better integrates religious liberty concerns into U.S. foreign policy by creating an office for religious freedom within the State Department. The 2007 annual report notes that Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan are “Countries of Particular Concern” where violations of religious freedom are severe.
- IRFA also created a nine-member *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom* to monitor religious freedom violations and make recommendations to the Administration and Congress. This commission issues its own annual report on the status of religious liberty. Its 2007 report adds Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam to the State Department’s list of “Countries of Particular Concern.” Several Catholic bishops have served on the Commission in the past.

USCCB POSITION

The Significance of Religious Freedom: The concern for religious liberty is not new to USCCB. From the Soviet bloc and Latin America in the ‘70s and ‘80s to China, Sudan and Iraq today, the Bishops have promoted respect for religious liberty. Fostering religious freedom is part of USCCB’s broader efforts to ensure that promotion of human rights is central to U.S. foreign, security and trade policies.

Human Rights Conventions: USCCB supported U.S. ratification of the torture and genocide conventions, the covenants on race, and civil and political rights, and U.S. legislation governing trafficking. USCCB successfully urged ratification of the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. U.S. participation in these and other human rights instruments is critical for strengthening international norms and adding credibility to its own efforts to promote greater respect for religious liberty and other basic rights.

Specific Cases: Dozens of countries violate religious freedom and human rights, often as part of a general disrespect for human rights. USCCB has focused, among others, on the following:

China: USCCB continues to monitor and press for greater religious liberty in China as there is continued concern over Chinese suppression of human rights, persecution of religious groups, such as the unregistered Catholic and Protestant churches, and intrusive interference by the state in the internal life of the “open” or recognized churches. However, improving relations with China is a high priority for the Church, as evidenced by the high-

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level China meeting at the Vatican in January 2007 and by Pope Benedict XVI's June 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics in which he appeals for unity and reconciliation between the clandestine church and the church sanctioned by the Chinese government. Recent ordinations of bishops in 2007 have occurred with Vatican approval, but individuals connected with Christian organizations are still being harassed or detained from time to time.

Cuba: For the Church in Cuba the 1998 papal visit is a key reference point, but the expectations that Cubans would enjoy full religious freedom have not been realized. The Cuban government still maintains excessive control over almost every aspect of daily life. The early years of outright persecution, expulsion of clergy, and confiscation of religious properties are past, but the Church is still restricted in receiving pastoral workers from abroad, gaining access to the media, and having the freedom to operate its own schools. While USCCB supports the lifting of travel restrictions and the embargo, the arrests of March 2003 and lengthy sentences given to 75 non-violent dissidents, more than half of whom are Catholic activists of the Varela Project, remains a major obstacle to improved relations between the Church and the state. Their release continues to be a principal demand of human rights groups.

Iraq: Iraq is engulfed in horrific civil and sectarian violence, making even more uncertain the country's future and whether and how the constitution's contradictory clauses concerning basic human rights and protections for religious freedom will fare. Christians disproportionately suffer targeted violence with many fleeing to surrounding countries or to the north to the Plain of Nineveh, a traditional area of Christians in Iraq. The Iraqi bishops and our Conference share the view that, the historical role of Islam deserves respect, but this must be done in a way that ensures full religious freedom and human rights for minorities. USCCB will continue to urge the U.S. government to encourage Iraq to respect human rights and religious liberty.

Pakistan: Recent years have seen the massacres of Christian worshipers and attacks on Christian centers. Official discrimination against non-Muslim minorities has lessened, but has not been eliminated. The state has ended the separate electorate system whereby Christians could vote only for Christians and Muslims could vote only for Muslims, a 20-year system that the Bishops called religious apartheid and instead reserved a small number of seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies for non-Muslim minorities. Islamic extremists, however, continue to pose a serious danger. The coordinated attacks against Catholic and Protestant churches in the Punjab two years ago by Islamist fundamentalists and arrests of over 40 people in 2007 on charges of blasphemy illustrate the still difficult situation in a country where democratic institutions are struggling.

Sudan: In Darfur, widespread violence and violations of human rights continue, despite international attempts to alleviate the suffering. The violations of human rights in Darfur are egregious, but reflect primarily an ethnic, not a religious conflict. At the heart of Sudan's North-South civil war was the struggle for religious liberty, ethnic "African" identity, and control of the country's natural resources. While the creation of a government of national unity is a hopeful development for the North-South conflict, obstacles remain to the full implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Among those challenges are continuing tensions with neighboring Chad, sagging international commitment to the peace process, separatist movements in the east and west of the country, and the crisis in Darfur. Questions persist about genuine freedom of religion for non-Muslims living in areas in the north.

Vietnam: While restrictions on religious freedom still exist, recent years seem to have brought some improvement, especially in relations between the Catholic Church and the government. Vietnam's Prime Minister met with the Pope in January 2007 and a Vatican delegation visited Vietnam in March. However, outright persecution of certain Buddhist and evangelical groups persists and claims of expropriated religious land and property remain largely unresolved. The long delays before allowing candidates for the priesthood and religious life to enter seminaries and novitiates have been somewhat mitigated, but the state still maintains excessive controls over religious practice. USCCB advocated for a Bilateral Trade Agreement with Vietnam and for Vietnam's 2007 accession to the WTO in hopes that greater trade with the rest of the world would lead to loosening restrictions on religious life and increased protection of human rights.

For further information: visit www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/libertyind.shtml or contact Virginia Farris 202-541-3182 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); vfarris@usccb.org.

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