

# U.S. allies violate human rights

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Several U.S. allies remain among the world's most egregious violators of human rights, a nonpartisan federal panel reported.

In addition, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said, two nations whose oppressive governments U.S. forces have helped overthrow since 2001—Iraq and Afghanistan—are in danger of joining that infamous list.

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Commission members made public their 2006 annual report and recommendations during a 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 the State Department name nations that commit or tolerate severe and egregious violations of religious freedom as countries of particular concern. Administration officials retain ultimate authority to make those designations and impose appropriate sanctions.

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

Although the commission has long recommended country of particular concern status for those nations, the State Department has failed to follow that recommendation for Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and has been slow to take action against Saudi Arabia.

In September—a year after the State Department declared oil-rich Saudi Arabia a county of particular concern—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 country of particular concern designation.

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.

In 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 chairman, in a letter to Rice accompanying the report.

He noted several recent incidents in which Afghan citizens were charged with crimes—some carrying the death penalty—for contradicting Islam. Cromartie also noted lawless conditions in Iraq have led to regular sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, 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,” he said.

Commissioner Preeta Bansal, a human-rights attorney, told reporters the new Afghan constitution, the makeup 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.

The full report is available on the commission’s website at [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov).

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