

## July 20, 2006: Commission Welcomes State Department Announcement of Saudi Policies on Religious Practice; Recommends Public Reports to Congress to Measure Actual Implementation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 20, 2006

Contact:

Anne Johnson, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the U.S. State Department's announcement Wednesday that bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia have enabled the United States to confirm a variety of Saudi policies to improve "religious practice and tolerance"-many of which were first recommended in Commission reports. According to the Commission, a bipartisan, independent federal oversight body, the newly-reported Saudi policies-if actually implemented in full-could advance much-needed efforts to dismantle some of the institutionalized policies that have promoted severe violations of freedom of religion or belief in Saudi Arabia and worldwide. The new policies aim to halt dissemination of intolerant textbooks and extremist ideology, to protect the right of Muslims and non-Muslims to worship in private, and to change the composition, powers, and practices of the Mutawaa (the religious police). Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer stated that "President Reagan's reminder to 'trust, but verify' has rarely been more relevant. Promises like these-on core human rights issues with dramatic international security implications-need to be verifiable, enforceable, and able to be challenged by those who claim their rights are abused." For several years, the Commission has reported on the absence of freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia, and offered recommendations for urgent reforms in the areas of private religious worship, the conduct of the religious police, Saudi textbooks, and global exportation of intolerance. According to Gaer, "Changes in these areas are necessary first steps for Saudi reform. Commissioners are pleased that the State Department has drawn on so many of the Commission's policy recommendations, and hope that the Department will also pursue the others." In the past, Saudi authorities have made statements regarding religious freedom reforms, but did not act on them. This is the first time the U.S. State Department has announced that such policies have been publicly confirmed by the Saudi government, and that the country's leaders have "engaged with us in a substantive manner."

Because previous Saudi reform pledges have not been implemented in practice, the Commission is concerned about whether and how these reported Saudi policies will be implemented and how the United States will monitor them. The Commission therefore recommends that the State Department report publicly to Congress every 120 days on the implementation of the policies identified in the bilateral discussions. Violations of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia led to the country being designated by Secretary of State Rice, in 2004, as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which requires that any country so named be subjected to governmental actions, unless a waiver is issued. The Secretary of State has issued such a waiver and has "decided to leave [it] in place," according to the announcement Wednesday. Among the policies reportedly confirmed are: On Intolerant Literature and Extremist Ideology in Saudi Arabia and around the World Revise and update textbooks to remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups, a process the Saudi government expects to complete in one to two years. Prohibit the use of government channels or government funds to publish or promote textbooks, literature, or other materials that advocate intolerance and sanction hatred of religions or religious groups. Ensure Saudi embassies and consulates abroad review and destroy any material given to them by charities or other entities that promote intolerance or hatred. On Private Worship and Harassment by the Religious Police Guarantee and protect the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice. Ensure that members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV, also known as the Mutawwa'in) do not detain or conduct investigations of suspects, implement punishment, violate the sanctity of private homes, conduct surveillance, or confiscate private religious materials. Require all members of the CPVPV to wear identification badges with their pictures and names. The Commission also recommends that Saudi Arabia remain a CPC for its systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom, in accordance with IRFA. The policies outlined to the Congress by Ambassador John V. Hanford, III, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, were confirmed by the Saudi government in discussions with the U.S. State Department and announced by the State Department on Wednesday. The Commission's 2003 report on Saudi Arabia can be found at <http://www.uscifr.gov/countries/region/middleeast/saudi/saudiReport.pdf> and its most recent annual report, containing an updated analysis of the country's severe violations of religious freedom, can be found at <http://www.uscifr.gov/countries/publications/currentreport/index.html>.

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