

Sept. 19: USCIRF: Don't Legitimize Iranian President Ahmadinejad with Invitation to "Dialogue"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sept. 19, 2008

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WASHINGTON—The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom sent the following letter Friday to the leadership of Religions for Peace, the American Friends Service Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, Quaker United Nations Office, and World Council of Churches—United Nations Liaison Office to protest their invitation to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to take part in a "dialogue" on "the significance of religious contributions to peace."

September 19, 2008

Dr. William F. Vendley

Secretary General

Religions for Peace

RFP New York Headquarters

777 UN Plaza

New York, NY 10017

Dear Dr. Vendley:

On behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am writing to express profound concern over your organization's invitation to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for what is termed an "international dialogue" on the topic, "Has Not One God Created Us? The Significance of Religious Contributions to Peace."

While organizations such as yours espouse the value of mutual understanding through dialogue, in this case we are convinced that this invitation and this platform will be counterproductive. President Ahmadinejad has manipulated such dialogues repeatedly into a platform for spreading hatred. He hosted some of the world's most notorious deniers of the Holocaust, racists and anti-Semites at a 2006 conference questioning the well-established facts of the Holocaust and calling for the destruction of a member-state of the United Nations. The only accomplishment of such an invitation would be to burnish the Iranian leader's legitimacy and cleanse his reputation as a purveyor of hate.

It is disturbing enough that a leader who has worked so ruthlessly to close off channels for free expression at home should be given an opening to expound his views here. But the invitation to President Ahmadinejad comes amid a rapidly accelerating deterioration of religious freedom and other human rights in Iran, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions often based on the religion of the accused.

The Iranian Parliament currently is finalizing a new penal code that for the first time would legally enshrine the death penalty for so-called apostasy, putting the members of many religious minority communities at grave risk. More than 20 Baha'is currently are in prison in Iran on account of their religious identity, and two Christian men were charged with apostasy earlier this month.

While the government has announced its suspension of stoning to death—although this is not the first time such claims have been made—Iran has continued the brutal execution of minors, with reliable reports that at least six have been executed this year, two of them just last month. Four women leaders of the One Million Signatures campaign, which is dedicated to ending discrimination against women in the application of Islamic law in Iran, have been jailed for six months for allegedly "spreading propaganda" against Iran's Islamic system by advocating for its reform.

Muslims are hardly immune to the repression. In recent years, hundreds of prominent Muslim activists and dissidents from among the Shi'a majority advocating political reform have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms on charges of seeking to overthrow the Islamic system in Iran; others have been arrested and detained for alleged blasphemy and criticizing the nature of the Islamic regime. Reformists and journalists are regularly tried under current press laws and the Penal Code on charges of "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that deviate from Islamic standards.

Because of these recurring and egregious violations of religious freedom, the Commission continues to recommend that Iran be included in the U.S. State Department's list of "countries of particular concern." Since 1999, Secretaries of State from both the Clinton and Bush administrations have agreed.

Inviting this leader undermines the legitimacy and seriousness of the "dialogue" termed "the significance of religious contributions to peace." Just today, the State Department issued its annual International Religious Freedom Report, which underlines the long history of human rights violations in Iran and the continued deterioration of religious freedom conditions under President Ahmadinejad.

We are concerned that your "dialogue" will be merely another platform for President Ahmadinejad to espouse an ideology of intolerance. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom would recommend that this event be canceled and that in any event you withdraw your organization's co-sponsorship.

I look forward to your reply.

Respectfully yours,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair