



State Department Assessments of Saudi Arabia, Vietnam Challenged

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WASHINGTON (BP) -- The State Department's annual report on international religious freedom contends that religious tolerance in Saudi Arabia and Vietnam is improving, findings that contradict an earlier and harsher assessment on conditions in the two countries from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Concerning Saudi Arabia, the State Department broke its seven-year pattern of saying religious freedom "does not exist" in Saudi Arabia. The Sept. 15 U.S. report on religious freedom overseas instead noted that there "is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and it is severely restricted in practice."

The report also claimed that the Saudi government had "identified and confirmed its policies with regard to religious practice and tolerance in a number of key areas," among them revising textbooks and curricula in Islamic schools to remove "disparaging references to other religious traditions."

Following the presentation of the report to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John V. Hanford III said in a briefing that the Saudi government --- while significant problems remained in the country --- was among those that had taken steps to "curb extremist ideology and encourage religious tolerance."

That assessment of Saudi Arabia prompted reaction from the USCIRF, a nonpartisan commission established by Congress in 1998 to monitor the status of religious freedom worldwide. The commission makes recommendations to the State Department regarding countries that should receive designation as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs), or those that are among the worst violators of religious freedom. Saudi Arabia received the designation in 2004 and 2005 and has been listed among the nations with no religious freedom since the commission was founded.

In its report to the State Department in May, the USCIRF said the Saudi government "engages in systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion and belief." It also denied past State Department reports of "slight improvements" in the country's approach to Shiite Muslims and non-Muslims.

Commission chair Felice Gaer said there was no reason for the State Department to soften its assessment of Saudi Arabia in the report submitted to Rice. "The commission is simply shocked that the Department removed longstanding and widely quoted language from its report that freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia," Gaer said.

The USCIRF also said the State Department's assertion of a greater level of tolerance is contradicted by its own report, which states "there generally was no change in the status of religious freedom during the reporting period."

Dwight Bashir, senior Middle East policy analyst at the commission, told Baptist Press that the State Department report, because it is laced with positive language, gives the appearance that the Saudis are "moving forward."

"We beg to differ," Bashir said. "Conditions on the ground may not be deteriorating, but they haven't improved. Public worship is still banned. Private worship services are often raided. Abuses by the mutawwa or religious police are still happening."

Bashir said the country may have developed policies of religious tolerance in response to requests from the U.S. government, but many have not been implemented. Doing so would be a significant step, he said, adding that the real test is "the follow-through."

"We would very much like to point to progress if it is warranted," Bashir said. "What the State Department seems to be saying is that the Saudis have adopted some policies that are forward looking, and now they are going to give them an opening to prove it." According to Bashir, that will mean doing more than revising textbooks or retraining or removing imams who teach extremist ideologies.

Saudi Arabia was one of 197 countries or territories assessed by the State Department in its 2006 report. Other countries the report lists as the foremost violators of religious freedom are North Korea, Burma, Iran, China, Eritrea, Sudan and Vietnam.

Vietnam's government, meanwhile, has "turned a corner," Hanford said in the briefing. In the State Department's report, the country is said

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to have made positive steps toward ensuring religious tolerance.

But the USCIRF contends the Southeast Asian nation, also repeatedly given the CPC designation by the Secretary of State, should remain on the list of countries that severely suppress religious freedom. Gaer said advances in Vietnam have not been uniform and serious abuses continue against members of Vietnam's religious communities, especially those among the 54 ethnic minority groups of the country.

"The CPC designation has been an important incentive for dialogue on addressing religious freedom concerns in Vietnam," Gaer said. "Nevertheless, given the current level of engagement between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments and the ongoing religious freedom abuses, the CPC designation for Vietnam should be maintained."

President Bush will meet with newly selected Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in Hanoi in November, and Congress also is debating a Permanent Normal Trade Relations bill with Vietnam. Passage of the bill almost certainly would result in Vietnam's admission into the World Trade Organization and bolster its acceptance among the international community, said Scott Flipse, senior East Asia policy analyst with the USCIRF.

"We see the upcoming debate about the trade bill and the president's visit as an opportunity to point out problems and work for progress," Flipse told Baptist Press. "We know the president will be strong on religious freedom during his visits with government officials in Vietnam."

Flipse, like Gaer, said the CPC designation for Vietnam should remain in place for at least another year.

"There certainly is a notion that relations are improving with Vietnam, and we want the country as a strategic partner," Flipse said. "We've seen some progress, which was really initiated by them receiving the CPC designation, international pressure and their desire to join the international community. But we want to see more tangible progress, and at this point there isn't enough to lift the CPC designation."

In May, the USCIRF cited repeated abuses of religious freedom in Vietnam, even though some religious prisoners were released, forced recantations of faith were outlawed, and some churches in the Central Highlands were allowed to reopen after being closed for almost five years. New detentions, however, have occurred under "national security" and "national solidarity" provisions of the penal code. Vietnam's constitution allows for religious freedom, but extends the freedom only so far as religious practice does not contradict the policies of the state.

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Baptist Press

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