



## Department of Social Development and World Peace Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on Religious Liberty February 2007

*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:

- In October 1998, the *International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)* was enacted. IRFA, which USCCB supported, makes promotion of religious freedom an explicit U.S. foreign policy goal. The law provides policy options to respond to the most serious violations, and better integrates religious liberty concerns into U.S. foreign policy by creating a new office for religious freedom within the State Department, providing for improved training and monitoring, and requiring annual reports by the State Department. The law covers all religious freedom violations in all countries without preference.
- IRFA also created a new 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. Bishop Ricardo Ramírez of Las Cruces and Archbishop Chaput of Denver are currently members. Former members include Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Bishop William Murphy.

#### 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 also urges 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 had opposed extending Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR), formerly Most Favored Nation Trade Status, to China due to serious violations of religious freedom and other human rights. The U.S. Congress, however, granted permanent trade relations to China. USCCB continues to monitor and press for greater religious liberty in China. The recent ordinations of bishops without consultation with the Vatican is a serious setback and places new obstacles that impede the effort to improve relations between China and the Holy See. Improving relations with China is a high priority for the Church, as evidenced by the high-level China meeting at the Vatican in January. In addition, the USCCB is concerned with the persecution of religious groups, such as the unregistered Catholic and Protestant churches, and the intrusive interference by the state in the internal life of the "open" or recognized churches.

3211 Fourth St., NE, Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339

**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 and gaining access to the media, and cannot conduct its own schools. 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 now 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 US government to encourage Iraq to respect human rights and religious liberty.

**Nigeria:** Religious conflict has increased after the transfer of power from a military to a civilian government, a situation worsened by the imposition of *Shari'a* law in Muslim-dominated northern states. Hundreds of Muslims and Christians in northern and central Nigeria have died in recent years as a result of violence between the two communities. Inertia and impunity have resulted in the failure both to prosecute those responsible for the violence and to implement the proposed truth and reconciliation commission to defuse tensions and prevent a recurrence of the conflict.

**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. 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 last spring's capital trial of a man charged with converting from Islam to Christianity illustrate the still difficult situation in the country.

**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 extensive restrictions on religious freedom still exist, recent years seem to have brought some improvement, especially in relations between the Catholic Church and the government. Outright persecution of certain Buddhist and Evangelical groups persists. 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 insists on maintaining excessive controls over religious practice. USCCB is hopeful that the need for greater trade with the rest of the world will lead to loosening restrictions on religious life.

## RESOURCES

Related USCCB statements on human rights and religious freedom, including Congressional testimony offered in November 2005 and March 2006, can be found at: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/libertyind.htm>

**For further information:** Walt Grazer 202-541-3182 (ph); 202-541-3339 (fax); [wgrazer@usccb.org](mailto:wgrazer@usccb.org)