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Commission urges attention to religious freedom in war

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious freedom shouldn't become a casualty in America's war on terrorism, says a federal commission that monitors religious liberty around the world.

Some observers say basic human rights may be already falling by the wayside in Central Asia and the Middle East as the United States focuses on building a strong international coalition against terrorism.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has in recent weeks asked President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell to heed religious-freedom concerns in strategies to build both a military coalition and a new government in Afghanistan following U.S. military action.

"The commission believes strongly that the United States needs to be laying the groundwork now for a future Afghanistan that respects the rights of all persons -- including the right to freedom of religion and belief -- and strengthens elements of religious tolerance," the commission said in a letter to Powell.

The commission later warned both Bush and Powell against becoming too friendly with Uzbekistan, citing the nation's "abysmal treatment of religious exercise." The former Soviet republic, which has been used to support American military operations in nearby Afghanistan, has been documented for severe repression of religious practice.

In a letter, the commission said any non-humanitarian U.S. aid to the Uzbek government should be tied to ending religious repression. That includes the release of Uzbek citizens imprisoned for their faith and dissolving government agencies that regulate religion.

In a Nov. 27 hearing in Washington, the commission heard testimony from experts on religious freedom and the war on terrorism. It was the commission's first hearing since U.S. attacks on Afghanistan. Witnesses cautioned that many U.S. allies in the effort are listed among the world's worst abusers of religious freedom.

Paula Dobriansky, deputy to the Secretary of State for international religious-liberty issues, said the Bush administration hasn't lessened its commitment to religious liberty in the wake of Sept. 11.

"Many have raised concerns that we are partnering for the sake of our counter-terrorism objectives with some countries with less-than-stellar human rights records," she told the commission. "We have not, however, suppressed our objections to their human-rights violations because of this increased cooperation."

Commission member and religious-freedom activist Nina Shea, however, questioned the administration's commitment to religious liberty in Sudan, where a Muslim-controlled government has waged a campaign of brutal persecution against Christians and other minority faith groups.

"There's a perception that, especially in the situation of Sudan, there has been precisely that [a trade off of human rights for cooperation against terrorism]," Shea told Dobriansky.

Shea noted that the administration intervened to block passage of the Sudan Peace Act in the House of Representatives. The act was designed to increase economic pressure on Sudan. Bush officials said economic sanctions against Sudan would result in "politicizing the economy."

The act passed, but not before a Bush-backed provision reduced sanctions against Sudan.

Other experts testifying before the commission, meanwhile, said promoting religious liberty in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia would ultimately serve the long-term interests of U.S. national security.

"The widening of religious freedom must be a cornerstone of this effort [the war on terrorism]," said Amy Hawthorne, a fellow with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "This is not merely a humanitarian objective -- it is essential to the promotion of U.S. interests in a stable, productive, peaceful Middle East."

The repression of fundamentalist religious groups in order to prevent terrorism in nations such as Pakistan, ironically, generally results in resentment and even more extremist religious sentiment, Hawthorne said. Interaction among faith groups in a religiously free society, meanwhile, tends to promote general tolerance and respect.

"Extremists like the al-Qaida network live in a symbiotic relationship with authoritarianism and disrespect for human dignity," she testified.

Findings from the hearing will guide the commission in preparing its annual report and recommendations to Congress and the White House.

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Religious Right leader attacks Islamic stamps

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A leader in America's Religious Right has weighed in on debate over a stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service to commemorate an Islamic holiday.

Stamps commemorating the Muslim feast Eid al-Fitr should be withdrawn, overprinted with an image of the World Trade Center towers destroyed in terrorist attacks Sept. 11 and reissued, suggests Paul Weyrich, president of the conservative political action group Free Congress Foundation.

"I have no doubt that a majority of Americans would find the altered stamps a more appropriate commemoration of Islam than the current celebratory version," Weyrich wrote in a letter to Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and other Republican Congressional leaders.

Critics denounced Weyrich's suggestion as hate speech.

The Postal Service issued the stamps honoring the feast that concludes the Muslim holy month of Ramadan after a long lobbying effort by American Muslim groups and a letter-writing campaign by Muslim school children.

The post office has long issued commemorative stamps celebrating other religious holidays -- such as Christmas and Hanukkah -- and ethnic-group celebrations, such Kwanzaa and Cinco de Mayo. The Eid stamps

were the first issued to commemorate an Islamic holiday, however. They have drawn unusual attention because of the timing of their release, just before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"America's most recent notable experience with Islam was the attacks on Sept. 11," Weyrich said in his letter to congressional leaders. Weyrich asked "that the current stamps be withdrawn, to be overprinted with the image of the Twin Towers [of the destroyed World Trade Center] and then reissued."

Weyrich was a pioneer in the development of the modern-day Religious Right and remains a prominent activist in conservative politics.

Weyrich's attack on Islam comes on the heels of controversy over comments by Franklin Graham, son of famous evangelist Billy Graham and heir-apparent to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association empire. Graham offended American Muslim groups and ignited a minor media firestorm by calling Islam "a very evil and wicked religion."

Other conservative leaders, such as President George W. Bush, have been careful to emphasize the positive role that Islam plays in the lives of millions of American Muslims and other moderate followers of Islam around the world.

But many commentators -- conservative and liberal alike -- have viewed comments such as Weyrich's and Graham's as uncalled-for and inflammatory in the wake of the harassment and persecution of some American Muslims that followed the Sept. 11 attacks.

Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt said in an interview that he believes Weyrich's suggestion is off base.

"Quite frankly, I think we all have to say -- to use an old colloquialism, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," Merritt said from Snellville, Ga., where he is pastor of First Baptist Church. "I couldn't really, in the spirit of religious liberty, issue a stamp for Christianity so to speak, but then say that you can't issue a stamp for Jews and Muslims."

However, Merritt -- who recently made news himself by calling on Southern Baptists to pray for the conversion of Muslims during Ramadan -- stopped short of criticizing Graham's comments about Islam. "I believe Islam, as I do believe every other religion outside of Christianity, offers a false hope," he said.

Merritt said he found it ironic that majority-Islamic countries often suppress religious liberty for religious minorities, while a majority-Christian country such as the U.S. allows complete religious freedom for Muslims.

"I find it interesting that there's not one Muslim country that is a democracy," Merritt said. "I find it interesting that Muslims can come to America and build mosques, but that we can't go to Muslim countries and build churches."

Contrary to Merritt's comments, the U.S. State Department reports that several majority-Muslim countries -- such as Turkey and Egypt -- are indeed governed democratically and offer at least some protection for Christians and other religious minorities.

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Churches can help families of military

By Michael Leathers

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. (ABP) -- A young woman gets the call on a Friday. Five days later she's saying good-bye to her children for possibly a year. She's trained in the Army reserves for years, and now this mom is being deployed.

As deputy staff chaplain of the 88th Regional Support Command at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis, Army Reserve Chaplain Lt. Col. Scott Boyd has watched this and similar heart-tugging farewells repeated by one family after another. Boyd, pastor of Temple Baptist of Champaign, Ill., has been involved in the deployment of two Army Reserve units in Illinois.

"It was nothing like I ever experienced before," Boyd said. "It's almost like dying when they're saying good-bye" because they realize that there's always a chance that their loved ones might not come back.

Reserve units and the National Guard constitute more than half of the United States' armed forces. Many have been summoned to active duty since the American military began pummeling Afghanistan to ferret out Osama bin Laden and other alleged terrorist masterminds of Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that claimed nearly 4,000 lives in New York City, Pennsylvania and Washington.

For many reservists, Boyd said, it's not a matter of if they are going, but when they'll be called up. They will leave behind spouses who must abruptly become single parents. If both parents are activated, they must send their children to their grandparents or other caregivers.

And those hurting families, coming to terms with their indefinite separations, represent an opportunity for ministry for churches.

"This is not a church-growth thing," Boyd explained. "This is a ministry if churches feel called of God to do it."

And it's a ministry that requires a long-term commitment because they'll be connecting with families with little or no church ties and they'll have ongoing needs even after they return home.

What are some of the struggles these families face?

In the weeks following deployment, Boyd said, those spouses left behind will battle loneliness. If they're parents, many wonder how they'll raise their families without help from their spouses. Children often feel betrayed, and they don't know "when their mommies and daddies are coming back."

For those who have been deployed, some may wrestle with anger and believe that life has treated them unfairly. They worry about how their families will treat them when they return. Some must brace for financial hardships for their families because their pay in the reserves can be less than what they earned at their other jobs. Whether deployed or staying behind, the bottom line is this: Separation is painful.

"The military truly cares about the family, but the reality is the mission comes first. That's the way it has to be," Boyd said.

Still, Christians can play a significant role in helping these families, especially the ones in their own neighborhoods, to ease the stress that comes with the adjustments they face.

An easy first step, Boys said, is to express appreciation about the sacrifice they and their families have to make because their loved ones have left to serve our country. Many feel others do not truly understand their ordeal.

For military families in your neighborhood, you can volunteer to watch their children so the parent has time to go shopping, run other errands or just get a break, Boyd said. These families already face enough stress from the separation, he said. Offering to do some of the routine chores, such as shoveling snow or cutting grass, can ease their pressure. Let them know you'll be available to help with car repairs or home maintenance if they need it.

You can help parents or spouses facing loneliness by inviting them to a men's or women's group at your church to help them develop other relationships, Boyd said.

Boyd mentors younger chaplains in a six-state region, and they work with each other to meet the spiritual needs of reservists as they're being deployed and their families in the months to follow. It's a challenge to connect with these families because they're spread out across a vast region, and many of the chaplains, like Boyd, are church pastors.

"As chaplains, we have to be the spiritual guide for these soldiers," he said. Many of these young men and women, because they are facing the possibility that they could be war casualties, are taking a hard look at eternal and spiritual issues.

For the chaplains, it's a "ministry of presence," Boyd said. They make themselves available to these soldiers during training in the days leading up to deployment. While some do not want to talk about spiritual matters, others do and will ask questions. "Because we're with them," he said, "we earn the right to speak about eternal issues."

It's a foregone conclusion that few, if any, of these reservists ever expected to be deployed when they first signed up. That's why Boyd said he had expected to deal with sudden cases of conscientious objectors, but he has not encountered one instance of anyone trying to get out of their duty to serve their country.

Those examples of men and women ready to lay down their lives was an overwhelming thought as Boyd stood in the rain, saluting the reservists as they were shipped out. "I was expecting the worst and I saw the very best," he said. "I was proud to be there."

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