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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Bush sounds theme of good vs. evil in first State of the Union address
- Religious freedom commission turns spotlight on North Korea
- News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Bush sounds theme of good vs. evil in first State of the Union address

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush, in his first State of the Union address, sounded a warning to repressive nations that are developing weapons of mass destruction. Other themes of the Jan. 29 address included the protection of women's rights and promotion of religious liberty, which the president said should guide America's foreign policy.

Addressing a joint session of Congress and assembled guests in a packed House chamber, Bush singled out North Korea, Iran and especially Iraq as "regimes that sponsor terror." He vowed to prevent them "from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction."

The president characterized the three nations as "an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."

Speaking about North Korea -- singled out by human-rights groups as one of the world's worst violators of religious liberty and other human rights -- Bush said: "We know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens."

Bush said Iran "aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hopes for freedom."

He criticized Iraq for sponsoring terrorism and continuing to develop chemical and biological weapons. "This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens," Bush said, "leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children."

Bush mentioned the term "evil" five times in his speech, continuing a theme he has used since Sept. 11 in portraying America's war on terrorism as a conflict between good and evil.

Bush signaled that the war would continue indefinitely, possibly for years. "Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun," he said. "This campaign may not be finished on our watch -- yet it must be and it will be waged on our watch."

To that end, Bush said his budget for the next fiscal year will propose a massive increase in military spending -- "the largest in two decades," as he described it.

Noting the outpouring of grief and support for victims across the nation since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Bush asked Americans to channel this positive energy into a new desire to work together and serve the wider American and global communities. He announced the creation of an umbrella organization -- called the

USA Freedom Corps -- to encourage volunteers to serve at home or abroad to extend universal ideals of human rights, freedom and prosperity. Bush said the organization would coordinate and extend the efforts of the already-existing Peace Corps international volunteer organization and AmeriCorps and Senior Corps domestic service organizations.

Bush rebuked those who doubt the Islamic world would be open to Western-style tolerance for human rights. "Let them look to Afghanistan, where the Islamic 'street' greeted the fall of tyranny with song and celebration," he said. "Let the skeptics look to Islam's own rich history -- with its centuries of learning and tolerance and progress."

While America has "no intention of imposing our culture" on the rest of the world, Bush said, the U.S. "will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance."

Despite Bush's touting of religious freedom as an important component of foreign policy, his administration has recently been criticized on that front. Members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and other religious-liberty watchdog organizations say Bush has downplayed an emphasis on religious freedom with some crucial allies in the war on terrorism, such as Sudan and Uzbekistan.

The president struck a strong bipartisan tone and Democrats applauded almost as often as Republicans during the speech. Still, several fissures in the post-Sept. 11 spirit of unity became apparent, particularly related to the economy. Democrats issued only a smattering of applause when Bush said most Americans supported a massive tax cut enacted by Congress last year.

The division was even more pronounced when Bush asked Congress to make the tax cuts permanent. Critics say the cuts disproportionately benefit the wealthiest Americans while providing little real tax relief to low- and middle-income citizens.

Bush also took a potshot at the Democratic-led Senate, which has stalled his economic stimulus package. It offers further tax breaks to the wealthy and large corporations.

"The way out of this recession ... is to grow the economy by encouraging investment in factories and equipment, and by speeding up tax relief so people have more money to spend," he said. "For the sake of American workers, let's pass a stimulus package."

In response, Republican members of the House applauded and shouted, "Work! Work!" toward Democratic Senators.

House minority leader and Southern Baptist Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) gave the Democratic response to Bush's speech. While commending the president on his leadership during a time of war and crisis, Gephardt mildly criticized Bush's policies on tax cuts, Medicare and campaign finance reform. "I refuse to accept that while we stand shoulder-to-shoulder on the war, we should stand toe-to-toe on the economy," Gephardt said. He is a member of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis.

Referring to the recent collapse of energy-industry giant Enron and that company's previous heavy financial support of politicians, Gephardt urged the passage of a campaign-finance reform proposal heretofore opposed by the Bush administration and most Republicans. "If the nation's largest bankruptcy, coupled with a clear example of paid political influence, isn't a prime case for reform, I don't know what is," Gephardt said.

Bush did not refer specifically to Enron in his address, though he did say he would like Congress to work on reforming regulatory legislation to better protect shareholders and pensioners from the kind of havoc the collapse of a large corporation can wreak on stocks.

Bush addressed his first joint session of Congress last March, but that was not officially considered a "State of the Union" address because he had been in office less than a year.

Religious freedom commission turns spotlight on North Korea

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Despite evidence of widespread human rights violations in North Korea, American officials are unsure about how to investigate them properly and disagree about how to respond.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom heard testimony Jan. 24 from witnesses with firsthand experience of the Communist regime.

Several witnesses described a systematic repression of religion. They included a North Korean defector who told tales of the imprisonment, summary execution and torture of Christians.

Witnesses disagreed on the proper way for the U.S. government to respond, however. Two called for increased engagement with North Korea, while another called for further isolating the government and ratcheting up sanctions against the regime.

"By all accounts, there are no personal freedoms of any kind in North Korea and no protection for human rights," commission chairman Michael Young noted to begin the hearing.

Witness Norbert Vollertsen, a doctor who spent a year and a half in North Korea as a medical volunteer, said he got special access normally denied to foreign visitors because he was given a special humanitarian award by the Korean government.

"Knowledge about the overall humanitarian situation in North Korea is ... not available for the normal foreign visitor," he told the commission in a written statement. "Protection of the humanitarian interests of the population is not possible."

Though the government in P'yongyang often points to the fact that there are three church buildings -- two Protestant, one Catholic -- in the capital city, Vollertsen said he never witnessed any Sunday morning activity at any of them. Taking a tour of one church where the person who said he was pastor boasted of 300-400 Christians in attendance every Sunday, Vollertsen said, "We found all the seats in the church full of dust -- never used in the last months, maybe years."

He said political dissenters are sent to "reform institutions" that Vollertsen said he believes are little more than death camps.

Vollertsen said he has spoken to refugees from the nation who have headed to South Korea or are amassed along the North Korean border in China. "All the former prisoners of the concentration camps were talking about mass execution, torture, rape, murder and other crimes against humanity," Vollertsen said. "They were simply punished because of spreading the gospel and reading the Bible."

Kim Sang-Chul, former mayor of Seoul and now chairman of a group formed to help North Korean refugees, verified Vollertsen's story. He said the three churches in P'yongyang, as well as a nearby Buddhist temple, are merely "ceremonial" and used to fool foreign visitors into thinking that the country allows religious freedom.

Soon Ok-Lee, a former North Korean civil servant, provided the day's most graphic testimony. Sent to a "reform institution" for a crime she says she did not commit, Ok-Lee said she witnessed brutal mistreatment of Christians. Ok-Lee said prison guards would regularly attempt to get Christian prisoners to recant their faith.

Ok-Lee told several stories of abortions being forced on female prisoners, some in the latest stages of pregnancy. "In North Korea, it is law that no birth should be given in a prison," she said. "There is an idea of collective punishment, where people with bad ideology are believed to spread on the ideology, so they are forced to have the fetus removed."

Ok-Lee said women were injected with vinegar to induce the abortions. "It requires about 24 hours for the fetus to be ejected from the body," she said. "This causes immeasurable pain."

Describing one forced abortion on a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy, Ok-Lee said the baby was born alive. While the mother pleaded for the infant's life as it writhed on the floor, Ok-Lee said, "The jail keeper came in and stepped on the neck of the baby."

Ok-Lee said the mother was then publicly executed as punishment for pleading for the baby's life.

Despite the trauma of the experience, Ok-Lee said she was so impressed with the faithfulness of the Christians in the prison that she later converted to Christianity. "What was amazing was that they did not reject God," she told the committee via a translator.

After hearing about the state of religious liberty in North Korea, commissioners heard conflicting testimony from policy experts regarding how the U.S. can promote human rights in the Asian country.

Donald Oberdorfer of the foreign policy institute at Johns Hopkins University and Stephen Linton of the Eugene Bell Foundation said further ostracizing North Korea -- as some in the Bush administration have wanted to do -- is the wrong approach.

"Continuing to isolate North Korea and maintaining economic sanctions in hopes that North Korea's government will collapse is not only unwise but cruel," Linton told commissioners. He referred to the massive humanitarian disaster that has befallen the bankrupt country since the mid-1990s.

"Unless the United States promotes religious freedom as a friend rather than an enemy, North Korea will likely turn further away from South Korea and the West, and seek relief from nations that would use its hungry, angry people to continue to threaten American interests in the region," Linton said.

Jack Rendler of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea agreed that, "Isolation will not punish the governing elite of [North Korea] nearly as much as it will do further damage to the 23 million people of North Korea."

A former foreign policy adviser to the House Policy Committee disagreed, however. Chuck Downs contended that North Korean officials have developed a pattern of negotiating in bad faith. Much humanitarian aid to North Korea is tightly controlled by the government and often does not make it to those who need it most, he said. For that reason, he argued, isolation is the only way to effect change in the country.

"The danger in providing aid to North Korea is that the United States will bear responsibility for prolonging the regime's survival," Downs told the commission.

-30-

News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

By ABP staff

College, convention leaders reach accord

ROME, Ga. -- Georgia Baptist Convention and Shorter College officials issued a joint statement Jan. 23 announcing the executive committee of the college's board of trustees has rescinded action taken by the full board in November shifting the college's assets and control to a self-perpetuating foundation board.

College and convention leaders met four hours Jan. 22 and agreed to form an ad hoc committee to study the trustee selection process, the statement affirmed. A few days prior to the meeting, trustees rescinded their earlier action as "a measure of good faith."

Shorter officials had said the action was taken to meet an accreditation requirement enabling the trustees to remove one of its own with cause. The new statement says the GBC administration committee has agreed to provide the college with a written procedure for trustee removal. Details of how that process would work were not released. (ABP)

Bible smuggler gets prison term in China

NEW YORK -- A Hong Kong businessman who allegedly smuggled thousands of Bibles onto China's mainland received a two-year prison sentence for illegally running a business.

Lai Kwong-keung had been charged under more serious anti-cult laws, under which human-rights activists feared he could have been executed.

According to news reports, Lai, 38, was detained in May after bringing 33,080 Bibles to distribute to an underground Christian sect known as the "Shouters" for their exuberant worship.

China permits the distribution of Bibles, but only those printed in China. Lai's Bibles included Western study aids and footnotes, which are not allowed. Further, churches are required by law to register with the China Christian Council, China's recognized Protestant organization. Many of the so-called "house" churches refuse to register, however, fearing government regulation.

The case has renewed criticism of China's record on religious freedom. The U.S. embassy said it was "troubled" by the arrests of Lai and others accused of distributing religious materials. U.S. officials are expected to turn up the heat on the issue in light of a planned visit to China by President Bush. (ABP)

Lay's wife optimistic that 'good will prevail'

HOUSTON -- Ken Lay and his family are looking to their faith to sustain them amid attacks against the former Enron head's character, his wife said in a television interview.

In an interview aired Jan. 29 on NBC's Today show, journalist Lisa Myers asked Linda Lay, "Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel?"

"Absolutely," Linda Lay replied. "Absolutely. God is good. Truth wins out. As my husband always says, 'Good will prevail.'"

The two-part interview also included a comment by the family's minister, Ed Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"I've seen him age almost overnight," Young said of the toll the Enron scandal is taking on Ken Lay. "Because he is broken and in real pain at this hour, trying to decide exactly what he can do." (ABP)

New Bible promises gender-neutral language

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. -- Zondervan and the International Bible Society have announced plans for an updated New International Version that, among other things, uses more gender-neutral language.

Publishers say Today's New International Version will translate the Bible more accurately and present it more clearly. One method of doing that is to use gender-neutral language when the text is meant to include both men and women. In general references, "sons of God," becomes "children of God."

There are no changes, however, when the reference is to a specific gender or to God.

The publishers earlier withdrew plans to replace the NIV with a more gender-neutral version amid criticism that it was motivated by a desire to be politically correct. They hope to avoid a repeat of that controversy this time, by continuing publication of the original NIV, which made its debut in 1978.

A New Testament of the TNIV is due out this spring. The whole Bible, including the Old Testament, is expected to be ready in 2005. (ABP)

-30-

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