

spirit of friendship with the people of Saudi Arabia. We think good friends can talk about these things."

By press time, representatives of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia had not returned phone calls from an Associated Baptist Press reporter seeking reaction to the report.

State Department and White House officials have repeatedly said that the best way to encourage greater religious freedom in Saudi Arabia is to work through behind-the-scenes private diplomacy rather than public actions.

When asked for Bush's reaction to the report's allegations during a May 14 press briefing, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer said, "the President believes that around the world, freedom of religion and tolerance are important and they should be pursued." When asked if the U.S. was doing enough to pursue those ideals in Saudi Arabia, Fleischer added, "I think you can assume, through State Department's contacts, this is a constant issue that comes up. It's something the president does care about."

In the annual report and press conference, commissioners also highlighted a number of other states where religious freedom is endangered. The commission issued detailed reports on Afghanistan, Belarus, Vietnam and Russia. Besides Saudi Arabia, the panel recommended that Burma, China, India, Iran, Iraq, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam be placed on the State Department's list of countries of particular concern with regard to religious-freedom violations.

In regard to Afghanistan, commissioners again voiced their frustration with a religious situation they described as dangerous. "The groundwork is being laid in Afghanistan for a regime almost as repressive as the Taliban," said commissioner Leila Sadat. "And sometimes it is happening with the permission and sometimes even the encouragement of the U.S. government."

Commission chairperson Felice Gaer said the commission is still pursuing its request, made last year to administration officials, for President Bush to appoint a high-level official to monitor the human-rights situation in Afghanistan -- paying particular attention to religious freedom. So far, Bush has not heeded that recommendation. The administration so far has also denied the commission's request to send its own representative to monitor the religious-freedom situation in Afghanistan.

Sadat said the panel believes U.S. officials have a copy of a draft of the proposed new constitution for Afghanistan, to be revealed around May 24, but so far have not allowed commission members to examine it. The panel wants to see how the constitution handles religious liberty and other human-rights issues. "We're getting, I suppose, stonewalled," Sadat said.

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