

Report from the Capital

NEWSLETTER OF THE BAPTIST JOINT COMMITTEE

Religious freedom panel cites U.S. allies

Some of the United States' best allies in the war on terrorism also have the worst records on abuses of religious liberty, according to a new report.

The U.S. Commission on International Freedom, in its annual report released May 6, cited concern that America might compromise on religious freedom issues to strengthen ties with countries like Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. All three countries made a listing of worst offenders in the 71-page report on the state of religious freedom around the world.

"The United States should not compromise its commitment to promoting human rights — including religious freedom — during the campaign against terrorism, and should not 'trade-off' that commitment for the cooperation of foreign governments in that campaign," the report asserts.

The report warned that the United States should ensure that any steps taken to improve relations with China, Russia, Pakistan and other nations "do not undermine its human rights message to the governments of these countries."

Specific concerns cited in the report involving nations that are cooperating in America's war on terrorism included:

◆ **China.** Despite signing several human rights treaties, China's government "has continued to commit severe violations of freedom of religion and belief," the commission said.

The report labeled "numerous egregious violations" committed against evangelical and Catholic

Religious liberty report lists



worst offenders

Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and other groups, such as the Falun Gong, that the government has labeled "evil cults."

◆ **Sudan.** The commission, in its past two reports, has labeled Sudan "the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief." Religion is a major factor in Sudan's civil war between the Muslim north and African south, the report continued. Other human rights and humanitarian violations under the Khartoum regime include aerial bombing of civilians and of humanitarian facilities, deliberate denial of humanitarian assistance, abduction of women and children into conditions of slavery and the forcible displacement of populations from oil-producing areas.

◆ **Uzbekistan.** The conditions for religious freedom in the former Soviet republic "are very poor," according to the report. "In addition to a highly restrictive law on religion that severely limits the ability of minority religions to function, the Uzbek government in recent years has been harshly

cracking down on Muslim individuals, groups, and mosques that do not conform to government-prescribed ideas on how the Islamic faith should be practiced and expressed."

◆ **Saudi Arabia.** "The government of Saudi Arabia denies religious freedom and vigorously enforces its prohibition against all forms of public religious expression other than that of those who follow the government's interpretation and presentation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam," the commission reported. "Numerous Christians and Shi'a Muslims continue to be detained, imprisoned, and deported."

The commission also complained that the State Department and administration had not done enough to impose sanctions and incentives on religious freedom abusers called for in a 1998 law.

The International Religious Freedom Act, which established both the religious freedom commission and an ambassador-at-large for religious freedom in the State Department, allows the president a range of tools for dealing with nations labeled "countries of particular concern." The commission faulted the administration for inaction against those countries and for not adding Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan to the list in its own reporting.

The commission also criticized a year-and-a-half delay in filling a vacancy in the religious freedom ambassador post, causing efforts to promote religious freedom around the world to suffer "significantly."

— Robert Marus
Associated Baptist Press

NewsMakers

◆ **Dean Koldenhoven**, the one-term mayor of Palos Heights, Ill., was awarded the 2002 John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for his condemnation of religious intolerance. He stood up to the city council, which was opposed to an Islamic community converting a local and vacant Christian church into a mosque. Koldenhoven was subsequently defeated in his bid for re-election in what many believe was a direct result of his decision to stand with the Islamic community.

◆ U.S. District Court Judge **Stewart Dalzell** recently ruled in *Freedom Baptist Church vs. Township of Middletown* that the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act is constitutional and does not violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. The court certified other constitutional issues to the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for review.

◆ Baptist Joint Committee Endowment President **James M. Dunn**, in an interview with a columnist for *The Roanoke Times* about prayer in public schools, said, "What most school superintendents and school board lawyers don't know is how much religion already is allowed in the public schools. Oh, that they would just do their homework!" △

Federal judge orders removal of 'Commandments' display

A movement to display the Ten Commandments at public buildings across Tennessee has suffered a second major blow in recent weeks.

U.S. District Judge Allan Edgar ordered the removal of two displays from court buildings in Chattanooga, saying they establish religion in violation of the First Amendment.

That comes on the heels of an advisory sent by the state's attorney general to county commissions claiming posting the Commandments on public buildings is unconstitutional.

The April advisory by Attorney General Paul Summers came amid a campaign calling itself Ten Commandments-Tennessee. Backed by June Griffith, a Republican running for the U.S. Senate, the effort has succeeded in getting about half of the state's 95 counties to approve such displays in the months following last Sept. 11.

The Hamilton County Commission voted in September to erect displays at the courthouse and a city/county court building. They went up in December.

The American Civil Liberties Union filed suit. At the trial, attorneys for the county said the Ten Commandment displays did not endorse or advance religion.

Judge Edgar disagreed. "We may, if we wish, read and heed the precepts of the Ten Commandments," he said in his opinion. "However, we do not need the aid of the government to do so." △

Clergy housing bill moves from Congress to White House

A bill that protects an 81-year-old tax break for clergy housing has passed both houses of Congress and is awaiting President Bush's signature.

The U.S. Senate passed the Clergy Housing Allowance Clarification Act on May 2, just two weeks after the House approved the bill 408-0. The bill moved with unusual speed through both houses, and its sponsor, Rep. Jim Ramstad, R-Minn., said Bush will sign the bill.

The legislation was meant as a pre-emptive strike against possible action by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, which said it wanted to review the constitutionality of the tax rule. Under the tax rule, clergy can exclude most of their housing expenses from their taxable income.

"As soon as the president signs my bill,

the clergy housing allowance will be preserved and our nation's clergy will be protected from a \$2.3 billion tax increase," Ramstad said. △

National Day of Prayer brings petitions, division

Speakers at National Day of Prayer ceremonies around the country hailed America's newfound post-Sept. 11 unity, but some controversy greeted the 50-year-old tradition.

The event began in 1952 after President Harry Truman signed a congressional resolution asking citizens to set aside a day to join in prayer for the nation and its leaders.

It became more widely observed after President Ronald Reagan signed legislation in 1988 designating the first Thursday in May as the prayer day.

Historically an ecumenical event, today many conservative Christian groups take the lead in organizing local and national observations of the event. That was evident in events planned by the largest group coordinating the day's activities, the National Day of Prayer Task Force.

The group, led by Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family head James Dobson, sponsored large prayer events May 2 in a House of Representatives office building and in the White House.

Featured speakers at the events included Dobson, former U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett, evangelical apologist Ravi Zacharias and Senate Chaplain Lloyd John Ogilvie, who composed a special prayer for the day.

Ogilvie's prayer noted the tragedies of Sept. 11, and then said, "We rededicate ourselves to be one nation under You."

Dobson lauded Bush in her remarks. "We are grateful to have a president who honors God and recognizes the need for prayer," she said.

Not all participants in ceremonies around the country reported such unity.

Complaining that right-wing Christian groups had dominated "official" National Day of Prayer celebrations at a Ventura County, Calif., government center in recent years, a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim clerics from the Ventura Interfaith Ministerial Association held their own service across the street from the government center.

"This is a statement that Ventura County celebrates diversity and that no one religion has the right to dominate the American cultural scene," said Rabbi John Sherwood, an event organizer. △

Prayer proclamations should come from clergy, not Congress

Last week our nation observed a day of prayer. As a result of an act of Congress in 1952 designating a National Day of Prayer — as well as annual proclamations of presidents — our government has been telling us when to pray for 50 years.

What's wrong with designating a special time for prayer and urging Americans to pray? There's nothing wrong with people of faith getting together to pray on a designated day. In fact, every day should be a day of prayer. The rub comes when the government declares it to be such and exhorts its citizens to engage in a religious exercise.



J. Brent Walker

Executive Director

Although most presidents have issued prayer proclamations, some did not. Thomas Jefferson, for example, refused to issue a Thanksgiving proclamation, because he believed that it was both unconstitutional and unwise. In an 1808 letter, Jefferson wrote:

Fasting and prayer are religious exercises; the enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, and the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the Constitution has deposited it.

James Madison, the father of our Constitution, was no less opposed to such proclamations. Apparently bowing to political pressure, he issued several prayer proclamations during his time in office. But in later years, Madison repented for those actions, recognizing that prayer proclamations tended to "imply and certainly nourish the erroneous idea of a national religion ... [and] carry the grave risk of using religion to serve the political ambitions of the moment."

Despite these reservations about the wisdom of prayer proclamations, the National Day of Prayer has become firmly

ingrained in our political culture. In most years, it seems that hardly anyone raises an eyebrow. As David Corn, Washington editor of *The Nation* magazine, recently observed, "Jefferson and Madison are losing the debate. Shirley Dobson [of the National Day of Prayer Task Force] and Pat Robertson are winning."

This year, the tradition went a step further. Not only did our government tell us *when* would be a good time to pray, it also told us *what* to pray. The "Prayer for America," reproduced in the sidebar, was written by Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, the chaplain of the United States Senate and, as such, a

government employee whose office is financed by tax money.

True, this prayer was not mandated as was the New York Board of Regent's prayer that was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Engel vs. Vitale* (1962). And it was promoted mainly by the NDP Task Force, a nongovernmental organization. But the specter of a governmental official writing a prayer for the nation to pray — no matter how much one may support the sentiment expressed in the prayer — would make Jefferson, Madison and Elder John Leland, turn over in their graves.

Compounding the problem, the prayer reflects both a theistic and Christian bent, even though not prayed in Jesus' name. The fact that real prayer by definition must be uttered in the context of someone's faith tradition makes a putative "nondenominational prayer" an oxymoron and highlights the reasons government should not be involved in prescribing religious exercises.

Exhorting our country to repentance and prayer on designated days is quite proper. But it's more appropriately called for by the preachers, priests and prophets among us, not civil magistrates, the Congress or even a legislative chaplain. Δ

Prayer for America

Gracious God, all that we have and are is a result of Your amazing generosity. Since September 11th, in the battle against terrorism, we have discovered again that You truly are our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

We rededicate ourselves to be one nation under You. In You we trust. We reaffirm our accountability to You, to the absolutes of Your Commandments, and to justice in our society.

Bless our President, Congress, and all our leaders with supernatural power. We commit ourselves to be faithful to You as Sovereign of our land and as our personal Lord and Savior.

Amen.

BAPTIST JOINT COMMITTEE

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Leaders vow to aid persecuted churches in North Korea, Sudan

Encouraged by politicians and persecution experts, Christian leaders May 1 reiterated their commitment to work against religious persecution, especially in Sudan and North Korea.

"This is an ongoing effort to set people free — it's nothing less than that," said Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson, opening the Second Summit of Christian Leaders on Religious Persecution.

"Our task ... is to keep public pressure on so that around the world tyrants know that the cost of persecuting Christians is simply too high for them to bear."

More than 100 religious leaders, members of Congress and former ambassadors attended the gathering, which was sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals and Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom in Washington.

The board of the evangelical umbrella group adopted a statement of conscience on worldwide religious persecution, a follow-up to its 1996 statement that officials say has helped fuel activism from prayer efforts to congressional lobbying on the issue.

"We have significantly achieved the goal of searing the consciences of millions and of focusing public attention on the plight of persecuted believers — a critical and necessary first step," the statement reads. "Such progress, however, is clearly insufficient to satisfy our obligations of conscience."

The document specifically voiced support for President Bush, who has called the government of Sudan "monstrous" and the North Korean government "evil," and noted that President Reagan described the former Soviet Union as an "evil empire" at a meeting of the National Association of

Evangelicals.

"Horrible as may be the torments now suffered by vulnerable believers throughout the world, those suffered by faith communities of Sudan and North Korea may be more brutal, more systematic, more deliberate, more implacable and more purely genocidal than those taking place anywhere in the world today," the statement adds.

The document cited the leaders' support of recent recommendations by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, calling for such measures as the enactment of the Sudan Peace Act and the expansion of reporting by organizations working to protect religious and other human rights in North Korea.

Beyond the statements, the summit featured personal testimony from a former North Korean woman and an Episcopal bishop from Sudan who recounted stories of people being kicked, beaten and imprisoned for their Christian beliefs.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., was among the members of Congress who urged the religious leaders to continue lobbying Capitol Hill on persecution.

"We need your strength, we need your prayers," Brownback told them. "It has to happen in the heavens before it can happen in the U.S. Congress."

Bush, in a letter read by his special assistant, Tim Goeglein, assured the leaders that his administration is continuing its work to address religious freedom in Sudan and North Korea.

"Strong advocacy on behalf of persecuted religious believers around the world will make a difference wherever men and women suffer for their faith," the president wrote. "Your advocacy and efforts help give hope to people who seek to worship as their conscience demands they do." △



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