

## **A Global Review of the Denial of Religious Freedom Fall 2001**

By Zarrín T. Caldwell

### **The United States**

In late October, the Bush Administration designated six countries as being “countries of particular concern” with respect to the persecution of religious believers. The countries on this year’s list, issued in an annual report produced by the U.S. State Department, were North Korea, China, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, and Sudan. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan has also been designated as a violator of religious freedom. Of note, however, was the absence of countries such as Laos, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan from this list. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, various human rights groups have charged that these nations, despite being egregious offenders of religious liberty, “were omitted because the Bush Administration needs their help in combating the Taliban and Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida terrorist network.”

In a hearing before the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in late November, Paula Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, said that, “Many have raised concern that we are partnering for the sake of our counter-terrorism objectives with some countries with less than stellar human rights records. ... We have not, however, suppressed our objections to their human rights violations because of this increased cooperation. We have and will continue to raise our concerns with our partners, regardless of their level of counter-terrorism cooperation. They are not mutually exclusive goals.”

Despite this assurance, some in Washington’s foreign policy community remain concerned about religious freedom becoming “a casualty of war.” Rep. Christopher Smith, a Republican who is vice chairman of the International Relations Committee in the House of Representatives, published an editorial in the *Washington Times* on this subject in late November. He stated, “Over the agonizing weeks since September 11, I have observed a trend in US foreign policy that is of great concern: a willingness to allow religious freedom and other human rights to suffer in order to combat terrorism abroad,” he said. “As the United States assembled an international coalition to fight worldwide terrorism, perennial human rights violators such as Saudi Arabia and heretofore little known Uzbekistan have jumped on board. When faced with the proposition of either ‘being with us or against us,’ most countries have chosen the former. Yet, the price for casting our net so broadly would appear to be silence on critical human rights issues.”

### **Mexico**

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* reports that improvements have been made in the recent past in Mexico related to greater tolerance toward religious minorities, and especially Jehovah’s Witnesses. In Chiapas, while some 50 families were expelled from the community for their religion, the National Commission on Human Rights stepped in to restore their lands and to help resolve conflicts with local authorities. In states such as Chiapas and Oaxaca, municipal authorities have tended to be intolerant of religious practices that are different from those of the local

community. Jehovah's Witnesses have been criticised in some indigenous communities because of their lack of participation in town religious festivities, including economic participation. Dialogue between the parties related to finding alternative work assignments in the community for Jehovah's Witnesses has, however, resolved some of the conflict.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* also reports that, in the past, there have been problems with the education of children who are Jehovah's Witnesses in Mexico due to, for example, their conscientious objection to the salute of the flag. However, educational authorities are apparently resolving such cases more favorably. Overall, the report indicates that progress has been made by public institutions to better respect the rights of religious minorities in Mexico.

## **Bulgaria**

In a late November visit to Haskova in Bulgaria, the US Ambassador to that country, Richard Miles, met with the local mufti, Faik Hadjimurad, to discuss some of the problems facing the Muslim community in Bulgaria. According to a report by the *Tolerance Foundation*, Hadjimurad noted that one of the main problems was the restitution of property belonging to the mosques. Apparently, the state continues to hold many so-called "vakhaf" properties (buildings, rural land, etc.) and some mosques have been turned into museums.

Despite democratic change in the country, much religious property, including that of the Catholic Church, continues to be state-owned and many political and juridical obstacles are said to remain before this property can be returned. While the current legislation is cumbersome and requires that religious groups meet complex criteria to claim ownership, various religious groups have joined forces to call both for the development of new draft laws and a change in political will.

On the above point, an inter-religious meeting was held in July 2001 which focused on a discussion of properties confiscated by the Communist regime. About 40 leaders of different religious organisations took part in the event, sponsored by the *Tolerance Foundation* in co-operation with the *Bulgarian Association for Defence and Encouragement of Religious Liberties*.

## **Russia**

In early December, a Moscow municipal court upheld a September ruling by Tagansky District Court that the Salvation Army must cease its activities in the Russian capital. The failure of the Salvation Army's appeal means that the order will now come into legal force, although an appeal has also been filed with the European Court of Human Rights. Various religious freedom advocates have closely followed this case. They have been concerned about what appears to be a situation of arbitrary discrimination, which may set precedents for other religious minorities operating in Russia.

*Newsday* reported in mid-September that "the Moscow government has sought to shut down the Salvation Army, accusing it of not registering on time and failing to regularly report its activities to authorities. The missionary group, which operates soup kitchens and does other charity work, says the government unfairly denied it

registration based on the 1997 law.” According to prosecutors, and as reported by the *Keston Institute*, the Salvation Army was in violation of Article 27, Part 4 of the 1997 Russian law on religion, which states that all religious organisations failing to re-register by 31 December 2000 were liable to liquidation.

Defence lawyers argued that the judge for the district court did not properly investigate the case, including reviewing the additional documentation brought by the Salvation Army. After the decision of the Moscow court, defence lawyer Vladimir Ryakhovsky queried why anyone would want to close down the Salvation Army for their work on feeding the homeless. “I’m ashamed that this is happening in my country,” he said.

In a separate development, the *Associated Press* reported in late October that “the foreign, interior and justice ministries would be ordered to make recommendations for amendments strengthening control over foreign religious activists in Russia.” The Russian paper *Pravda* added, “currently the law allows followers of any religion the exclusive right to invite foreigners to preach their ideas, still the mechanism for legally regulating the religious activity has not been worked out.” The government has reportedly taken these moves out of concern for religion being used to disguise extremist activities.

## **Uzbekistan**

Fearful of the extreme version of Islam that reigns in Afghanistan, the Government in Uzbekistan has adopted an extreme secularism, said the *Associated Press* in October. According to this article, which reviewed the government’s treatment of religion in the country, a governmental body called the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan sanctions the practice of Islam. Lengthy jail terms, torture, and killings in custody often await those who try to pray under imams without board approval. Human rights groups estimate that some 8,000 people are presently in jail for religious reasons. Some of these groups suspect that Uzbek President Islam Karimov will use current world events to impose even harsher restrictions against religious groups in the country.

According to the *Office of General Counsel of Jehovah’s Witnesses*, this community also continues to face persecution in Uzbekistan. Over the past year, there have been numerous cases in towns throughout Uzbekistan in which Jehovah’s Witnesses have been arrested and had their homes raided and literature confiscated. The report asserts that these patterns of religious persecution are becoming more common with Jehovah’s Witnesses branded as religious extremists. While Uzbekistan’s 1998 law on religion purportedly protects freedom of religion or belief, says the *Keston Institute*, local and district authorities have “almost unlimited power to refuse registration to religious communities.” Unregistered organisations are, thus, considered illegal and face increasing harassment.

## **Nigeria**

Following the last update in the May 2001 edition of *IARF World*, violence between Muslims and Christians has continued in Nigeria. Although the figures vary, clashes in mid-October caused the death of some 100-200 persons in Kano, northern Nigeria. The incidents in Kano, including the destruction of holy places, were

attributed to Muslim protests against US military action in Afghanistan. This conflict followed bloody religious clashes in early September in the central Nigerian city of Jos, which also suffered a death toll of several hundred. Religious violence in Jos was attributed to strong feelings by the majority Christian community against the implementation of strict Islamic Shari'ah law in many of Nigeria's northern states (*UN Integrated Regional Information Network*).

At this writing, approximately 12 predominately Muslim states in northern Nigeria have adopted Shari'ah law. The *Barnabus Fund* notes that these laws are only supposed to apply to Muslim-majority areas with customary law courts set up for areas where Christians are in the majority. However, various Christian groups and non-governmental organisations have continued to express concerns that Christians will be victimised and the activities of the ministry restricted in such a situation. The IARF remains uncertain about how the application of these laws will work in practice. Regardless, the adoption of any state religion remains in contravention of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and, thus, the federal government has been opposed to these developments.

In providing some history to the present situation in Nigeria, *Reuters* reported that "the introduction of strict Islamic Shari'ah law in parts of predominately Muslim northern Nigeria, despite opposition from non-Muslims, triggered violence early last year. But the Shari'ah crisis appears to have only compounded historical ethnic and regional rivalries blamed for a devastating civil war in the late 1960s in which more than a million people died." It appears that a potent mix of politics, religion, and ethnic clashes continue to plague this region.