

NEWS RELEASE

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First Freedom Center Issues Major Report on Vulnerable Religious Communities Worldwide

The New Year began with reports of widespread violence against Coptic Christians in Egypt, of the continuing drama surrounding Pakistan's Blasphemy Law, and of the enduring violence among religious communities in many lands, not least, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Against that background, the First Freedom Center announces the publication, on January 13, 2011, of its report on *Minority Religious Communities at Risk*. Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, who holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, is a member of the report's Editorial Board. He notes in anticipation of its publication that: "The twenty-first century seems to be drifting into violent religious conflicts that remind us of the dark ages centuries ago. There is nothing more important than to support those of goodwill and good faith, bringing people of different religions and nations together. One such example of this is the *Minority Religious Communities at Risk* report, which is an important contribution to this discussion."

Compiled in collaboration with 14 of the United States' most eminent authorities on freedom of religion and conscience and on human rights generally, the report identifies minority religious communities most at risk of disappearing during the coming decade by virtue of political repression, cultural antipathy, demographic exhaustion, and other factors. It profiles these communities as illustrations of the pervasive deficiencies worldwide in according to religious minorities the rights guaranteed them in international law. The report concludes that the relative standing of minority religious communities is a key indicator of countries' respect for human rights and that, where minority religious communities are in peril, rule of law is in peril also. It

recommends that international organizations and national leaderships individually undertake practical measures to strengthen religious-minority rights in such areas as police and judicial training, institution building, and the systematic consideration of the rights of religious minorities in the devising of measures for the resolution and avoidance of conflicts. It offers for particular emulation and study the achievements of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which the authors hope can be replicated in other regions of the world.

Felice Gaer, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee, also a member of the Editorial Board, remarks that: "This thoughtful and well-documented analysis compels us to re-examine how long-standing tactics of intolerance are mobilized to drive out and threaten the very existence of many communities of religious minorities worldwide. Whether the means are extremist mobs torching homes, shops, and houses of worship, or more subtle tools of societal and political discrimination, the failure of many governments to protect those communities has led to the sorry state outlined in this important new report by the First Freedom Center. It is my hope that by drawing attention to their plight, the report can encourage urgently needed measures to protect and save the members of these communities from expulsion and extinction."

The report offers a detailed analysis, global region by global region, of the legal, political, cultural and other challenges facing minority religious communities. Its authors and editors intend it as a serious contribution to human-rights monitoring in its specialized field. It takes positive note of the monitoring reports issued by the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom and the Department of State, but finds that neither these nor other monitoring instruments have as their exclusive focus the circumstances of minority religious communities. They note in the report that every country on earth has signed at least one of the basic treaty documents defining universal human rights, including the rights to freedom of conscience, religion, and belief. All have accepted the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a "common standard." All have affirmed the Vienna Declaration of 1993, which imposes a "duty" to uphold all fundamental human rights "regardless of their political, economic, and cultural systems." The United Nations' two Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights enjoin members of the United Nations System not only to respect and uphold the rights in the 1948 Declaration, but also to frame and implement domestic laws for that purpose.

The report finds that most countries are deficient in fulfilling those responsibilities. It further finds that the "cultural rights", behind which some perpetrators of human-rights abuses take refuge,

cannot legally excuse their infringements. The report notes that the perception is gaining strength in some quarters that Western countries, which traditionally have championed universal human rights, may be diminishing their interest in seeing those rights secured. That perception alone, the report observes, can encourage further infringement of the human rights of members of religious minorities. It stresses that peace agreements, conflict resolution measures, and efforts to stabilize post-conflict societies will be inherently deficient -- including in Afghanistan -- if they ignore or consider inadequately the rights of religious minorities.

Robert Seiple, former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and past President of the First Freedom Center, who has reviewed the report, remarks that: "Governments can always be judged by how they treat their minority populations. Indeed, how the world responds to the vulnerabilities inherent in minority status will tell us much about universal values and global responses. The material in this report on vulnerable religious populations can be found nowhere else. The need for practical scholarship on this issue has more than been met. My congratulations to the First Freedom Center for making this a priority and a reality."

Among the communities which the report finds most "at risk" are Orthodox Christians in Turkey, Jewish communities in Arab lands, Sabian Mandeans in Iraq, Nazarene Christians in Somalia, and others. The report assesses also the circumstances of communities which, while too large to be at risk of extinction in the near term, are under significant duress. These include, among others, Egyptian Copts, Rohingya Muslims in Burma, Yezidis in Iraq, Uyghur Muslims in China, Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, and Zoroastrians. The report's eminent-expert editors comprise representatives of a number of faith communities, human-rights organizations, and other NGOs, as well as members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The principal authors are Ambassador (ret.) Randolph Bell, President of the First Freedom Center, and Dr. Isabelle Kinnard Richman, the Center's Vice President for Education.

The First Freedom Center is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-denominational 501(c)(3) institution, whose mission is "to advance the fundamental human rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience." Its headquarters are in Richmond, Virginia, on the site where, in 1786, the Virginia General Assembly passed Thomas Jefferson's 1786 Statute for Religious Freedom. The statute provided the template for the non-establishment and free-exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and its principles infused the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Center has worked since 1984 to advance freedom of conscience and religion, honoring such international protagonists as Vaclav Havel, Tony Blair, and President

Abdurrahman Wahid of Indonesia. Its international honoree this year is former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir.

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