

Religious freedom panel meets with Clinton

Lindsay Perna Religion News Service | Jun. 10, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Members of a religious freedom watchdog panel met June 8 with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who noted their concerns without promising specific actions, one of the panel's members said.

Nina Shea, a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), said Clinton was agreeable and took notes on their 40-minute discussion, but did not commit to take public action on the panel's proposed agenda.

Shea said the commissioners of the bipartisan panel insisted in the meeting that the administration oppose a proposed United Nations resolution that would ban the defamation of religion. Pakistan and other Middle Eastern nations support the ban, which would bar public criticism of religions.

They also urged the administration to secure the release of all Arabic-language textbooks used at a Saudi-funded private school in Northern Virginia that critics say teaches a militant form of Islam. Moreover, commissioners asked the administration to support the rights of Egyptian Muslims who convert to Christianity in Egypt; and, to designate Vietnam as a "country of particular concern" for its religious freedom record.

Clinton took a more diplomatic tone after President Obama's public statements last weekend in Cairo and Paris against religious persecution and in favor of religious expression, Shea said.

"We're looking for policy action from them ... to use the bully pulpit since they haven't yet," Shea said. "I'm concerned there won't be any effort or minimal effort. Public policy is languishing on (these issues)."

The commission, in a statement, said it also raised concerns about blasphemy laws in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt; and also the plight of religious minorities, including Iranian Baha'is and Vietnamese Christians.

The State Department did not return calls for comment.

Michael Cromartie, a commissioner and vice president at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, agreed with Shea, calling the meeting with Clinton agreeable, and said commissioners have to trust that the administration will actually work behind the scenes on these issues.

"It wasn't an hourlong dialogue on the study of human rights abuse in North Korea," he said. "We told them what we wanted, she heard us and that was that."