



NEWS RELEASE

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Extremist Islam, Genocide in Sudan Top 2004 List of Issues Affecting Religious Freedom

Council for America's First Freedom Cites "Perils and Progress" at Home and Abroad in Year-End Assessment

RICHMOND, Va. (January 7, 2005) - Extremist interpretations of Islam -- the driving force behind much of the post-9/11 conflict around the world -- have been named the number one issue affecting the cause of religious freedom in 2004. The interpretation of Islamic principles, which condones repression of religious liberty, topped the list in a new assessment by a 23-person jury of scholars and observers empanelled by the Council for America's First Freedom, the Richmond-based non-profit educational organization whose mission is to champion religious freedom worldwide. The inaugural report, entitled *Perils and Progress: Top 10 Religious Freedom Issues of 2004*, covers both risks and significant milestones related to religious liberty in the United States and around the globe.

"Religious liberty is a fundamental human right, and yet the freedom to worship as an individual sees fit is not a universal guarantee, as this ranking makes amply clear," said Tommy Baer, president of the Council for America's First Freedom. "The struggle for religious freedom is a prominent, real and, in many cases, bloody campaign that continues to summon the courage and conviction of countless global citizens."

"At the same time," added Stephen Elliott, executive director of the Council, "the past year also witnessed landmark events that celebrate religious liberty - milestones that provide hope and inspiration for broadening religious freedom to all of the world's people."

The panel named the ongoing genocide of two million non-Muslims in Sudan's southern region as a close second in the Top 10 list. Mariane Pearl, award-winning journalist and widow of slain *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Daniel Pearl, termed the Sudan genocide as a case of "ethnic cleansing."

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Other issues rounding out the Top 10 include church involvement in politics, the French ban on religious attire and family law reforms in Morocco. The issues were selected from among a larger listing of both domestic and international nominations which were evaluated based on the degree to which they had an impact on the issue of religious freedom during the past 12 months. The full list, ranked in order by the panel, follows.

PERILS AND PROGRESS: Top 10 Religious Freedom Issues of 2004

- 1. Extremist Islam (ongoing)** - Profound worldwide concern exists about the often violent actions of certain Muslim groups in the name of Islam. Mainstream Muslims emphasize that Islam is a religion of faith, reconciliation and peace. However, as Colin Powell noted in an October speech, "It's misused by terrorists. Terrorists can't stand democracy. They can't stand systems of government where people are free to make their own choice." These radical Muslims' intolerance of other faiths based on a restricted interpretation of Islamic principles threatens religious freedom around the globe.
- 2. Genocide in Southern Sudan (ongoing)** - In the course of Sudan's 20-year civil conflict, two million people – primarily African Christians and animists from south and central Sudan – have been killed. The Sudanese government in the north engages in religious persecution by kidnapping and forcing southern Christian boys to convert to Islam; imprisoning, beating and torturing Christians and clergy who refuse to apostatize; raping and enslaving thousands of women and children; destroying homes and villages, and interring residents in concentration camps; and obstructing the delivery of desperately needed humanitarian food aid. *(SPECIAL NOTE: On December 31, 2004, a peace agreement was reached between the Sudanese government and the rebels in southern Sudan. A ceremony has been set tentatively for January 9 in Nairobi where negotiators for both sides are expected to finalize the deal.)*
- 3. Church Involvement in Politics (Fall 2004)** - The 2004 election year brought about much discussion regarding the proper place of religion in the political arena. While religious organizations are legally permitted to take positions on political issues, they are forbidden from explicitly supporting or attacking political candidates. Since 1996, the IRS has investigated houses of worship and religious nonprofits for violations of their tax-exempt status. The IRS has threatened to revoke the tax-exempt status of churches and other religious non-profit organizations that have supported political candidates on the grounds that this conflicts with the 501(c)(3) requirement of non-partisanship.
- 4. French Ban on Religious Attire (effective Sept. 2004)** - The French Parliament passed a law, at the request of President Jacques Chirac, prohibiting students and school officials from wearing "obvious" religious symbols in public schools. Under the law, young Muslim students are prohibited from wearing headscarves; Sikh students cannot wear turbans; Jewish students are not allowed to wear yarmulkes; and Christians are prohibited from wearing "large" crosses. To date, French school officials have expelled more than 15 Muslim and Sikh students for refusing to remove their headscarves or turbans.
- 5. Display of Ten Commandments in Government Buildings (Oct. 12, 2004)** - The U.S. Supreme Court agreed, after 25 years of debate, to consider the constitutionality of displaying the Ten Commandments in government buildings. The announcement came a week after the Court denied an appeal from former Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy S. Moore, who was removed from office after disregarding a federal order to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from the state's court building. Over the past five years, 24 similar

cases have been filed in federal courts. Scheduled to begin in February, the High Court will address the constitutionality of displays in Kentucky and Texas.

6. **Countries of Particular Concern (Sept. 15, 2004)** - In its annual report on the state of religious freedom in the world, the U.S. State Department added three new “countries of particular concern”(CPC) to its list: Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. According to the U.S. State Department, these CPCs include countries whose governments have “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” Some of their violations include restricting religious practice to a small number of officially recognized religions; punishing dissenters, especially the leadership, with prison terms, physical abuse and other forms of torture; requiring the renunciation of non-approved faiths; and forcibly closing houses of worship. Other CPCs remaining on the list from last year include Burma, China, Iran, North Korea and Sudan.
7. **Vietnamese Law Restricting Religious Freedom (effective Nov. 15, 2004)** - The Vietnamese government began enforcing a new law limiting religious freedom which is called the Ordinance on Religions and Beliefs. Through it, the government exercises control over religious activities by requiring: official recognition and registration; authorization for educational organizations involved in training religious workers, including mandatory teachings on the history and laws of Vietnam and approved religious curriculum; approval for all forms of collaboration by religious groups; evaluation of clergy selected by the Church for ordination or promotion; authorization on all printed materials for publication; designated places of worship to be sanctioned by the government; and the confiscation of property as the government sees fit. The government also maintains the right to deny religious freedom if it is considered a threat to national unity, national security or public order, among other things.
8. **“Under God” case (June 14, 2004)** - “One nation, under God” remains in the Pledge of Allegiance after the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed the case brought by California atheist Michael Newdow, stating that Newdow did not have legal standing to challenge the language of the Pledge. Newdow sued the Elk Grove Unified School District, where his daughter attends public school, to have the phrase “Under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance, alleging it violated the Constitution’s prohibition that the government would “establish no religion.” Because the Pledge, with its “Under God” phrase, is recited in public schools, Newdow argued that his daughter was being taught that her father’s atheistic beliefs were un-American. The case made its way to the high court where it was dismissed after the court concluded that Newdow did not have the legal right to file this claim on behalf of his daughter since he had neither physical nor legal custody of her.
9. **350th Celebration of Jewish Life in America (Sept. 2004)** - The year 2004 marks 350 years since the first communal settlement of Jews in North America arrived on the ship, the St. Cathrien (sometimes called the St. Charles). After being expelled from Spain, Portugal and Brazil, a group of 23 Jewish refugees, including women and children, arrived in New Amsterdam to settle and build a new home for themselves. In the years that followed, the growing Jewish community pressed authorities to extend to them rights offered to other settlers, including the right to erect a house of worship.
10. **Family Law Reforms in Morocco (Feb. 2004)** - The Moroccan parliament approved landmark changes to a 46-year-old family law by granting women property rights in marriage and the right to divorce. The reforms also placed new restrictions on polygamy and raised the minimum age of marriage for women from 15 to 18, the same age for men. Women’s rights advocates based their arguments on the Qur’an and worked with religious scholars to arrive at suitable reforms. The legal changes reflect more diverse understandings of Islam and enhance the sense of religious freedom in Morocco.

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About the Council for America’s First Freedom

The Council for America’s First Freedom (CAFF) is a non-denominational, non-political, non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization based in Richmond, Va. Established in 1984, CAFF’s mission is to champion religious freedom worldwide through education and to strengthen appreciation for America’s protection of this fundamental human right. CAFF sponsors the following annual initiatives: Presidential Proclamation of National Religious Freedom Day (January 16); First Freedom Awards; and the First Freedom Student Competition. Currently, CAFF is developing the First Freedom Center, a world-class facility with interactive exhibits and educational outreach programs that will explore the development of religious freedom in America, and today’s related national and international issues. For more information, please visit www.firstfreedom.org.