

# **Iraq listed as site of imperiled religious freedom: "Alarming and deteriorating situation"**

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Iraq has been added to a "watch list" of countries requiring "close monitoring" of violation of religious freedoms, reports an independently run monitoring group established by the U.S. government.

The decision by the Commission on International Religious Freedom to add Iraq to the list is due to the "alarming and deteriorating situation for freedom of religion and belief" within the war-torn nation, the panel said in its annual report released May 2. Iraq joins a watch list that includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Nigeria and Indonesia.

The report noted what it called the "growing scope and severity of human rights abuses" within Iraq. It said that nonstate actors, particularly a Sunni-dominated insurgency, "are responsible for a substantial proportion of the sectarian violence and associated human rights violations."

However, the Iraqi government also bears responsibility for acts of violence, the report stated. This includes engaging in human rights violations through its state security forces. Among those violations are arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention without due process, torture and extrajudicial executions, the panel said.

The government is also responsible, the report said, for tolerating religiously based attacks and other acts violating religious freedom, including abuses carried out by armed Shi'ite factions.

In addition to adding Iraq to its watch list, the commission released its annual recommendations to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about "countries of particular concern," whose governments have "engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief." This is seen as a more serious category than that of the watch list. The 2007 "countries

of particular concern” are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. -*Ecumenical News International*