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## Persecution

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tempting to sign up 50,000 churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious centers around the country to prepare for a "Season of Prayer," Sept. 28-Nov. 16, in preparation for the international day of prayer. Rev. Haas noted that organizers picked Nov. 16 for the culmination because it comes two weeks before Thanksgiving.

"What we're asking people to do is to think about 'family' that we don't think about as family," he said, referring to the persecuted.

Haas' organization provides resource kits to interested churches and groups that includes a *Prayer Journal* filled with accounts of religious persecution.

For example, the journal points out that Christians, moderate Muslims and animists have been victimized by Sudan's militant Islamic regime, which many observers consider one of the worst persecutors of religious believers.

"Food is denied those who will not convert to Islam," the journal noted. "Christian families are broken up by abduction, imprisonment, torture and execution of men."

The minister plans to be in the Rochester area Aug. 29-31 to promote the day of prayer, according to Kim Edlin, executive director of operations at Faith Temple in Rochester, a Pentecostal church. His appearance schedule, however, was still being planned.

Edlin is serving as N.Y. state coordinator for the day of prayer. She said that Catholic churches interested in participating in the season and day of prayer can call her at Faith Temple at 716/472-1680.

### How should we respond?

Last May, two Congressional Republicans, U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsyl-

vania, and U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia, simultaneously introduced a bill in their respective legislative chambers that calls on the government to establish a White House office to monitor foreign religious persecution.

The proposed legislation also outlines economic steps the government should take to punish persecuting countries. For example, the bill would ban all exports to foreign government offices and agencies that directly carry out acts of religious persecution. The bill also calls for the United States to give priority consideration to refugees from religious persecution seeking asylum in this country.

Religious and human rights experts the *Courier* interviewed all praised the bill's framers for bringing the issue of religious rights to the forefront of the nation's political consciousness.

Nina Shea, director of the religious program at Freedom House, a Washington, D.C.-based human rights organization, said the bill would finally put teeth into years of U.S. government rhetoric leveled against foreign religious persecution.

"I think the economic sanctions are absolutely needed because words don't mean anything anymore," Shea told the *Courier* in a phone interview. "I don't believe anybody takes any of our criticism seriously, including the persecuting regimes."

However, some experts had problems with the bill.

Because it specifically names China and such Muslim-dominated countries as Sudan and Saudi Arabia, the Wolf-Specter legislation could be seen as setting up a simplistic, confrontational scenario, according to Joe Stork, advocacy director for the Middle East Division of Human Rights Watch.

"It could be seen as 'Us, the Christian West versus the Muslim East and the Communist Asians,'" he said.

Stork stressed that religious persecu-

tion is a highly complex issue, tied up with issues of nationalism, ethnic identity and the power of ruling elites. For example, he said, while Saudi Arabia harasses Christians, most of whom are foreign workers, it also frowns on its own citizens who are Shia Muslims, a minority group in Saudi Arabia where Sunni Muslims dominate. Yet, the Wolf-Specter bills make no mention of such persecution, he noted.

Powers, the U.S. bishops' foreign policy adviser, said the bishops haven't signed onto the bill because they're still studying its provisions. However, he saw some problems already with the fact that the legislation mandates a series of sanctions against offending nations.

"If any legislation is passed, it ought to recognize that there is no magic bullet, in terms of policy response, to cases of religious persecution," he said in a phone interview from Washington, D.C.

For example, he said, the U.S. bishops opposed renewing Most Favored Nation trading status for China earlier this year, citing that nation's record of religious persecution, and its lack of willingness to change its anti-Christian practices.

However, the bishops didn't call for any economic sanctions when the Russian parliament approved a bill earlier this year that would have relegated the Catholic Church to second-class status, Powers noted.

The bill was later vetoed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, despite tremendous pressure by Russian nationalists for him to sign it, Powers said.

If economic sanctions had been mandated against Russia for passing the bill, such sanctions could have played right into the hands of Yeltsin's — and the Catholic Church's — enemies in Russia, Powers said.

"How you deal with a particular problem must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis," Powers said.

## The new rights lobby

Although they may differ in tactical approaches to religious persecution, religious and human rights activists generally agree that the United States has put human rights on the back burner in order to focus on free trade, according to Patricia Rengel, chief legislative counsel of Amnesty International USA.

"Before the fall of the Soviet Union, there always was a certain ideological element to the U.S. rhetoric on human rights," she said.

She noted, for example, how U.S. leaders selectively protested their communist enemies' human rights violations while ignoring those of the country's capitalist friends. Now that the Soviet bloc has fallen, the United States is doing business with regimes that regularly abuse such rights as religious freedom, she said.

"Human rights are seen as something of an annoying and unnecessary interference," she said, pointing out how the U.S. didn't consider China's human rights record when considering its Most Favored Nation status.

Shea pointed out that the 1980s were a more fertile time for the human rights community than the 1990s. Activists of various stripes in the '80s focused on dismantling apartheid in South Africa, protesting Soviet persecution of Christians in the Eastern Bloc, and decrying the killing of church workers in Latin America, she noted.

However, the 1990s offers a new challenge in the form of religious persecution by nations doing business with the United States, she said, and religious citizens must rise to meet this challenge.

"I don't think the traditional human rights groups can be effective," Shea said, pointing to such groups as her own and others like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. "I think the Christian churches are the new human rights lobby."

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