

US report raps Saudi human-rights record

Khaleej Times - 19 October, 2007

Saudi Arabia has made little progress on pledges to improve human rights, curb harassment by the Islamic religious police and halt the spread of extremist literature, US monitors said in a report issued on Thursday.

Although Saudi Arabian authorities now tolerate two human rights groups and more debate on the issue in the media, such changes still face "substantial resistance" in parts of the government, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom said.

"Despite some increase in public space to discuss human rights issues, pervasive restrictions remain on civil society and political activists, including representatives of minority religious groups," the group wrote in its report.

The panel of experts, set up by the US Congress in 1998, urged the US government to abandon its discreet approach and put more public pressure on Saudi Arabia over its rights record.

The report said that women and members of other religions face persistent obstacles to equal rights under Saudi Arabia's harshly enforced brand of Sunni Islam. The religious police, or mutawaa, had "largely unchecked power" to hinder freedoms.

Panel members visited Saudi Arabia this summer to meet with government officials, human-rights activists and members of religious minorities.

Most of them credited King Abdullah with "making some efforts to bring much needed human-rights reforms to the kingdom," the report said.

But when compared to Saudi promises to improve human rights that were made to a US envoy on religious freedom in 2006, "little progress has been made," the panel said.

The pledges included curbing the export of educational texts and other materials from Saudi Arabia that spread hate against Jews and Christians and call for jihad.

The commission said it was unclear what steps Saudi Arabia is taking to revise textbooks, change school curricula and retrain teachers, but "there is evidence that intolerant and inflammatory elements remain in textbooks."

In its delicate relationship with a key Mideast ally and the world's biggest oil producer, the US State Department has placed Saudi Arabia's human-rights record under special watch since 2004.

The commission urged Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to open an investigation into the Islamic Saudi Academy, a school outside Washington with ties to the Saudi embassy, and to order its closure if the school fails to turn over its textbooks for inspection.

Other recommendations to the US government included pressing Saudi Arabia to ratify a key international human-rights pact and to be more open about its global efforts to promote its brand of Islam.