

Christian convert released

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KABUL, Afghanistan—An Afghan man who had faced the death penalty for converting from Islam to Christianity has been released from prison after the case was dropped, the justice minister said Tuesday.

The announcement came after the United Nations said Abdul Rahman has appealed for asylum outside Afghanistan and that the world body was working to find a country willing to take him.

Justice Minister Mohammed Sarwar Danish told The Associated Press that the 41-year-old was released from the high-security Policharki prison on the outskirts of Kabul late Monday.

"We released him last night because the prosecutors told us to," he said. "His family

was there when he was freed, but I don't know where he was taken."

Deputy Attorney General Mohammed Eshak Aloko told the AP that prosecutors had issued a letter calling for Rahman's release because "he was mentally unfit to stand trial." He also said he did not know where he was being held.

He said Rahman may be sent overseas for medical treatment.

Hours earlier, hundreds of clerics, students and others chanting "Death to Christians!" marched through the northern Afghan Mazar-i-Sharif to protest the court's decision Sunday to dismiss the case.

"Abdul Rahman must be killed Islam demands it," said senior cleric Faiez Mohammed, from the nearby northern city of Kunduz.

"The Christian foreigners occupying Afghanistan are attacking our religion."

Several Muslim clerics have threatened to incite Afghans to kill Rahman if he is freed, saying that he is clearly guilty of apostasy and deserves to die.

Rahman, 41, was arrested last month after police discovered him with a Bible. He was put on trial last week for converting 16 years ago while he was a medical aid worker for an international Christian group helping Afghan refugees in Pakistan. He had faced the death penalty under Afghanistan's Islamic laws.

The case set off an outcry in the United States and other nations that helped oust the hard-line Taliban regime in late 2001 and provided aid and military support for Afghan President Hamid

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PHOTO/WADE NASH

Former U.S. envoy criticizes panel

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATHENS, Greece—A U.S. commission that monitors international religious freedom risks weakening American influence by concentrating on sharply worded declarations and calls for sanctions rather than encouraging step-by-step negotiations, the panel's former top diplomat said Tuesday.

"The commission sees itself set up to be a watchdog and the only way you can be a watchdog is to bark really loud," said Robert Seiple, who served as the first ambassador-at-large for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

"And in barking really loud, it seems to find its ultimate expression in punishments ... Punishment has never changed behavior."

Seiple's comments suggest growing questions in Washington about "good cop, bad cop" signals between the commission's often tough outlook and the less confrontational style of the State Department, which also has an office that evaluates religious persecution and other limits on worship around the world.

"We have one group screaming for action and punishment and another group working quietly behind the scenes. ... It can be very confusing," Seiple told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from Washington.

The commission is finishing work on its latest annual report expected in early May at a time when attention to religious openness has taken on global proportions with the appeals for Abdul Rahman, an Afghan convert to Christianity who faced a possible death sentence under Afghanistan's Islamic codes. Rahman was released from prison on Monday and appealed for asylum abroad.

In past years, the commission has urged Washington officials to use diplomatic and economic leverage on allies such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan for religious intolerance against non-Muslims. But such proposals often clashed with U.S. foreign policies in the region.

The commission's 2005 report recommended 11 nations be considered "countries of particular concern" and in line for possible sanctions and other pressure. The

list included U.S. foes Iran and North Korea, but also some critical partners such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, China and Uzbekistan.

"My feeling ... was that any time we put a country on the dedicated list with sanctions to follow, we had demonstrated failure of diplomacy," said Seiple, who now heads the Institute for Global Engagement, a Washington-based group that promotes religious tolerance and dialogue. "It is a tool, but it is a very blunt instrument."

The commission was formed in 1998 after lawmakers and others sought a stronger voice from Washington on issues of religious openness and expression. Seiple, a former head of the Christian aid group World Vision, was appointed ambassador and left the post in 2000.

Current commission members include Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's ethics and religious liberty commission, Denver's Roman Catholic Archbishop Charles Chaput and Khaled Abou El Fadl, an authority on Islamic law at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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