

Statement by
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to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China
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"Will Religion Flourish under China's New Leadership?"

Chairman Leach, Chairman Hagel, and other members of the Congressional Executive Commission on China:

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the current state of religious freedom in China and the prospects for improvements in the situation under China's new leadership. I would also like to discuss the many efforts the Administration has taken to push for greater respect for religious freedom in China. Finally, I look forward to hearing from other speakers their views on options open to the United States to prompt the development of new policies toward religion in China.

As you know, President Bush is deeply and personally concerned over the state of religious freedom in China, and he has raised his concerns in his meetings with Chinese leaders and in public remarks in China. Addressing Chinese students at Beijing's Qinghua University in February 2002, the President said, "Freedom of religion is not something to be feared, it's to be welcomed, because faith gives us a moral core and teaches us to hold ourselves to high standards, to love and to serve others, and to live responsible lives." Speaking to the strong interest we have over the situation in China, the President added, "My prayer is that all persecution will end, so that all in China are free to gather and worship as they wish."

These concerns are shared by all of us in the Department of State, and in our mission in China. Promoting respect for religious freedom is one of our top foreign policy goals. So I welcome today's hearing on this important topic, and look forward to continuing the dialogue in the future.

I. Current Conditions

Let me start by describing our assessment of current conditions in China. As you know, the Secretary of State has designated China one of six "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act. The other five are North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Burma, and Sudan. We made this designation because we found that the Government of China "is engaged in or tolerates particularly severe violations of religious freedom" in a manner that is "egregious, ongoing and systematic."

During the last 12 months, the government's respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience remained poor overall, especially for many unregistered religious groups and spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong. Thousands of believers -- Catholics, Protestants, Tibetan Buddhists, Muslims, or members of the Falun Gong and other groups -- remain in prison for seeking to exercise their religious or spiritual views. Some have been tortured; many have been abused.

But at the same time, we have seen some positive developments that may suggest a possibility of increasing tolerance for religious activity. China has seen progress since the late 1960's, when religious activity was entirely proscribed. The growing number of believers in China is a testament to the hunger of Chinese people for religious faith. It is also a testament to the greater space given to some religious organizations by the government. While we seek to highlight and encourage the positive trends that we see, this does not mean that the overall situation is good. It clearly is not, and we remain very disturbed at the harassment and serious mistreatment of many religious believers in China, as well as by the Chinese Government's continued insistence on controlling religious activity.

Let me discuss a few specific areas of concern to illustrate this complex picture.

A. Registration Requirements:

The government requires all religious groups to register with state-sanctioned religious organizations, which monitor and supervise religious activities. Many believers feel they would have to make compromises in what they believe or how they worship in order to register and have, therefore, chosen not to register. Officials have continued a selective crackdown on unregistered or "underground" churches, temples, and mosques. Members of some unregistered religious groups, including Protestants and Catholics, are subjected to restrictions, including intimidation, harassment, and detention. However, the degree of restrictions varies significantly from region to region. In some localities in southeastern China, some "underground" churches have been allowed to operate without registering -- though often only after their leader has been vetted by officials. While we have urged the government to relax or eliminate the registration requirements and to allow any religious or spiritual group to practice their faith freely, any increase in the number of unregistered groups allowed to operate is a positive intermediate step.

B. Minors

Religious education for young people is necessary to ensure the vibrancy and continuity in a religious community; it is crucial that families be allowed to transmit their faith and values to their children, and that ethnic minority communities such as Tibetans and Uyghurs be allowed to transmit core elements of their culture. Therefore, prohibitions on minors practicing religion or receiving religious education have been a long-standing concern for us. In response to our inquiries, senior government officials claim that China has no restrictions against minors engaging in religious activity. Nonetheless, observers have witnessed local officials in some areas preventing children from attending worship services, and some places of worship -- especially mosques in western China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region - - have signs prohibiting persons younger than 18 from entering. At the U.S.-China human rights dialogue session held in Beijing last December, senior Chinese government officials told us they would consider taking steps to clarify state policy on minors and religion, but this has not yet occurred.

C. Xinjiang

I just mentioned Xinjiang. Let me discuss in somewhat more detail additional problems of deep concern. Under the mantle of "counter terrorism", Chinese officials have ramped up a brutal crackdown against ethnic Uyghurs, a Muslim minority group. Uyghurs enjoyed two brief periods of independent statehood during the last century. Convinced that Uyghurs again seek independence, Beijing pursues a policy of such tight control that it may be stoking the very separatist sentiment and instability it fears. In a misguided effort to curb separatism, officials have closed some mosques, forbidden minors from engaging in religious activities, and taken other steps to limit the practice of Islam. I say this effort is misguided because we do not see a link between nationalist aspirations of some Uyghur groups and Islam per se.

The way to deal with dissatisfaction among minority peoples is not through crackdowns, but through allowing Uyghurs and others the high degree of autonomy guaranteed them under Chinese law. For the Uyghurs, as for Tibetans and other minority groups, this means having a greater voice in decisions affecting their lives -- for example, greater respect for their rights to decide when, where and how to worship. We urge Chinese officials to recognize what

President Bush has repeatedly stated: that religious faith is a source of strength for any community, and that China has nothing to fear from the free and unhindered practice of religion, whether Islam in Xinjiang, Buddhism in Tibet, or Christianity throughout China.

D. Tibet

The situation in Tibetan regions is a mixed picture. In many areas, Tibetan Buddhist lay practitioners are able to worship relatively freely and engage in religious celebrations, but Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns continued to face restrictions on their ability to pursue a religious education. A number of monks in Sichuan Province were arrested in connection with a series of bombings, and one former monk was quickly put to death despite promises from the Chinese that he would be allowed to appeal his case and that the Supreme Court would review the sentence. China has not conducted open trials in any of these cases, and we have seen no evidence to suggest that Tenzing Delek Rinpoche, a senior religious figure who remains in jail, was in any way connected to the bombings. Elsewhere in Sichuan, a dozen or more Tibetans were arrested in conjunction with a public "long life" ceremony for the Dalai Lama. We fail to see why such activity merits arrest and imprisonment, and we call on China to follow its own laws on freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

E. Falun Gong

An issue well known to all of us is China's continued harsh repression of groups that it has determined to be "cults", including the Falun Gong. Various sources report that thousands of Falun Gong adherents have been arrested, detained, and imprisoned, and that several hundred or more Falun Gong adherents have died in detention since 1999. I am sad to report that the repression of the Falun Gong continues, and continues to be an issue of great concern internationally and in Washington. We have raised these issues with the Chinese repeatedly, and will continue to do so.

F. South China Church

Another group China deems to be a cult, the South China Church, has seen its members arrested in large numbers. Credible reports from four young women indicate that security forces tortured them to obtain "evidence" that was then used against the group's founder. We have raised this case in great detail with the Chinese and remain deeply concerned over reports of continuing abuse of other followers still in detention.

G. Relations with the Vatican

China still refuses to acknowledge the Vatican as the supreme authority for Chinese Catholics in many matters of faith, insists on controlling the appointments of Catholic clergy, and only recognizes the government-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). Many Chinese Catholics who remain loyal to the Pope are forced to conduct their religious activities surreptitiously or risk arrest. Dozens of "underground" clergy remain in detention or under house arrest, including Bishop Su Zhimin, a senior bishop who has been missing since 1997. We continue to urge the Chinese government to release these detainees, and to resume its dialogue with the Vatican, in hopes that China will acknowledge Rome's unique role in the spiritual lives of all Catholics around the world, including in China.

H. North Koreans in China

We are aware that many North Koreans cross into China fleeing famine and persecution, and others come seeking work. South Korean missionaries are active along China's border with North Korea, and the number of Chinese-Korean and North Korean residents of China who are Christian is growing. North Koreans who practice Christianity face severe risks if they are repatriated, and we are concerned about reports that China continues to forcibly repatriate North Koreans. We have urged China to treat those who flee from North Korea in a humanitarian way. This Administration has also worked to increase basic humanitarian aid being provided to this vulnerable population and to secure PRC permission for individual North Koreans to depart China for South Korea, and we have been funding various organizations that work quietly in northeastern China providing North Koreans there with food, medicines, and shelter.

I. Numbers of Believers

Despite all the problems I just mentioned, officials, religious professionals, and persons who attend services at both officially sanctioned and underground places of worship all report that the numbers of believers in China continues to grow, and credible reports place the number of worshippers in the tens of millions. An increasing number of these religious adherents also report they are able to practice their faith in officially registered places of worship and to maintain contacts with those who share their beliefs in other parts of the world without interference from the authorities. These are hopeful signs.

J. Community Activities

In some localities, officials worked closely with Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant groups building schools, medical facilities, and retirement centers for poor communities. In cases involving Catholics and Protestants, local officials frequently encouraged Western religious groups to work in their communities to provide much-needed social services, provided that the groups did not proselytize openly. President Bush made clear in his talks with Chinese leaders that religion can act as a stabilizing force in any society, and we see that this is true in the Chinese context.

II. Potential for Change under New Leadership

At this point, let me turn to another important question: the potential for change under China's new leadership. The changeover in leadership of the Communist Party took place last November, and the new government lineup emerged in mid-March. Hu Jintao has taken over the top slots in both party and government, and most other senior portfolios also switched hands. But while we have a clear picture of who is sitting where, we have not yet seen a clear sign that the new leadership plans to grant significant new freedoms to religious believers, or even to work with the international community on concerns over religious freedom, or concerns over human rights more generally.

At last December's human rights dialogue, China committed to cooperate with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, as well as with the Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Chinese leaders promised that all three groups would soon be visiting China, but to date no such visits have been scheduled. Some of this can be attributed to the SARS outbreak, and we acknowledge that the epidemic created obstacles to many types of exchanges. However, the worst of the outbreak is behind us, and we now expect China to move forward quickly on its commitments to work with these international bodies.

In addition, Chinese leaders agreed last December to invite the Congressionally-chartered U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to visit China. I believe that Commissioner Felice

Gaer, who will speak later, plans to go on the trip. We understand that this trip is scheduled to take place next month. We look forward to hearing the Commission's findings upon their return.

China invited the elder brother of the Dalai Lama to visit last summer, and then invited emissaries of the Dalai Lama to visit last September. Another visit by the Dalai Lama's emissaries took place again two months ago, which suggests the new leadership may be willing to keep the dialogue going. We have long pressed for resumption of dialogue between the Government of China and the Dalai Lama or his representatives, so we are encouraged that the exchanges continue to take place. We urge that the two sides continue to work toward a negotiated settlement on issues of mutual concern.

As for the broader question on the willingness of Chinese leaders to take steps to address restrictions on religious activity in China, I can only say that we are waiting for progress in a number of key areas. Moments ago, I discussed the problems surrounding the registration requirements, and we have repeatedly urged China to liberalize -- or drop altogether -- these requirements, and to stop arresting those who do not register. We continue to make this demand, and to watch for a clear policy shift in this area. In addition, Chinese officials repeatedly told us that minors are free to participate in religious activity anywhere in China -- to participate in programs of religious training, and to enter places of worship. While no policy statement has emerged from Beijing, we expect China to honor its pledge to address this issue.

So whether or not the Chinese people will enjoy greater freedom to practice and express their faith under the new leadership remains an open question. We have seen a few positive developments, but these take place in an environment where respect for religious freedom remains poor overall. We call again on Chinese leaders to honor the commitments they made to the United States last December, and to address the concerns of the international community in a more systemic, comprehensive manner.

III. USG Actions

Finally, let me discuss actions we have taken to increase respect for human rights generally, and religious freedom in particular. As I mentioned at the start, the Administration has made this an extremely high priority. The U.S. Government raises religious freedom issues with Chinese leaders on a regular, frequent basis, and at all levels. President Bush discussed religious freedom in his meetings with former President Jiang Zemin. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford has traveled twice to China -- the only country he has returned to so far -- and meets regularly with Chinese officials in Washington. Other senior officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Lorne Craner, and U.S. Ambassador to China Clark Randt have all repeatedly called on China to halt the abusive treatment of religious adherents and to respect religious freedom. Ambassador Randt also raises our concerns in almost all of his public speeches, on both sides of the Pacific. The Department of State, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and the U.S. Consulates General in Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenyang all make concerted efforts to encourage religious freedom, repeatedly urging Chinese officials to respect citizens' rights to religious freedom and release those detained for the practice of their faith.

The issue of religious freedom also was raised during the official U.S.-China human rights dialogue in December, which was conducted by both Assistant Secretary Craner and Ambassador Hanford. Part of the U.S. delegation, led by the Assistant Secretary, traveled to Xinjiang to meet with Muslim clerics and government officials and to express concern that authorities were using the war on terrorism as an excuse to persecute Uyghur Muslims. Another part of the delegation, headed by

Ambassador Hanford, engaged in a roundtable discussion on religion and held several in-depth meetings on religion with key policy makers.

These diplomatic efforts have led to some progress. Several religious prisoners were released during the last 12 months, including a number of Tibetan nuns. The most prominent is Ngawang Sangdrol. She was released last October, and the new leadership permitted her to leave China and travel to the United States in late March. Ngawang Sangdrol and the other nuns detained with her should never have been arrested in the first place; their "crimes" were to demonstrate for greater freedom for Tibet and for Tibetan Buddhists. The physical abuse they suffered in prison in Lhasa is shocking and totally unacceptable. Nonetheless, their releases are significant, and we again call for China to release all persons detained for the nonviolent expression of their religious views.

Let me close by saying again that the situation of religious freedom, as with many things in China, is a decidedly mixed picture. China's new leadership has not yet made clear what its policy toward religious freedom in particular, and human rights in general, will be. China remains a country of particular concern, and yet we have seen a few hopeful signs. We have no illusions about China's history of hostility to religion -- and in particular to religious groups that refuse to take direction from the State.

Nevertheless, we will continue to call for China to make the right choices here, and to understand clearly the President's message that China has nothing to fear from the unfettered worship of people of faith. We will also continue to make clear to our interlocutors that this is an issue that will not go away for us, that concerns over human rights and religious freedom will remain an obstacle to closer ties between China and the United States, and between China and the rest of the world.