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China's Persecution of Protestant Christians During the approach of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games

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Introduction

The approach of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games has been accompanied by a significant deterioration in religious freedom for China's unregistered Protestant Church, also known as the house church. At the end of 2007 President Hu Jintao made statements that China has a policy of religious freedom. However, in May 2008, two independent sources informed China Aid Association (CAA) that the Ministry of Public Security has received funding from the Chinese Central Government to increase its campaign of eradicating house churches throughout China. Abhorrent abuse of religious believers continues, and regular raids of Christian meetings take place. Persecution includes the largest mass-sentencing of house church leaders in 25 years, a level of expulsion of foreign Christians not seen since the 1950s, and targeted repression of the Chinese House Church Alliance. Also, reports have been received of planned intensified persecution, with greater control and prevention of large Christian gatherings also anticipated: it is further feared that harsher persecution will take place after the Olympics.

It is vital for Western analysts to realize the destructive control — contrary to rhetoric otherwise — wielded by the Chinese government in religious matters, and to recognize the extent to which this recent crackdown has permeated into various aspects of society. This report focuses on increased persecution especially in Xinjiang province and Beijing, and on the restrictive measures affecting business, foreigners in China, and even individuals offering aid to earthquake survivors. Furthermore, the misuse of the legal system as demonstrated in numerous cases serves to highlight the deterioration in the rule of law in China. Another important development is that many Chinese independent religious groups including house churches are welcoming everyone — including the Chinese president, foreign statesmen, and diplomats — to attend their services. Understanding this development is vital to overcoming misunderstandings or unfounded fear by some Western diplomats and governments: the Chinese themselves do not fear to simply attend (so what fear do the western visitors have?), while persecution continues as a strong, underlying current to active participants. Western recognition of the increased religious persecution surrounding the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games is a key factor for reversing the current trend, and it is encouraged that the recommendations included in this report be used in dialogue with China.

Background

The Restricted Official Churches: China permits the operation of the official, registered churches. This government-sanctioned organization, called the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), suffers restrictions on selection and training of clergy, location of venues, publications, finances and relationships with Christians abroad. There are also restrictions on working with certain classes of people, including those under age 18. Religious education in government-sanctioned seminaries is severely restricted.

The Persecution of the Unregistered Church: Because of the atheistic government's control of TSPM churches, most Christians choose to worship in unregistered churches. However, those belonging to unregistered, and therefore illegal, groups can face many difficulties, including being harassed, humiliated, fined, tortured, imprisoned and subjected to forced labor. Physical assault has left Christians injured, hospitalized and disabled. Meetings have been forcefully dispersed, unofficial church buildings destroyed and property confiscated. New government regulations that came into force in March 2005 renewed the drive to enforce registration. Because their faith is not recognized as belonging to an official religion, members of unregistered churches can be classified as cults, along with less conventional groups, and can therefore come under particular attack and be subjected to harsh penalties.

The Limitation of Bibles and Christian Literature: The Chinese Government allows only The Amity Foundation in Nanjing to print Bibles and a limited selection of Christian materials. These Bibles are distributed only through the TSPM churches, making it difficult for house church Christians to obtain Bibles and other Christian materials. It is illegal to sell Bibles at public bookstores and other public facilities. Amity's production is insufficient to meet the needs of the burgeoning Christian population.¹ Pastors who have printed Bibles and Christian literature to fill the unmet needs have been arrested and imprisoned.

Trends of the Pre-Olympic Crackdown

Overall increased persecution: In assessing persecution trends, CAA reported a rise of 18.5% in the numbers of Christians persecuted last year compared with the previous year, and an increase of 30.4% in persecution cases. The analysis highlighted the level of persecution occurring in urban areas, reporting that just under 60% of persecution cases occurred in such areas. The assessment also highlighted the ongoing targeting of house church leaders, with 415 reported arrests of such leaders last year.

Persecution Specific to Xinjiang: In April 2008, CAA reported that Chinese government officials had launched a strategic campaign, called the "Anti-illegal Christian Activities Campaign," against house church members in Xinjiang. While both Han and Uyghur Christians have been targeted, the plight of the minority Uyghur Christian population is especially harsh as they face persecution on the grounds of both their unusual religious faith and the broader ethnic persecution of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. Even the limited religious freedoms protected elsewhere in China are further restricted in Xinjiang and there have been repeated arrests and mistreatment of Christians in Xinjiang over an extended period. Of particular concern is the use of national security and separatism charges against religious believers, even as recently as May 2008.

Persecution of unregistered churches in Beijing: During May 2008, significant measures were taken against key unregistered churches in Beijing. Chinese house churches have long suffered persecution, but this is believed to be the first time that authorities have cracked down systematically on these Beijing churches which have members from among the more educated and wealthy strata of society who have greater awareness of their rights. (These churches generally meet in urban areas and were previously tolerated, even though operating with certain restrictions.) Three recent instances of such persecution follow:

On May 9, 2008, Pastor Dong Yutao, a leader of one of Beijing's largest house churches, was arrested while on his way to collect a shipment of Bibles. The Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB) placed him under criminal detention for receiving illegally printed Bibles and religious literature.

On May 11, 2008, policemen and detectives broke into the regular worship service at Beijing's Shouwang Church. A plain-clothed law enforcement officer showed his identification from Haidian District Bureau

of Ethnic and Religious Affairs and ordered the church to stop its activities. Members of the church were ordered to leave the premises as the gathering was illegal.

On May 25, 2008, various house church gathering sites connected to the 1,000-strong Beijing Gospel Church were raided by officials from 4 different government agencies, including the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs. Officials forcibly entered and searched the homes of house church members without presenting search warrants or proper documentation and proceeded to confiscate religious materials. Some of those targeted sustained minor injuries from violence by the officials. Victims of the attacks described the incident in an open letter to government officials in which they cite various laws which have been breached.

Increased measures to prevent property rentals to unregistered groups: Many house churches were already being pressured to stop gathering or to leave Beijing by September 2007 when CAA reported a new restriction as described by Beijing Evening News on September 5th: per direction of the Beijing Municipal PSB, police were to conduct inspection, and to warn owners of rental properties that they should on their own initiative refuse to rent their properties to "five types of prospective tenants," including people who are accused of engaging in the so-called "illegal religious activities." According to numerous reports received from CAA, many house churches in Beijing were pressured to stop gathering or to leave Beijing. House church leaders in Beijing identified the move as a new tactic to persecute the house churches before the Beijing Olympics.

Prohibition of religious groups at the Olympics: According to disclosures which CAA received from reliable internal Chinese government sources, the Ministry of Public Security of the Chinese Government issued a general nationwide order in April 2007 that all those from China and overseas who will participate in the Olympic Games, including athletes, media and sponsors, are to be strictly checked. The Ministry of Public Security also secretly issued a document entitled "Notice on Strict Background Check on Applicants for the Olympic Games and the Test Events." In the eleven-category blacklist, the third category is "Religious extremists and religious infiltrators." The categories are further divided into forty-three groups and Category Three includes the following:

1. Members of illegal religious organizations both in China and abroad.
2. Members who have been caught by the Chinese authorities for engaging in religious activities.
3. People who have given illegal sermons.
4. People who illegally distribute religious publications and video/audio materials.
5. People who have illegally established both in China and abroad religious organizations, institutions, schools, sermon sites and other religious entities.

The restrictions also apply to those wishing to attend the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

Forced labor for Olympic products: While in prison, Beijing house church leader Pastor Cai Zhuohua was forced to work ten to twelve hours a day making soccer balls for the Olympics. Pastor Zhuohua was released in September 2007 after serving three years of imprisonment for "illegal business practices" for production of Christian literature.

Rise in persecution of foreign Christians: China has conducted the largest expulsion of foreign Christians since the 1950's when all foreign missionaries were expelled. In a campaign termed "Operation Typhoon No. 5," over 100 foreign Christians had been arrested, interrogated and expelled from China by the end of 2007. Most were from the West, but Koreans and those of other nationalities were also targeted. Seventy foreigners with secular business operations were expelled from Xinjiang alone. CAA reports an 833% increase in such expulsions compared with the previous year. Amongst the firms targeted was the British company Jirehouse which ran an operation in Xinjiang. The company's Project Manager,

Alimujiñag Yimiti, a Uyghur Christian, was accused of engaging in illegal religious activities and tried on May 27, 2008, for endangering national security.

Persecution of Christian publishers: A further trend relates to the treatment of those involved with Christian publications. There have been a series of cases where those involved in producing Christian literature have been accused of illegal business practices. Beijing church leaders Pastor Cai Zhuohua and Mr. Shi Weihān have both been targeted in this manner.

Prevention of aid: Although China's house church Christians have a strong desire to provide social support and humanitarian aid in China, authorities prevent them from carrying out such work. Government officials have refused aid from house church Christians to help the earthquake survivors in Sichuan Province and even arrested house church members who have volunteered to help those affected by the disaster. Among the cases was the arrest of three Christians in Sichuan Province on May 31st, while they were carrying out relief work. On June 1st, police raided a house church meeting in Henan Province and interrogated participants about which church members would be taking donations to the earthquake affected area. Six members were held in detention under the charge of sending money to a disaster area in the name of a house church. Police and religious affairs officials stated they would not release them until they each paid a 1,000 yuan fine. The restriction on religious believers seeking to help survivors has been highlighted in The Wall Street Journal.²

Exploitation in the Exercise of Law: CAA continues to receive reports from numerous provinces of individuals targeted for their peaceful practice of their Christian faith.³ Despite the religious nature of their actions, some Christians are subjected to criminal detention and face such charges as "endangering national security" and "inciting separatism." They have faced further difficulty to rightful legal representation when their lawyers are withheld or harassed. Experiences of inhumane and violent treatment while in detention is consistently reported, including report of prisoners with serious medical conditions not receiving requested medical treatment.

Recommendations

Following his visit to China in 1994, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance⁴ made a number of recommendations which would assist in bringing China's religious law and practice into line with international standards. These recommendations are from an authoritative impartial source and China should be urged to implement them. They include the recommendations that China should:

- Provide an explicit guarantee of the right to manifest religion and, accordingly, amend the pertinent legal texts, including Article 36 of the Constitution, to provide constitutional guarantees of religious liberty that accord with the definition of religious freedom provided in the 1981 Declaration.
- Adopt a specific provision clearly stating that persons under the age of eighteen have the right to freedom of belief, in accordance with China's obligations under the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly those arising under Article 14.
- Adopt a text explicitly recognising the right to freedom of belief for everyone, including members of the communist party and other socio-political organisations.
- Abandon the practice of distinguishing between 'normal' and 'abnormal' religious activities and respect the right of all individuals to freely follow their chosen belief, without interference, subject only to the limitations laid out in international standards, most notably in Article 1(3) of the 1981 Declaration, namely only those that are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
- Release all those detained for religious reasons.

- Provide human rights training, particularly on religious freedom, to state officials and judges.
- Post the principal texts on religious freedom in the relevant administrative services concerned, compile and distribute a compendium of texts on religious freedom together with implementation instructions, distribute human rights materials to religious organisations and inform citizens and organisations of appeal procedures available in the event of refusal to register religious organisations.
- Provide education on religious freedom, including at the university level.

In addition it is recommended that China:

- Recognise the right of freedom to choose any religion, including those outside the official organisations and the five recognised religions.
- Rescind the registration system in its present form so that it is no longer a mechanism for controlling religious activity.
- Cease the policy of imposing penalties, including administrative and criminal detention, fines, confiscation of property and destruction of premises, for religious behaviour.
- Establish a dialogue with representatives of the house churches, as requested in the appeal issued by house church leaders on August 22, 1998.
- Maintain follow-up contact with the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.⁵
- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and amend legislation and practice to conform to the rights laid out therein.
- Implement effective protection for religious believers from arbitrary detention and abuse by officials and address the impunity of officials who abuse individuals and groups due to their religious beliefs.
- Allow the free movement of religious materials and personnel into and within the country.

¹ Precise figures for religious believers in China are impossible to obtain. Estimates of house church figures range from 40 million to over 100 million. In January 2007 CAA issued news that a reliable source had informed that Mr. Ye Xiaowen, the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, had stated in two internal meetings at Beijing University and the Chinese Academy of Social Science that there are now 130 million Christians in China, including 20 million Catholics.

² See <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121208455251929967.html> or <http://chinaaid.org/2008/05/30/chinaaid-relief-effort-reported-by-wall-street-journal-christian-groups-step-delicately-in-sichuan/>.

³ Specific cases are presented in report at http://chinaaid.org/pdf/Pre-Olympic_CHina_Persecution_Report_in_English_June2008.pdf.

⁴ The title of the Special Rapporteur has since been changed to Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

⁵ See <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/religion/index.htm>.