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Before The Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Roundtable on Religious Freedom in China

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Thank you for the opportunity to join this round table on the issue of religious freedom in China. Freedom House commends the Commission for monitoring this issue.

Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom is alarmed by mounting repression against the major religious and spiritual groups in China - Protestant Christians, Roman Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong, and Uighur Muslims. Beijing controls the five "authorized" religions (Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Taoism) by the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), controlled by the United Front Work Department, itself controlled by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In turn, Party officials, by law must be atheists. The RAB registers and controls Protestant Christians all religious groups through the Three-Self Patriotic movement and the China Christian Council, Catholics through the Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops Conference, and similar patriotic associations for Buddhists, Muslims and Taoists. Falun Gong is banned completely.

China's new tactic of labeling religious groups as so-called "cults" and then cracking down on them intensifies the repression of non-approved religion. After China stopped treating religious offences as counter-revolutionary, religious offences were treated as a type of civil offense, punishable by fines, or by minimal incarceration. This would be comparable to a "misdemeanor" in America (though punishable by possibly three years in a labor camp). With the introduction of the laws regulating "heretical cults" in October 30, 1999, religious offences can now be classified as threatening national security, comparable to a "felony" in America, and punishable by life sentences or even death. This tactic has been increasingly employed in the last two years, and government spokespersons maintain that believers are not being repressed by restrictive religion laws, but are criminals disrupting public and social order laws.

The result of these developments has been a marked deterioration in religious freedom in China over the last year and in particular since Congress approved PNTR. China has not ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Chinese government has not provided information or permitted unhindered access to religious leaders who are in prison, in detention, under house arrest, or under surveillance.

The heightened crackdown may stem from frustration and political insecurity as authorities observe the astonishing revival of religion throughout China particularly through unsanctioned groups. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's Christian churches, registered and underground, Catholic and Protestant, have been experiencing explosive growth. Thirteen million Protestants are registered with the government. Unregistered Protestants may number over 50 million, in house-churches, so named because services are held in houses.

While this roundtable is focused on Catholics and Protestants, it is important to raise the situation of Falun Gong, which this month is facing perhaps its worst repression ever. Falun Gong officials in the U.S, say:

"police have been ordered to "shoot on sight" anyone posting or handing out written materials for Falun Gong. After practitioners showed cable TV programs with facts about Falun Gong on March 5 in the city of Changchun, Jiang Zemin issued a "Kill Without Mercy" order. On March 15, Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action request for "Falun Gong practitioners in Changchun City," saying, "Amnesty International believes they are at serious risk of torture or ill-treatment...police 'stop and search' checkpoints have reportedly been established across the city...." Consequently, 5000 or more practitioners in the Changchun area have since been arrested, several practitioners have reportedly "jumped" or "fallen" from tall buildings when pursued by police, and police have secretly cremated the bodies of numerous practitioners tortured to death by police. Latest reports indicate that more than 100 have died in Changchun in this spasm of violence by authorities in the past three weeks."

We are concerned that some thirty-three Catholic bishops and priests are in prison, under house arrest, or under strict police surveillance, including Bishop Su Zhimin of Baoding in Hebei Province, who disappeared into custody in 1996. The Vatican's Fides News Service list thirteen bishops who have been arrested, as well as twenty priests, and says that this list is incomplete.

Among Protestants, one of the most striking recent cases is Pastor Gong Shengliang, who was sentenced to death on December 5 on charges of operating an "evil cult" and on apparently trumped-up charges of rape and assault. The month-long period for deciding his appeal was extended on January 5 by a Hubei court following sharp international protest. In a letter, dated December 31, 2001, members of an underground church in China describe the torture and abuse that was applied to them by police to pressure them to testify against Gong:

"These few days, all of those arrested have been badly beaten by the police. Ma and her boy Longfeng were both beaten almost to death. Li Enhui fell unconscious and was awakened with cold water and beaten again. They did this to her non-stop for seven days and seven nights. Xiao Yajun was also questioned seven days and seven nights. On July 20, we heard the news that Yu, who was arrested in Ma's house, had been tortured to death."

In efforts to find and apprehend Pastor Gong and suppress the South China Church, police arrested sixty-three congregants, severely beating at least twenty-five Christians and torturing some with electric prods. The person whom the authors write was tortured to death is Yu Zhongju, a young mother, who had been arrested last May in a private house connected with Pastor Gong's congregation. She died in police custody in late July, after having being beaten.

I will focus the rest of my remarks concerning China on what has been revealed in secret Chinese government documents, released in February, detailing an official crackdown against large, unregistered churches and other religious groups nationwide. Copies of the documents, along with translations, were provided to Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom by Mr. Shixiong Li and Mr. Xiqiu (Bob) Fu of the New York-based Committee for Investigation on Persecution of Religion in China. Freedom House's Center had the official documents authenticated by expert and exiled former Chinese government journalist, Su Xiaokang.

The seven documents, issued between April 1999 and October 2001, detail the goals and actions of China's national, provincial and local security officials in repressing religion. (The Freedom House analysis is available online at: www.freedomhouse.org/religion). They show that China's government, at the highest levels, aims to repress religious expression outside its control, and is using more determined, systematic and harsher criminal penalties in this effort. Hu Jin-tao, designated as the successor of President Jiang Zemin is quoted in the document as endorsing the drive against the Real God church. The Minister of Public Security is quoted giving the order to "smash the cult quietly." (Document 4).

Ye Xiaowen, the head of China's Religious Affairs Bureau, wrote in January 2002 that repression is not working and suggested that a more nuanced approach is needed. In fact, the documents reveal that a brutal, but more clandestine, approach is being employed to crush unregistered churches and religious groups.

As a result, normal religious activity is criminalized, and, as the December death sentences brought against South China Church Pastor Gong Shengliang and several of his co-workers attest, the directives outlined in these documents are being carried out with ruthless determination.

Several documents focus particularly on measures to "smash" the Christian South China church and the Real God Church, which, Chinese authorities state, rivals Falun Gong in its reach and dangerous effects. Other documents list several Christian churches, Falun Gong, the Unification Church, and other banned religious groups. In all, 14 religious groups are identified in Document 1 as "evil cults."

The documents indicate that Beijing may feel it is losing its battle to control religious expression. They note with palpable alarm that the Real God Church is growing rapidly throughout 22 Chinese provinces. Document 4 says that "inner circles" of the Communist Party and government officials have secretly joined the banned Real God Church, and instructs officials to find out who among them are members of the group.

China is an officially atheist state that arrogates to itself the authority to define orthodoxy, determine dogma and designate religious leaders. The documents are notable for their crudeness in understanding the religions the government purports to control. Revealing a fundamental misunderstanding or deliberate misinterpretation of the New Testament, Document 1 uses a basic Christian doctrine that Christ is in every believer to accuse churches of "deifying" their leaders, a practice defined as "cult-like."

Document 2 betrays deep paranoia on the part of Chinese officials. It raises particular concerns about public unrest over China's entry into the WTO which it ties to Western support of democracy movements ("Democratic Party of China"), and religious groupings, especially Falun Gong; it accuses the Vatican of "still waiting for any opportunity to... draw the patriotic religious believers up to them and incite them to rebel."

In Document 4, "Praying for world peace," ecumenical relations between churches, printing religious publications, and developing a diocesan, parish and prayer group-like organizational structure, are all seen as dangerous activities. Document 4 also views with alarm ecumenical relations between the Protestant house-church Real God and the underground Catholic Church. Real God is also said to have ties with Tianenmen Square student protest leaders, as well as in the Communist Party and the government.

Measures to be taken against banned religious groups include surveillance, the deployment of special undercover agents, the gathering of "criminal evidence," "complete demolition" of a group's organizational system, interrogation, and arrest, as well as the confiscation of church property, and homes in which meetings are held. Document 2 repeatedly refers to the use of "secret agents" to infiltrate "cults," underground Catholics, businesses, joint ventures, people with "complicated political backgrounds," prestigious colleges and universities, and other organizations.

As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended, U.S. policy should press the Chinese government to take effective steps in the following four areas:

1. End its current crackdown on religious and spiritual groups.

2. Reform its repressive legal framework and establish an effective mechanism to hold officials accountable for religious-freedom and related human rights violations.
3. Affirm the universality of religious freedom and China's international obligations and ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
4. Foster a culture of respect for human rights.

The U.S. government's China policy should support and, as appropriate, fund human rights advocates within China, as well as those, wherever found, who are promoting the rule of law, legal reform, and democracy there. The U.S. government should make sure that Tibetan and other ethnic minorities, as well as representatives of religious communities and other nongovernmental organizations, are included in exchange programs with China.

Through public diplomacy, the United States should directly explain to the Chinese people this message and the reasons for our concern. Such efforts should include the expansion of Radio Free Asia and Voice of America broadcasts throughout China. Since the U.S. permits Chinese media, including the official Chinese Central Television Company, access to American markets, we should ensure that U.S. media, including broadcasting companies, are allowed a similar presence in Chinese markets. Also, the U.S. government should ensure that U.S. companies doing business in China do not engage in practices that would facilitate violations of religious freedom and other human rights, such as disclosing employees' religious or spiritual activities or affiliations to Chinese officials.