



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

June 18, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

I write to you on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to respectfully urge that the United States raise questions about violations of religious freedom and related human rights in China during the seventh session of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED). Until the regular schedule of the Human Rights Dialogue resumes, the S&ED is the most significant bilateral mechanism through which the United States can raise issues regarding freedom of religion or belief in China.

USCIRF was pleased to see the recent Department of State press statement issued on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests noting the continuing human rights abuses in China. USCIRF agrees that the Chinese government must do more to uphold its international commitments. Increasingly China sees itself as a leader in the global community of nations, yet continues to bristle when other nations like the United States encourage needed human rights improvements that would bring the country's policies more in line with internationally agreed standards. Despite these objections, or perhaps because of them, the United States must remain steadfast in pressing the Chinese government to honor human rights.

When it comes to religious freedom, there is no shortage of examples that need urgently to be addressed. In the name of fighting terrorism, Chinese officials at the central and regional levels have increased religious repression of Uighur Muslims, most recently cracking down yet again on this beleaguered community's right to carry out religious practices and activities during Ramadan. Heavy-handed and indiscriminate measures such as these targeting Uighur Muslims have contributed to a dramatic increase in harassment, arrests, and overall violence. Tibetan Buddhists also have experienced harsher policies in recent years. Last month's 20-year anniversary of the disappearance of the Panchen Lama was a stark reminder of the Chinese government's long-standing vilification not just of the Dalai Lama, but of the entire Tibetan Buddhist population and faith. Sadly, the corresponding number of self-immolations among this community continues to rise in response to the repressive hands of the government.

In 2014, Chinese Protestants and Catholics experienced religious freedom violations markedly more severe than at any time in recent memory. The Chinese government's unprecedented and deliberate interference, harassment, and demolition of religious structures targeted both unregistered and registered churches, as well as clergy and laypeople. In a new and disturbing development, the government began striking out at house church pastors and religious practitioners by labeling individuals as "cult" leaders, and it continues to name groups like Falun Gong as "evil cults." The general climate of repression of human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, and academics is just as bleak, and the number of prisoners of conscience continues to grow.

The S&ED offers a valuable opportunity for U.S. representatives to press China for reform, as its record on religious freedom and related human rights remains profoundly troubling. We respectfully urge the U.S. delegation to privately and publicly raise these important issues in the S&ED, including, as appropriate, calling for the release of prisoners of conscience. Doing so would reaffirm that the promotion of religious freedom remains a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy with China and lay the groundwork to similarly express these concerns when China's President Xi Jinping makes an expected visit to the United States in September this year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert P. George". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Robert P. George
Chairman

cc: Secretary Jacob J. Lew, U.S. Department of the Treasury