

The following letter was sent to the Vice President:

August 15, 2010

The Vice President
Old Executive Office Building
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Vice President

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to wish you well on your upcoming trip to China. During your trip, we urge you to continue to speak candidly to Chinese leaders about the importance of religious freedom in U.S.-China relations and to be a strong voice for those imprisoned for peaceful advocacy of universal freedoms.

As I am certain you agree, promoting universal freedoms is in China's long-term interest. In this regard, I am reminded of what you said in May 2011--namely, that "protecting fundamental rights and freedoms such as those enshrined in China's international commitments, as well as in China's own constitution, is the best way to promote long-term stability and prosperity."

It follows naturally that a vibrant diplomacy on religious freedom and related human rights should be an important part of bilateral relations and woven throughout the entire range of U.S. government programs and actions. How the Chinese government deals with growing religious activity, ethnic unrest, and vocal human rights advocates will affect issues of domestic stability and economic development, as well as the transition of China to a rule of law system and the growing demands of millions of Chinese for greater freedoms, social welfare, and government accountability--all critical concerns for China itself and a growing U.S.-China relationship.

Notably, your visit coincides with the fifth anniversary of human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng's disappearance. His case is emblematic of China's continued repression of all forms of public dissent, of individuals such as Liu Xiaobo, Chen Guancheng and Fan Yafeng who sought peaceful reform and universal rights, as well as the Shouwang Church in Beijing, whose weekly public prayer services have led to members being intimidated, detained, and arrested.

These are important cases and we urge you to raise them prominently during your visit. We also ask that you use the visit as an opportunity to be a "voice for the voiceless" in China, by

raising some of the less prominent cases of Buddhists, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Falun Gong adherents, and human rights lawyers who remain in Chinese prisons or in other forms of detention. We have enclosed, for your reference, selected cases from our 2011 Annual Report.

Issues related to Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists are especially crucial at this time, as very recent violence and ethnic unrest have brought unprecedented levels of repression and religious restrictions. Stability is never secured for long by government promises of economic blandishments and force. Rights are needed--not just money or other temporal entitlements--and additional repression will only be a catalyst for further frustration and discontent in regions of critical strategic importance. In order to build trust and stability, we hope you will encourage Chinese leaders to take a different approach, lifting all restrictions on peaceful religious activity, encouraging and protecting ethnic culture and language, and allowing both transparent investigations of violence and demonstrations in Tibetan and Uighur areas of China.

We commend the Administration's public statements promoting negotiations between Beijing and representatives of the Dalai Lama on Tibet. We believe the United States should offer similar encouragement for better relations between Beijing and the Holy See. Relations have deteriorated recently as the Chinese government continues to ordain Bishops without Vatican approval and arrest or disappear Catholic clergy who peacefully refuse to acknowledge the government's control over the Catholic Church in China.

While sometimes difficult, we hope your advisors will help find ways for you to speak directly to the Chinese people through meetings and worship services, the Internet, and Chinese language media. We hope you will speak candidly about the pivotal nature of religious freedom and related rights and about our desire to build better relations on a foundation of greater freedoms, universal rights, and the rule of law for all of China's citizens. Such a message will resonate with a Chinese population increasingly skeptical that economic prosperity alone will solve mounting social and political discontent or ensure China's "peaceful rise."

We trust your trip will be a success and hope you will continue to convey, consistently and publicly, that the United States takes seriously the challenges posed by China's repression of peaceful religious activity and views human rights as a key component in U.S.-China relations.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo
Chair

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PRISONERS IN CHINA (SELECTED)

SHI ENHAO: Is reportedly serving a two year sentence in reeducation through labor for “using superstition to undermine the implementation of the law” (Art. 300 in the Criminal Law). Pastor Shi is deputy chairman of the Chinese House Church Alliance and leads an unofficial Protestant church with a membership in the thousands. In early June, 2011 he was detained for 15 days in Suqian city, Jiangsu province. According Radio Free Asia, on June 21, 2011 Pastor Shi was given a notice by Suqian Municipal Public Security Bureau (PSB) that he was to serve a two years administrative sentence. No further information regarding Shi's current whereabouts is available.

GUO FEIXONG: Since Dec. 13, 2007, Guo (also known as Yang Maodong) has been serving a five-year sentence in Meizhou Prison, Guangdong Province for “illegal operation of a business.” He was reportedly arrested for a 2001 publication on official corruption that was printed without the proper licenses. Guo was active in rights defense, including on behalf of Christians and Falun Gong practitioners, and was detained for several months in 2005 after he advised villagers in Taishi village (Guangdong Province) on the recall campaign of an allegedly corrupt official. His lawyers report that he was tortured in an attempt to coerce a confession. In November 2009, the United States granted asylum to Guo's wife and children. He has stated that he would like to be re-united with his family once released.

THABKHE GYATSO: Since May 21, 2009, Tibetan Buddhist monk Thabkhe Gyatso has been serving a fifteen-year sentence in a prison in Lanzhou, Gansu Province for “endangering state security.” He was arrested for organizing a peaceful protest at Labrang Monastery in the presence of international media, opposing religious freedom restrictions. According to Radio Free Asia, before and during his trial, he was denied access to legal representation, his family was denied visitation rights, and finally, his family was not informed of his trial. While in detention Thabkhe has reportedly endured severe beatings that may have seriously affected his mental health.

MERDAN SEYITAKHUN: This Uyghur Muslim leader was sentenced to life imprisonment for “splitting the state” under article 103 of the Criminal Law. He was arrested with ten others for

teaching religion to children in an underground religious academy. According to Radio Free Asia, authorities in Xinjiang detained 12 Uyghur men between March-June, 2008. The others arrested were Ahmetjan Emet (15 years), Seydehmet Awut (10 years), Erkin Emet (10 years), Abdujilil Abdughupur (6 years), Abdulitip Ablimit (6 years) (all last known to be held at the Ghulja PBS detention center), Mewlanjan Ahmet (10 years), Kurbanjan Semet (10 years), Dolkun Erkin (10 years), Omerjan Memet (10 years), Mutelip Rozi (6 years), and Ubulkasim (3 years).

ALIMJAN YIMIT: Since his conviction on Oct. 7, 2009, Yimit has been serving a 15-year sentence in Xinjiang No. 3 Prison in Urumqi, XUAR. Authorities in Xinjiang detained Uyghur Protestant „house church“ leader Alimjan Yimit (also spelled Alimjan Himit, Alimujiang Yimiti) on January 12, 2008. While initially charged with “endangering national security” during his first trial in May 27, 2008, that charge was dropped due to lack of sufficient evidence. On Oct. 7, 2009, he was finally convicted of “instigating separatism” and “providing state secrets to foreign organizations” and sentenced to 15 years in prison, allegedly for his activities proselytizing among ethnic Uyghurs and for sending a transcript of his initial police interview to foreign news services.

ZHANG LI & ZHANG JIANLIN: These two Catholic priests were arrested by authorities on or around May 24, 2008. They were detained for seeking to travel to the Sheshan shrine in Shanghai municipality, an annual pilgrimage undertaken by thousands of Catholic Chinese. However, government authorities have reportedly tried to curtail the pilgrimage this year. According to New York Times, Reuters, and the Cardinal Kung Foundation public security officers detained the two priests, who are members of an unregistered church, in Xuanhua district, Zhangjiakou city, Hebei province. No additional information about the two priests' place of detention or charges against them, if any, is available.

ADIL QARIM: Imam Adil Qarim was arrested during a “security sweep” in Kucha county, Aqsu district, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the aftermath of a reported series of bomb attacks in the county on August 10, 2008. According to the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), authorities detained Imam Qarim reportedly because an individual accused of being involved in the August 10 incident attended his mosque. Adil Qarim denied having any links to the attack. His whereabouts are not known.

CHEN ZHENGPING: Was tried and sentenced to eight years in prison for “using a cult to undermine implementation of the law” (Article 300 of the Criminal Law) in October 2008. According to Amnesty International, authorities detained Falun Gong practitioner Chen at her home in Zhengzhou city, Henan province. Authorities did not allow Chen to have legal representation throughout her case. She is currently serving her sentence at Henan Women's prison (also known as Women's No. 5 Prison) where she is reportedly beaten and medicated against her will.

WANG YONGHANG: Is serving a seven year sentence for “using a cult to undermine implementation of the law” (Article 300 of the Criminal Law) for providing defense counsel for several Falun Gong adherents. According to Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), domestic security protection officers in Dalian city, Liaoning province, abducted and beat Wang Yonghang on July 4, 2009, causing fractures in his right ankle. In May 2008, authorities refused to renew his lawyers' license. On October 16, 2009, the Dalian Shahekou District People's Court tried Wang in secret. Neither his defense lawyer, nor his family, was informed of the trial. Wang is currently being held in the Dalian Detention Center, and his appeal is pending in the Dalian Intermediate People's Court.

SU ZHIMIN: Bishop James Su Zhimin was arrested in March 1996 while he led a procession of Catholics to a Marian shrine near the village of Donglu in Hebei province. The (unregistered) bishop of Baoding, Su escaped the following month, went into hiding, and wrote an open protest letter to the National People's Congress. He was captured again on October 8, 1997. Though Su has been the object of frequent American and international inquiry, the Chinese government has provided no information about him, and indeed claims that it has not taken any “coercive measures” against him. On November 15, 2003, the then 71-year-old Su was sighted at a hospital in Baoding, where, under heavy guard, he was undergoing an eye operation and treatment for a heart ailment. Since then he has disappeared again.

GEDUN CHOEKYI NYIMA: On May 14, 1995, the Dalai Lama announced from Dharamsala that he had recognized the boy as the 11th reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second most prominent lama of the Gelug sect. Chinese officials denounced the announcement as “illegal and invalid” and took Gedun Choekyi Nyima, then age six, and his parents into custody on May 17, 1995. They have been held incommunicado in an unknown location since then. Several months later Chinese authorities installed another boy, Gyalsten Norbu, and demanded

that Tibetan Buddhist secular and monastic communities accept his legitimacy. The move continues to stir widespread resentment. The U.S. and other governments have repeatedly urged China to end restrictions on Gedun Choekyi Nyima and his family and to allow international representatives to visit them.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.