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**February 7, 2012 | by USCIRF**

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) sent the following letter on February 3, 2012:

The President  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) hopes your upcoming meetings with China's Vice President Xi Jinping are productive, and we respectfully urge you to raise critical issues of religious freedom and the rule of law during the visit. We know you are personally committed to protecting the vulnerable and expanding the rule of law. We urge you to demonstrate unwavering support for freedom of religion or belief and the rule of law by raising

the situation of those in prison, disappeared, or under pressure in China for seeking greater government accountability, religious freedom, and other human rights.

The religious freedom situation in China has worsened in recent years. The Chinese government accommodates some religious practice, but repression of peaceful religious activity remains intense and widespread, focusing on Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Catholics, unregistered Christians, and spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong. Religious prisoners in China have reported torture and ill-treatment in prison, and while we do not have the precise number, we are aware of hundreds of religious prisoners. In the past year the Chinese government has expanded efforts to control the doctrines, worship sites, and selection of religious personnel of the majority of China's religious communities. In Tibetan and Uighur areas of China, the escalating oppression of free religious practice has created deep resentments that cannot be mitigated by the increased repression or economic inducements being tried by Beijing at this time.

China's growing number of human rights lawyers and rights defenders have also come under intense pressure in the past year, often for defending religious freedom. Despite promises by China's leaders to become a nation governed by the rule of law, those who seek to advance fundamental freedoms are often abused and disbarred. The United States has long connected the establishment of the rule of law with respect for human rights in China. Such a connection is blunted when our rule of law programs and outreach prioritize economic interests over protection of the vulnerable or improving commercial regulations over assisting China to fulfill its international human rights obligations, including the freedom of religion and belief.

USCIRF has welcomed your statements in the past year about why religious freedom is an important American interest, fundamental to our nation's history. We respectfully urge you to discuss with Vice President Xi Jinping why religious freedom is in China's interest, detailing the tangible diplomatic, political, social welfare, security, and economic benefits gained by fully

protecting and promoting religious freedom, as well as explaining the costs of continued repression to the future growth of bilateral relations.

In addition to these suggested actions taken during the Xi Jinping visit, we also urge the administration to consider taking the following actions prior to the visit:

- meet with Chinese human rights defenders, religious leaders, and exiled dissidents living in the United States and solicit their opinions about China's deteriorating human rights situation and how to approach Chinese leaders about it;

- release publicly a list of human rights priorities that will be raised during the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the Legal Experts' Dialogue and the Human Rights Dialogue with China over the next year and announce that human rights and related rule of law issues will be pursued at the highest levels and across your administration; and

- release publicly a list of religious freedom benchmarks to be met before the next U.S.- China Human Rights Dialogue, including addressing the specific grievances of the Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur ethnic minorities, freeing all prisoners, allowing unregistered Christian groups to meet without harassment, ending repressive security measures at Tibetan monasteries, allowing lawyers to vigorously defend their clients without retribution, and ending torture of religious prisoners. Without specific benchmarks the dialogues have not been productive and only reach agreements on when to meet again.

As your administration begins the policy of re-balancing relations with Asia, the visit of China's future President provides an opportunity to demonstrate that U.S. interests encompass more than security and trade. We appreciate the statements you have made in the past about the deteriorating situation in Tibet and on prominent prisoners such as Gao Zhisheng. We ask that you continue to send a clear and consistent message that religious freedom and related human rights are a critical interest of U.S.-China relations.

Sincerely,  
[Leonard Leo](#)  
Chair

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Paul Liben at [pliben@uscirf.gov](mailto:pliben@uscirf.gov) or (703) 870-6041.