



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Statement of Leonard Leo
Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
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2009 is a year of many anniversaries in China—the 50th anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s flight to India, the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen Square, and the 10th anniversary of the crackdown on the Falun Gong. Unfortunately, the ongoing unrest and deaths occurring in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, will add another anniversary of abuse to Chinese history.

The Commission is gravely concerned about the Chinese government’s active repression of the peaceful cultural and religious traditions of ethnic Uighurs. Violence has left as many as 180 Han Chinese and Uighurs dead and thousands injured and detained.

Protests such as those occurring last week happen for a reason. China has experienced numerous public protests in recent years from many different sources—Tibetans, peasants, and now Uighurs. Beijing has pushed its ethnic and religious minorities, its human rights lawyers, its labor activists, its free speech advocates to the wall. The international community must speak out and act.

China’s entry to the global community cannot be defined solely by its economic power. China has international obligations to protect religious freedom and related human rights. The expansion of freedoms and the rule of law in China will assist both diplomatic and economic relations with China.

For decades, an estimated 8 million Uighur Muslims faced restrictions that violated China’s own Constitutional protections and its international obligations to protect peaceful religious activity and related human rights. In some cases, religious freedom restrictions are more severe in Xinjiang than in other places of China. China views peaceful religious practice in Xinjiang as a potential breeding ground for terrorism or separatism.

During the past several years, the Chinese government has tightened restrictions on the practice of Islam in Xinjiang (though not on Islam elsewhere in China); started campaigns to “weaken religious consciousness” among woman and young people; created new rules to police the

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

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religious activities of minors; and shuttered “illegal religious publications” and “illegal religious education centers.” Imams are required to go through political indoctrination sessions and included pro-government messages in their sermons. Historic sections of Kashgar (a city visited by the Commission in 2005) have been destroyed and economic incentives and government jobs are reserved for Chinese migrants.

In the name of preserving national unity and security, Beijing’s repression has caused unrest and deepened dissatisfaction among Uighurs. Beijing’s policies have failed in Xinjiang—as they have failed in Tibet. The Administration and the international community must urge Beijing move in another direction. One way to start is to encourage Beijing to move quickly to guarantee greater religious and social freedoms in law, taking steps to protect Uighur culture, and target economic opportunities for the ethnic minorities of Xinjiang.

In many ways, the situations in Tibet and Xinjiang have many parallels. Xinjiang is “China’s other Tibet.” We have with us today a noted human rights defender and successful businesswoman, who is a moral and courageous voice for the Uighur people. Rebiya Kadeer has suffered personally for her peaceful human rights advocacy. She spent six years in a Chinese prison for speaking out about the repression of her people. Two of her sons remain incarcerated and reportedly are in poor health.

Before she comes up to make her statement, I want to make several recommendations to the Obama Administration. The Commission urges the Administration to:

- Seek an independent investigation of the violence, including a full accounting of those killed, injured, and detained. The Administration should demand that those injured or be given access to doctors and those detained should be allowed to notify relatives and be given access to lawyers.
- The U.S. should continue to seek to establish a diplomatic presence and/or consulate in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province.
- The Administration should speak out in appropriate multilateral forums about China’s human rights record and seek access for the Special Rapporteur on Religion and the Special Rapporteur on Arbitrary Execution to Xinjiang. China has for too long been given a pass at the UN Human Rights Commission, General Assembly, and other UN bodies. The U.S. is the only country that can take the lead in providing evidence and sponsoring resolutions that address egregious violations of religious freedom and related human rights in China at the UN.
- The Administration should consider taking a new Presidential Action under the International Religious Freedom Act, targeting Xinjiang and other provinces where human rights violations are the worst. Such an action could include targeted sanctions

on exports from Xinjiang or travel restrictions on government officials or public security officials who have authority over Xinjiang. The Obama Administration has an opportunity to end the practice of prior Administrations and use the many tools of the International Religious Freedom Act to target state agencies, provincial governments, or government officials who are responsible for egregious religious freedom abuses. The Commission brought up this issue last month during its meeting with Secretary of State Clinton and we will continue to press on this issue.

We are honored to be joined today by Rebiya Kadeer a powerful voice and champion of the Uighur people.