

February 25, 2002: Commission Welcomes President Bush's Speech in China

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, today welcomed President Bush's speech in China emphasizing religious freedom and other human rights. The President spoke at Tsinghua University last Friday.

"President Bush told the Chinese people the truth: Religious believers are not a threat to China's public order - they build civic society" said Felice Gaer of the Commission's executive committee. "It was important that the president's talk was carried live on Chinese television. The Chinese people need to know that America's interest in religious freedom and other human rights is part of who we are as a people, and it's a worldwide concern that China has pledged to respect. It's disturbing that the Chinese authorities censored the printed text."

The presidential speech followed a January 31 Commission letter to the President, recommending he "obtain assurances from the Chinese government that you will be given an opportunity to address the Chinese people directly by live, uncensored broadcast in a major speech on fundamental human rights and freedoms, particularly freedom of religion and belief."

In addition, the Commission issued recommendations regarding China February 13, in which it urged the U.S. government to press China to end its crackdown on religious and spiritual groups; to reform its repressive legal framework; to affirm the universality of religious freedom and China's international obligations; and to foster a culture of respect for human rights. Among its specific recommendations, the Commission wrote that the U.S. government "should seek expanded opportunities to speak frankly and directly to the Chinese people to express why the U.S. government, on behalf of the American people, is concerned with violations of internationally recognized human rights, including freedom of religion or belief."

"We sincerely hope Chinese officials at all levels will take President Bush's words to heart and end their deepening campaign of repression against the Falun Gong, unregistered Protestant and Catholic Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and Uighur Muslims - a campaign that has resulted in tens of thousands sent to detention camps and scores brutally murdered in official custody," Ms. Gaer said. "As the United States deepens its relationship with Beijing, we strongly urge the U.S. government to keep the pressure on China to stop these atrocious violations."

Michael K. Young, Chair

Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director