

January 12, 2000: Commission Regrets Chinese Naming of Bishops

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 12, 2000 Contact:

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today expressed disappointment with China's move last week to consecrate five Catholic bishops. The Chinese authorities reportedly use a litmus test for such government-approved bishops: They must disavow allegiance to Rome. "A church is not free when it cannot govern itself and select its own clergy," said Rabbi David Saperstein, the Commission's chairman. "That's especially true when a government demands loyalty to the state instead of spiritual qualifications for office." Equally troubling, Chairman Saperstein said, was the ordination by bishops associated with the "Catholic Patriotic Association" of Su Changshan as auxiliary bishop for the Baoding diocese in Hebei province. The Vatican-recognized bishop, Su Zhimin, was arrested in 1997 and his whereabouts are unknown. The Chinese government denied taking any "coercive measures" against him, but refused at least one foreign delegation permission to visit him in 1998. The Commission called for the Chinese government to account for Bishop Su Zhimin's detention, well-being and whereabouts. China's Communist government broke ties with the Vatican when it took power in 1949. Catholics were forced into the "Patriotic Catholic Association," which claims about 4 million members in some 4,600 churches. Vatican sources estimate the number of Catholics in the underground church at 10 million to 12 million. These Catholics worship in underground "house churches," risking harassment, arrest, and torture by the police. Several bishops and priests loyal to Rome are in jail or house detention. Saperstein noted that China's action in ordaining the bishops was a serious step backwards from efforts over the past few years to improve Vatican-Chinese relations. Press reports quoting church officials say the two sides held secret talks last year over improving relations. "The action to consecrate these bishops appears to be a retreat on China's part from such efforts and was particularly provocative, coming on the same date that the Pope was consecrating new bishops worldwide." This is part of an escalating pattern of religious repression in China," Saperstein said. He pointed to the reported arrests of 100 Christian "house church" leaders; the reported arrests of two Catholic bishops since August and death of a priest in police custody; the crackdown on the Falun Gong spiritual movement and sentencing of four of its leaders to long prison terms; and the harassment of Tibetan Buddhist monks and Uighur Muslims. "We urge the United States government to again publicly condemn China's persecution of religion," Saperstein said. He added that the US should also include a condemnation of that religious persecution in the resolution on Chinese human rights violations it will introduce in the United Nations Human Rights Commission this coming March and work vigorously for its approval.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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