

## December 30, 1999: Religious Repression Worsening in China

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The repression of religion in China has worsened considerably in recent weeks with the sentencing of several Falun Gong and Christian leaders to long prison terms, said Rabbi David Saperstein, Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today. "The exercise of state power in trying to quash religious expression -- including arrests, imprisonment, and the use of state-run media to slander people because of their religious practices, worship, or teaching -- is alarming to all those who care about religious freedom," Chairman Saperstein said. "This can only set back China's current efforts to participate fully in a world community committed to international rights and liberties." "The Chinese leaders must understand they are not operating in a vacuum," Saperstein said. "The outside world is appalled by what they are doing." Four leaders of the Falun Gong spiritual movement received stiff prison terms ranging from seven to 18 years on Dec. 26 after a nine-hour show trial. Meanwhile, detentions of peaceful protests by Falun Gong practitioners continued apace in Tiananmen Square, where press reports said 20 more silent protesters were seized by police Tuesday. Police also reportedly re-arrested a university student and sent her to a labor camp for three years for posting on the Internet a picture of her ankles, bloody and infected from police leg irons. Press reports and human rights organizations say that at least 35,000 Falun Gong supporters have been arrested during a half-year crackdown on the movement, and perhaps thousands remain in detention. Falun Gong is a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional Chinese exercise, taught by Li Hongzhi, who now lives in the United States. The Chinese government has labeled it a dangerous "cult" and issued a warrant for Li Hongzhi's arrest. Chinese authorities last week also convicted six leaders of Protestant Christian groups in central China, according to the Hong-Kong based Information Center for Human Rights and Democratic Movement. Six leaders of underground "house" churches were sentenced to "labor education camps" for terms ranging from one to three years. The six were originally arrested in August. China's "house churches," which tend to be charismatic and evangelical, operate outside state-sanctioned churches, in violation of Chinese law. "The only crime these Christians are guilty of is worshipping God according to the dictates of their consciences," Saperstein said. Saperstein said the Commission will continue to follow closely the developing situation in China and make recommendations for U.S. policy response in accordance with its congressional mandate.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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