

December 9, 1999: Message to China: Make Peace With Falun Gong

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The Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Rabbi David Saperstein, today reiterated President Clinton's call to China to halt its suppression of the Falun Gong spiritual movement. "China has nothing to fear from these peaceful practitioners of Falun Gong," Chairman Saperstein said. "Instead of strengthening China, the crackdown weakens it -- complicating its foreign relations, undermining its standing among ordinary Chinese citizens, and erecting new barriers to reunification with Taiwan." Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the State Department has designated China as a "country of particular concern" for its violations of religious freedom, and consequently President Clinton extended for two years a ban on export of crime-control and -detection equipment. Falun Gong is a mixture of traditional Chinese exercise with elements of Buddhism and Taoism, one of China's traditional religions. Its founder, Li Hongzhi, currently lives in the United States. Falun Gong disciples have protested the government ban on their movement by peacefully meditating in Tiananmen Square. Some have held up placards calling for recognition of the movement. Tens of thousands of Falun Gong members have been arrested and detained; hundreds, and maybe thousands, have been thrown in jail or labor camps; and four leaders of the movement were recently given prison terms. The Chinese Foreign Ministry Tuesday demanded the two-year U.S. sanction extension be lifted and criticized President Clinton's remarks Monday that the crackdown on Falun Gong is a "troubling example" of Beijing acting against those "who test the limits of freedom." Saperstein thanked the President for his support of religious freedom, noting that the suppression of Falun Gong parallels that of Tibetan Buddhists, Muslim Uighurs, and Chinese Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. "If China wants the world's respect, it must respect its own religious believers," he said.

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