

January 16, 2002: Administration, Congress, Must Press Religious-Freedom Cases With China

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January 16, 2002 Contact:

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency advising the Administration and Congress, yesterday wrote President Bush urging him to press religious-freedom cases with China. The Commission expressed grave concern over reports from China of an escalation of repression of religious groups, most recently Protestant Christians. "Few assumed the human rights situation in China would immediately improve after approval of PNTR," the Commission wrote. "But instead, conditions have worsened." The Commission called on the Administration and the Congress to continue to speak out against this campaign, now and during the President's trip to China next month. The text of the letter follows: January 15, 2002 Dear Mr. President: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is gravely concerned over reports from China of an escalation in repression of religious groups, most recently Protestant Christians. The Commission respectfully urges you to continue to speak out against this apparent campaign both now and in your meetings in Beijing next month. For reportedly the first time since adoption of a 1999 "evil cult" law, a Protestant Christian pastor has been sentenced to death. Pastor Gong Shengliang of the underground "South China Church" was sentenced to death in December for founding an "evil cult" and on reportedly questionable charges of assault and sexual violence. On January 5, a Hubei court extended the month-long period for deciding on his appeal. Fifteen other leaders of the South China Church were sentenced to between two years to life imprisonment. As you know, last month the same law was used to indict a Hong Kong businessman for allegedly smuggling Bibles to another banned Protestant group. Last August and September, 63 Protestant believers (including Pastor Gong) reportedly were arrested, mostly in Hubei and Hebei provinces; two other members of Pastor Gong's church reportedly were tortured to death. The arrests are part of a crackdown - often lethal - on religious believers who are outside of China's state-controlled religious organizations - a crackdown that has intensified since the United States granted China Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status and thereby eliminated the annual congressional review of China's human rights record. The Chinese government delayed announcement of the death sentence against Pastor Gong (which was imposed earlier in December) until just three days after you signed the PNTR trade proclamation on December 27, 2001. Few assumed the human rights situation in China would immediately improve after approval of PNTR. But instead, conditions have worsened. The Commission is grateful that you and several members of Congress have expressed their concerns to China over Mr. Li's indictment. We also appreciate that you have raised religious freedom directly with the President Jiang Zemin in your meetings in October. We urge you to speak out regarding Mr. Li and Pastor Gong and to raise their cases, along with those of other religious prisoners of conscience, during your visit to Beijing in February. The Administration must continue to tell Chinese authorities at all levels that human rights obligations are every bit as important to the United States - and just as binding politically on China - as other international obligations. Thank you, Mr. President, for your efforts on behalf of religious freedom in China and for considering the Commission's recommendation in this vital matter. Respectfully yours, Michael K. Young Chair

Michael K. Young, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director