

August 8, 2003: China: Commission trip to China postponed

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WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, is disappointed that a scheduled visit to China in early August 2003 could not proceed as planned due to unacceptable last-minute conditions imposed upon the Commission's visit by the Chinese government.

Since its inception, the Commission has made several formal requests for an official invitation to visit China. In December 2002, at the U.S.-China bilateral human rights dialogue in Beijing, the Commission was informed that Chinese officials conveyed to Assistant Secretary of State Lorne Craner the Chinese government's decision to invite the USCIRF to visit China. The Commission believes that a successful visit is in the mutual interests of the United States and China, and should have gone forward with the full access to relevant areas and people as was promised to Assistant Secretary Craner.

Since February 2003, when the Commission began negotiations with the Chinese government regarding the parameters of a visit, the Commission made it clear that Hong Kong was an integral part of the visit. The Chinese government has always assured the United States that Hong Kong is an open city not requiring special access. The USCIRF was also given assurances by Chinese Embassy staff that Hong Kong would not be a problematic part of our itinerary. The Commission proceeded with that assumption until two weeks ago when it was informed that the Chinese government "strongly discouraged" our visit to Hong Kong. The Chinese government's position then moved from discouragement to "insistence" that the Commission drop Hong Kong from its itinerary.

"This action on the part of the Chinese government suggests a degree of Chinese control over foreign access to Hong Kong that is unprecedented and in contradiction to the concept of 'one

country, two systems.' It further raises the concern that just six years after the handover, Hong Kong's autonomy is already seriously in doubt. As a commission concerned with religious freedom and related rights, we cannot possibly accede to such a condition," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young.

In addition, the Commission is deeply concerned that just one week before the Commission delegation's scheduled arrival in China, the Chinese government did not provide the Commission with an itinerary of confirmed meetings with government and Communist Party officials responsible for religious policy and its implementation in each of the places the Commission requested. Nor did the Commission receive assurances it would be able to visit prominent religious houses of worship and meet privately with religious leaders. Instead, the Commission was simply told that there would be meetings appropriate to the important nature of its visit.

In light of the circumstances and last-minute limitations that the Chinese government imposed, the Commission could not accede to the conditions and the trip was postponed.

"The Commission fully anticipates and hopes that the Chinese government will honor its commitment to Assistant Secretary Craner and allow the trip to proceed as originally promised," said Young.