

Commission Asks Powell to Raise Religious-Freedom Issues on Asia Trip

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 23, 2001

Contact:

Eileen A. Sullivan, Deputy Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 26

The U.S. Commission has written to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell asking him to "raise prominently the protection of religious freedom in China, Vietnam, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" during his upcoming trip to the region. The text of the letter follows:

July 17, 2001

Dear Secretary Powell:

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urges you to raise prominently the protection of religious freedom in China, Vietnam, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea during your upcoming trip to the region later this month.

China. Systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom in China continue. The persecution is so broad and severe, and the numbers of victims so high, that China cries out for immediate and prominent attention. Leaders and members of unregistered Protestant and Roman Catholic churches have been arrested, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries closed and private religious practice monitored, and Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang have been executed on specious charges and without even a semblance of due process or fair trial. The government has intensified its campaign against the Falun Gong movement, and at least 150 followers have reportedly died in police custody, allegedly following torture. More than 1,000 religious buildings and sites in Wenzhou were confiscated or destroyed by Chinese officials in late 2000. The government continues to maintain tight control over the training and selection of clergy and leaders of the official Protestant and Catholic churches.

The Commission in its May 2001 annual report recommended that the U.S. government persistently urge, at the highest levels and at every opportunity, the Chinese government to take specific, measurable steps to protect religious freedom. The Commission asks that you stress the importance of such progress in your meetings with Chinese officials and ensure that religious freedom is prominent in President Bush's talks with Chinese officials at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in October.

Vietnam. Despite the increase in religious practice among the Vietnamese people in the last 10 years, the Vietnamese government continues its repressive policy toward all religions and their followers in Vietnam, including Hoa Hao Buddhists as well as Christians who are members of ethnic minorities, and appears to have increased its crackdown on prominent religious dissidents during the first half of 2001. Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, a Roman Catholic priest who submitted written testimony to the Commission's February 2001 public hearing on Vietnam, and Venerable Thich Quang Do, the second-ranking leader of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), have recently been imprisoned or placed under house arrest. In February 2001, the Vietnamese government violently suppressed protests by thousands of ethnic minority Central Highlanders seeking the return of ancestral lands and the freedom to practice their religion. Although the Vietnamese government permitted Ambassador Peterson to visit the area this month, he reported significant obstruction from local officials in Gia Lai province during his visit. In April 2001, the Vietnamese government recognized the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) in the south; however, this recognition apparently does not cover up to two-thirds of Vietnam's nearly 1 million Protestants who are ethnic minorities.

The Commission is also concerned about the inhumane treatment of the Patriarch of the UBCV, the Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, who is 83 years old and has remained under house arrest without charge in a remote village of Quang Ngai province since 1982. He is reportedly suffering from serious hypertension, kidney and stomach disorders, and the inability to walk without assistance. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese government has prevented him from traveling to Ho Chi Minh City for proper medical treatment.

The Commission draws your attention to its recommendation in its letter of March 29, 2001, that you raise religious freedom concerns in Vietnam, including the deteriorating treatment of prominent religious dissidents, during your meetings with Vietnamese officials at the ASEAN meetings in Hanoi.

North Korea. The Commission also understands that you will be meeting with Japanese and Korean officials in Tokyo and Seoul, respectively. Given the extreme deprivation of religious freedom in North Korea, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government work with Japanese and South Korean officials - as a part of the trilateral policy coordination - to press upon North Korean officials the importance that the U.S. assigns to the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, and to the eradication of particularly severe violations thereof. The Commission urges you to raise this issue with your Japanese and South Korean counterparts during the upcoming trip.

Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's recommendations. We would be grateful if you would share with us the findings and achievements of your trip upon your return.

Respectfully,

FOR THE COMMISSION

Michael K. Young

Felice D. Gaer

- Firuz Kazemzadeh Leila Nadya Sadat Dean Michael K. Young Nina Shea Rev. Charles R. Stith Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director