

April 4, 2008: China: Bush Should Attend Olympics Only in Case of Improvement in Tibet, U.S. Congress Should Issue Tibet Resolution

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urges President George W. Bush not to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing this summer unless there is substantial improvement in respecting Tibetans' religious freedom, including by opening direct and concrete talks with the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhists' spiritual leader. If the president does attend the opening, the Commission proposes that he first visit the Tibetan regional capital, Lhasa, or another Tibetan area, in an affirmation of the U.S. commitment to religious freedom for Tibetans, as well as for China's other growing religious communities.

The ongoing repression of legitimate Tibetan demands for greater freedoms has been a constant source of resentment. But it is the desire for greater religious freedom and related human rights that has been an important demand of recent protests: Monks at the Jokhang Temple affirmed to foreign reporters visiting Lhasa last week that repression of religious freedom lies at the heart of Tibetans' grievances. Religious freedom abuses in Tibet have long been some of the worst in China. Even before the current unrest, the State Department's 2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices indicated that religious repression has increased in Tibetan areas over the past year. The latest upheaval was sparked on March 10, when hundreds of monks from Drepung monastery demonstrated peacefully to end the government-imposed requirement of "patriotic education," which often requires monks to denounce the Dalai Lama, and to protest the continued

detention of monks who celebrated the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama. Such peaceful protests are protected actions under international human rights standards, and they should not be met by force or detention.

"China's plans to 'pacify' Tibet through religious repression alongside economic modernization and in-migration of mostly ethnic Han Chinese have fueled a deep and lasting resentment," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "For too long, the Chinese have employed a 'security' approach to Tibetan Buddhism—preferring repression, control of leadership decisions, castigation of the Dalai Lama, and 'patriotic education' over freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. That approach is no longer viable; in fact, it is counterproductive. Fully guaranteeing freedom of religion is a necessary first condition for any negotiations regarding Tibet."

China could take immediate, confidence-building steps signaling its commitment to guaranteeing religious freedom for Tibetans by:

- lifting restrictions that are the source of resentment and protest;
- announcing an end to all "patriotic education" programs;
- repealing new laws requiring government approval of all lamas;
- affirming that minors should be able to engage in religious education at any age;
- ensuring safe passage for Tibetans traveling to Nepal or India;
- announcing that devotion to the Dalai Lama, including displaying and venerating his picture, is not a criminal act; and
- unconditionally releasing all detained monks and nuns.

The Commission strongly supports the longstanding United States' policy of calling on Chinese authorities to open a meaningful dialogue with the Dalai Lama to resolve the persistent dispute in Tibet, of which the recent clashes are only the latest confirmation. China

should begin direct negotiations with the Dalai Lama with the aim of establishing true religious freedom and greater autonomy for Tibet inside China. "Religious freedom cannot be ensured without recognizing the authority of the Dalai Lama, his centrality to the beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists, and their steadfast loyalty to his leadership despite severe restrictions," Cromartie said.

The Commission also urges the U.S. government to call for restraint and an independent investigation into the unrest in Tibetan-inhabited areas of China, including reports of violence by both police as well as some civilian protesters. The Commission calls for the release of peaceful protesters from detention, a full accounting of all the individuals who have been killed, detained, or gone missing in the unrest, permission for international observers to gain unrestricted access to the TAR and other Tibetan-inhabited areas including permission to enter jails and prisons to monitor the treatment of detainees and investigate allegations of torture in custody, and immediate access by the injured to medical treatment. The Commission further calls on the U.S. government specifically to demand Chinese protection for the monks who spoke out at the Jokhang Temple last week. The Commission visited that temple during its August 2005 trip to China, which included meetings in Lhasa and at the Drepung monastery.

After a telephone conversation on Tibet between President Bush and President Hu Jintao last week, the White House reported that President Hu was open to restarting negotiations with the Dalai Lama. Yet Chinese media and officials continue to blame the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader and his so-called "clique" for organizing protests, endorsing violence, and trying to sabotage the Olympics. "Amid a campaign of public defamation and blame, we need to hear a clear statement from President Hu that promises restraint and an end to violence against peaceful protesters, as well as proposing plans for moving forward with concrete negotiations with the Dalai Lama. President Hu was previously Party Secretary of Tibet. More than any other Politburo member, he should grasp the need for a new approach," Cromartie said.

In order to counter any diplomatic efforts by the Chinese government to blame the Dalai Lama alone for recent unrest in Tibetan areas, the Commission urges the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate to sponsor a joint resolution that objectively details the history of recent negotiations between the Dalai Lama and Beijing and makes a clear statement about the need for substantive discussions on Tibet that will lead to genuine freedom of religion and a level of autonomy consistent with Chinese law that allows ethnic minorities to be "master of their own affairs" while maintaining China's sovereignty. Such a resolution would garner the support of other governments as well, and enhance the common goal to see an end to violence and the start of substantive negotiations on the Tibetan crisis before the Olympics begin this summer.

The Commission's recommendations regarding the Olympics and Tibet also include the following:

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If attending the Opening Ceremonies or any of the Olympic games in Beijing, President Bush should request to meet with prisoners and persons detained by the state because of their exercise or advocacy of freedom of religion and related human rights. President Bush should also attend an "unregistered" church to underline the Chinese government's violations of religious freedom through its efforts to control faith.

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The U.S. government should seek unrestricted access to Tibetan regions to assess the situation and visit imprisoned monks.

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In order to raise the profile of religious freedom and related human rights promotion through the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the Commission has urged the U.S. Congress to

- within funds appropriated for the security of U.S. citizens in Beijing during the 2008 Olympic Games, allocate sufficient resources to ensure that training and related information materials include content that:

- instructs security officials, Olympic spectators, and athletes regarding China's commitments to uphold for all visitors certain internationally recognized human rights standards during the Olympic Games; and

- informs U.S. citizens, participants, and spectators at the Olympic games of their rights protected under international

law and identifies problem areas they may encounter with Chinese authorities, relating to the freedoms of expression, religion or belief, assembly, and association, including information on Chinese law and recent human rights practices of the Chinese government on these issues; and

- in order to promote a free and open environment, in concert with the principles of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the standards of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, designate appropriate funding to independent human rights organizations to monitor and report on human rights conditions during the summer games to ensure that the Chinese government is in compliance with relevant commitments made to the IOC to uphold human rights and international standards during the Summer Olympics.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan, independent federal body, is mandated by Congress to monitor abuse of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights around the world and to make recommendations to the President, State Department and Congress on ways to address religious freedom concerns.