

September 12, 2008: Human Rights in Post-Olympics China and Asia - Remarks by Michael Cromartie

Human Rights in Post-Olympics China

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Commissioner Michael Cromartie

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The Chinese government hoped that the Olympics would showcase the country's rapid economic growth to the rest of the world. They hoped the games would demonstrate the Communist Party's ability to govern and China's rise as a world power.

The Games are over; we watched the athletes and marveled at their achievements. But Beijing's hopes for a public relations and diplomatic benefit from the games have faded. The Games demonstrated China's wealth but it showed grave shortcomings. The Communist Party responded clumsily and brutally to a whole host of human rights and political challenges that emerged in the year before the Olympics.

Tibetans Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, unregistered Christian groups, and spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong---all seeking greater religious freedoms--instead faced increased repression, restrictions, surveillance, arrests, detentions, and beatings.

Hopes that the Olympic Games would dramatically improve human rights conditions in China have been dashed. I want to provide a quick overview of where things stand currently in China regarding religious freedom and detail some of the Commission's recommendations.

Tibet and other Tibetan areas remain closed. In March and April, Beijing responded to demonstrations with lethal force—even if peaceful—and blacked out all independent sources of news from the region, including foreign television stations and YouTube videos. Text messages in and out of Tibet are filtered.

Beijing also created a "most wanted list" of Tibetan protestors, and jailed an unknown number of monks and nuns who peacefully demonstrated for greater autonomy and religious freedom.

The Commission has urged the U.S. and its allies to press China toward concrete and transparent negotiations with the Dalai Lama and his representatives. We have recommended that as a show of good faith and as a way to ease tensions, that Beijing lift restrictions on Buddhist religious practice, including;

- 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;
- 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.

In Xinjiang province, among the ethnic Uighur Muslims, Beijing continues to use the so-called "war on terror" to justify harsh repression of Uighur Muslim religious practice and culture.

In the months leading up to the Olympics, the Chinese government reportedly arrested 160 Uighur minors for participating in "illegal religious activities." And five imams were sentenced to seven years in prison for "illegally" organizing Hajj pilgrimages to Mecca.

Now we have learned that additional restrictions have been placed on Muslims during Ramadan. Rules include prohibiting women from wearing veils and men from growing beards, worshippers from taking pilgrimages, as well as barring government officials from observing Ramadan.

The Commission has urged the U.S. government to open a consulate in Xinjiang, urge the immediate and unconditional release of Rebiya Kadeer's family and other religious prisoners, and to make the issue of balancing national security and human rights protections in Chinese law a prominent part of diplomatic exchanges and the U.S. - China human rights dialogue.

Conditions for Christian communities in China vary by whether or not they are legally registered. Unregistered Protestants and Catholics, those who refuse to join the government supported religious organizations, have faced increasing pressure over the past year.

Almost 700 Protestants were arrested in the past year with 38 receiving sentences of over one year in prison.

Before the Olympics, the Chinese government issued orders to expel "house churches" from rental properties in Beijing; ordered Beijing residents to report individuals and organizations who "engage in activities that endanger state security by utilizing religions"; and forcibly detained or removed from Beijing prominent Protestant leaders and human rights defenders, such as Pastor Bike Mingxuan. Pastor Bike and others were detained when trying to meet with Congressman Frank Wolf and Congressman Chris Smith during their visit to Beijing in June.

In Shandong Province, local officials instituted a province-wide

crackdown on unregistered Protestant groups, over one hundred Protestants were detained and 21 Protestants leaders were sentenced to 3 years imprisonment for "illegal cult activity." Similar patterns of arrest and restrictions occurred in other provinces in China as well, including in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Henan. Unregistered religious leaders were arrested on charges of "engaging in cult activities"; charges that so brutally and effectively repressed the Falun Gong over the past ten years.

There remain at least 30 Roman Catholic bishops or priests under arrest, imprisonment, or in detention, including the elderly Bishop Su Zhimin. Chinese authorities continue to appoint Bishops in some regions without prior approval from the Vatican.

Pre-Olympic campaigns targeting religious communities and dissidents will continue post-Olympics. There are distributing reports emerging about an upcoming campaign to crackdown on "unstable social elements, including unregistered Christian leaders, land petitioners, human rights defenders, and political dissidents.

Chinese dissidents have reported that a directive was issued by the Political and Legal Committee of the Communist Party instructing law enforcement agents to conduct a nation-wide campaign, beginning next month targeting "unstable social elements." This directive has not yet been implemented. Hopefully, with growing international awareness, the Communist Party will withdraw the directive.

The Commission has recommended that the U.S. government press China to both re-establish relations with the Vatican on terms similar to the ones laid out in Pope Benedict's letter to the Chinese Church. We have also recommended that the issue of legal recognition of Protestants be a major part of the U.S.-China human rights dialogue.

Unregistered Protestants should not be forced to join the government sponsored religious organizations. Even Vietnam, not necessary a paragon of religious freedom protections, allows Protestants to legally operate independently, as separate denominations.

There are many here who will be able to speak eloquently and with detail about troubling human rights conditions in China—including advocacy on behalf of courageous human rights defenders, such as Li Hepring and Teng Biao and so many others.

But I want to also note another issue that sometimes gets lost on the many discussion of China and human rights--that is the protection of North Korean refugees in China. During a trip to South Korea this past June, Commissioners with North Korean women who had been trafficked to China as brides, laborers, and prostitutes. All said they would go through that ordeal again in order to have freedom for themselves and their children.

This is a horrific choice these women were forced to make because China views all North Koreans as economic migrants and repatriates them to North Korea if they are caught. Between 30,000-50,000 North Koreans are reportedly hiding in China, living under constant fear of deportation. Each month hundreds of North Koreans are believed to have been forcibly repatriated.

During its trip, the Commission learned that Chinese authorities in the border region were tightening security ahead of the Olympics. Detention centers were full of refugees awaiting repatriation to North Korea.

The Commission has issued two reports on North Korea. Both provide compelling evidence that North Koreans repatriated from China are mistreated, tortured, and imprisoned and may face execution for the political offense of their religious belief or affiliation.

It is time China fully protected North Korean asylum-seekers and lives up to its international obligations to protect refugees. It is time the international community made refugee protection in China a priority--including at the UN and in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea.