

December 20, 2006: China: USCIRF Concerned About Attempts to Restrict and Control Catholics

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 20, 2006

Contact:

Angela Stephens, Assistant Communications Director,
(202) 523-3240, ext. 114

WASHINGTON- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency, was troubled to learn that the official Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association on November 30 ordained Wang Renlei to serve as bishop for the Xuzhou Diocese in Jiangsu province despite objections from the Vatican, and that officials from the Religious Affairs Bureau detained two bishops from Hebei province, pressuring them to participate against their will in the ordination. The Xuzhou ordination illustrates again Beijing's insistence on actively controlling religious institutions and contradicts religious freedom guarantees in China's own constitution and the international covenants to which China is a signatory. Felice D. Gaer, Chair of the Commission, remarked: "The Chinese government continues to repress Catholics who refuse to join the government-approved Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) and refuses to allow all Catholics to choose and train their own leaders. Article 6 of the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Religious Intolerance explicitly states that freedom of religion includes the right to 'appoint, elect or designate ... appropriate leaders' of one's religion or belief." There are an estimated 12 million Catholics in China. That population is almost evenly distributed between parishes associated with the CPA and the "unregistered" Roman Catholic Church. Bishops and priests affiliated with the unregistered Church face constant harassment, with many serving prolonged terms in detention, as they come under pressure to affiliate with the CPA. The issue of bishop selection and leadership of the Catholic Church is politically sensitive for Beijing. The Chinese government's role in the selection of bishops, its vetting of priests and seminary candidates, and its increasing pressures on "unregistered" churches to join the CPA structure are parts of a policy to exert government influence over the direction of Catholicism in China and to minimize a perceived threat of "foreign infiltration." Complicating this plan, however, is a fast-aging population of bishops and the fact that an estimated three-quarters of all bishops and priests have, either publicly or in private, gained approval from the Vatican for their assignments within the Church hierarchy. Thus, in order to maintain state control, Beijing has an interest in ordaining bishops without Vatican loyalties or ties. During the Commission's visit to China in August 2005, there were signs that the Vatican and Beijing were working toward some form of accommodation regarding the approval and selection of bishops in the CPA. In Shanghai and in Xian, through a process of consultation, both the Vatican and the Chinese government agreed upon candidates to replace two aging bishops. Although the Chinese government never publicly acknowledged the Vatican's role in the selection process, both candidates publicly professed communion with Rome during their ordination ceremonies. Despite this example, in April and May of 2006, the Chinese government and the CPA ordained two bishops without Vatican consultation in Anhui and Kunming. These ordinations initiated a series of high-level consultations between the Vatican and Beijing about bishop selection and ordinations. After these meetings, Vatican officials expressed optimism that they had reached a consensus that ordinations would proceed with some sort of consultation. The ordination of Wang Renlei in Xuzhou abrogates and undermines this consensus. In addition, the Chinese government took specific actions to demonstrate their overt support for the new bishop. Security personnel from the Religious Affairs Bureau detained two bishops from Hebei province, who both publicly acknowledge their connection with Rome, and pressured them to participate in the Xuzhou ordination. They refused and were later released. Additionally, Ye Xiaowen, Director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, attended the ordination ceremony in his official capacity, although he had not attended several previous ordination ceremonies that took place in April and May of this year. "The Xuzhou ordination and China's actions to repress Catholics who do not join the CPA call into question China's sincerity of claiming to be a nation that respects religious freedom," said Gaer. The Commission calls on the Chinese government to allow religious institutions to freely organize and to select and train their own leaders consistent with international norms and treaties to which China is a signatory.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair • Michael Cromartie, Vice Chair • Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Vice Chair • Nina Shea, Vice Chair • Preeti D. Bansal • Archbishop Charles J. Chaput • Khaled Abou El Fadl • Richard D. Land • Bishop Ricardo Ramirez • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio • Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director