

August 21, 2006: USCIRF Condemns Arrests of Prominent Human Rights Defenders in China; Reiterates Call for End to Crackdown on Religious Rights

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Contact:

Angela Stephens, Assistant Communications Director,

(202) 523-3240, ext. 14 WASHINGTON- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, condemns the arrests of prominent Chinese lawyers and human rights activists Gao Zhisheng in Beijing and Xu Zhiyong in eastern Shandong province. Xu was preparing to defend Chen Guangcheng, a blind legal activist who has campaigned against China's harsh population control measures. Gao, whose law firm has been closed because he refused to curtail his defense of persons unjustly accused, including for religious practice, has demanded the release of Chen. Chen was charged with disrupting traffic and destroying property in Shandong during a protest in February. Xu's arrest deprived Chen of his legal defense during the trial Friday. Xu was released Friday after Chen's trial ended. No verdict was announced. "The arrests of Mr. Gao and Mr. Xu appear to be an attempt to intimidate and silence those who are using legal means to defend human rights protections in China, and to deny legal representation to a citizen whose views or actions are unacceptable to the Chinese government," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. "Such actions against these prominent courageous attorneys are disgraceful. China should be encouraging more use of legal means, not chilling its use." The Commission has previously documented that the government ordered Gao's law firm closed in November 2005 for one year because he refused to curtail his defense of Falun Gong practitioners and Cai Zhouhua, a Protestant pastor who was ultimately sentenced to three years in prison for distributing Bibles. Gao has written an open letter to President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao condemning methods used by the Chinese government in implementing its ban on what it calls "evil cults," such as Falun Gong. In April, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution urging the government of China to reinstate all licenses of Gao Zhisheng and his law firm and revise law and practice in China so that it conforms to international standards. Chinese law allows a lawyer to represent a criminal suspect, but defendants in politically sensitive cases frequently find it difficult to secure an attorney's services. The State Department has annually designated China a "country of particular concern" for its ongoing and egregious abuses of religious freedom, based on the recommendations of USCIRF since 1999, when the Commission first issued such recommendations. The Commission, which traveled to China in August 2005 to examine the status of religious freedom and human rights in the country, reiterates its recommendation that the U.S. government call on the Chinese government to end its crackdown on religious and spiritual groups, including harassment, surveillance, and detention of persons on account of their manifestation of religion or belief, and halt the coercion of individuals to renounce or condemn any religion or belief.

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