

Hearings on Religious Persecution in China: Opening Remarks

March 16, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

RABBI

SAPERSTEIN: Ladies and gentlemen, I want to welcome you to this hearing today. My name is Rabbi David Saperstein. I serve as the chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, and I welcome you to the second public hearing of the U.S. Commission.

Today

we focus on the issue of religious freedom in China. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by a unanimous vote of Congress in passing the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. It is our responsibility to make recommendations to the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, the Congress of the United States, on how best to promote religious freedom internationally.

Let me begin by having my fellow Commission members introduce themselves to you briefly, and let me start with Ambassador Bob Seiple.

AMBASSADOR SEIPLE: My name is Bob Seiple. I'm the ambassador-at-large for the National Religious Freedom, and I reside in the State Department.

COMMISSIONER ABRAMS: Elliott Abrams, President of the Ethics and Public Policy Institute.

DR.

KAZEMZADEH: I am Firuz Kazemzadeh, Professor of American History at Yale and member of the National Assembly of the Bahais of the United States.

JUSTICE SMITH: I am Charles A. Smith, a justice of the Washington State Supreme Court.

RABBI

SAPERSTEIN: And let me introduce also Steve McFarland, who is the executive director of the Commission. You'll have the opportunity throughout the day to see some of the extraordinary work of the staff of the Commission, and we'll have an opportunity to introduce some of those staff people to you later today.

We have several other members of the Commission who are not able to be here, in each case for understandable reasons. One is on his way over to Taiwan, will be staying through the election. Another is escorting the Pope on his historic trip to the Holy Land. So there are reasons deeply connected with our mission that prevents some of them from being here. But these are public hearings. They are being recorded both on video and will be published here. So all of those who were not able to be here will be reviewing the entire record of our discussions today.

The Chinese Constitution in 1982 states that Chinese citizens may believe in religion or disbelieve. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with education, the educational system of the state, and no religious affairs may be controlled by any foreign power.

Religious groups that serve the purposes of the state are permitted. Those that do not serve the purpose of the state have no protection under the law. We point out that the entire scheme of international human rights are those rights that vest in people by intervening human beings. The role of the state is to secure and to protect those rights, not to make those rights subservient to the state.

The package quoted above sets out the theoretical limits on religious freedom in China. How are those restrictive clauses used in engaging in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, controlled by foreign power, interference with the educational system of the state -- in what way are they used to restrict the religious freedom of people? In what way does the promise of religious freedom actually exist? For whom? Under what circumstances? What are the dynamics within China that enhances or impedes those, and what are the possible avenues that China might take that help expand religious liberty and freedom, and what role does America play and the international community play in

furthering that positive direction? Those are the questions we will be asking today for the one billion citizens of China and most directly and immediately for the 200 million religious adherents, tens of millions more than just a few years ago.

There has been an enormous rebirth of interest in religious issues in China today. I visited China in 1989. I was there with my father, a well-known and distinguished rabbi, and my wife, a journalist. As we were walking along the streets -- this was two months before Tiananmen Square -- it was a robust feeling of the wonder of the exploration that the expanding freedoms were offering them. And when people found out that we were rabbis, crowds would gather around us to talk to us.

I didn't know at that time about official churches and underground churches; but at several times we were brought, someone said, "Would you meet with a group of us who are trying to study the Bible?" And we would go, and my father and I would teach about the Christian Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, and people would be absolutely fascinated, bursting with questions. You could feel, even then, two months before Tiananmen Square, this kind of wonder about the opportunity of freedom to explore religious beliefs and religious heritage that was taking place there.

And of course Tiananmen Square took place, and the repression of this last decade took place, and in particular this past year. We will hear from people who testify about the guerrilla repression suffered by those whose religious activities fell outside of what authorities choose to allow.

This has been a particularly difficult year for so many in China seeking to exercise what in the West we take for granted to be normal religious activity. Because of ongoing religious systemic egregious violations of religious freedom of international norms, the United States State Department in its 1999 annual report on religious freedoms, designated China "a country of particular concern." There only sits seven such countries designated in the world, none of which have the extensive relationships with the western world, the democratic countries throughout the world and the United States, that China has.

Last month in Hong Kong, Mary Robinson, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, criticized China's deteriorating human rights and raised concerns about the repression of freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and severe sentences leading out of activities related to political and religious expression. Christian house-church leaders and Catholic priests have been detained. Tibetan Buddhists have suffered severe repression under the restrictive state control of monastery and

religious rights. Muslims have endured arbitrary detentions and imprisonment and severe limitations on religious activities.

The crackdown on Falun Gong adherents has exposed afresh the injustice of the extrajudicial reform through education systems and the cruelty of China's prisons. Our purpose here today is to come to a better understanding of the range of religious activity in China, how China deals with religious organizations, why it takes the actions it does, and what can be done to move China toward granting greater religious freedom to its own citizens.

We have such distinguished witnesses, such distinguished experts in this field. It's an honor for this nation and for this Commission and for all who hear and benefit from the discussions that will take place today. In a moment I want to call our first panel.

Before I do, I want to note with sadness the passing of Cardinal Ignacius Kung, one of the great heroes in the struggle for religious freedom. Thirty years he was imprisoned because he refused to accept the mandates of the state. He exemplified the plight that afflicts millions and millions of people of all faiths, of all faiths who struggle for freedom in China. In the Jewish tradition we have a saying, "May his name and memory ever be for a blessing." So may it be for Cardinal Kung.

It is now my pleasure to call our first panel to give us and to provide for us an overview of human rights in China. I call first -- let me introduce the three panelists. First, Mr. Wei Jingsheng. Mr. Wei was born and raised in China. He first came to the attention of Chinese authorities in 1978 when he penned a remarkable essay and posted it on Democracy Wall in Beijing. It was entitled "The Fifth Modernization." He argued that without democracy, China could never truly modernize. Wei then founded an underground magazine called "Exploration." In his last edition he published an article called "Democracy or a New Dictatorship, A Direct Critique of Deng Xiaoping."

Wei was immediately arrested, convicted, and sentenced as a counterrevolutionist for 15 years in prison. Shortly after being released in 1994, he was rearrested and sentenced to another prison term of 15 years. By this time he had attracted the attention of the world community and champions of human rights across the globe. They began to mobilize and speak out on his behalf. And in part because of that pressure, Mr. Wei was released by the Chinese authorities in conjunction with a visit by President Jiang Zemin in the United States in 1997.

Since his exile to the United States, he's been a tireless activist of human rights and democracy for the citizens of China. "He spoke: The Courage to Stand Alone," a compilation of his essays, won international acclaim.

For people like myself, Mr. Wei, it opened my eyes to the realities of China in a dramatic and compelling manner that I have never sensed before. And I thank you for that, as do so many others.

You speak with the moral authority learned through 18 years of suffering for having the courage to express his convictions and currently serves as the president of the overseas Chinese democratic coalition keeping the dialogue open with world leaders committed to moving forward the cause of democracy in China.

Mr. Lu Siqing, better known to the western media and to those of us in the United States as Mr. Frank Lu, is the director of the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democratic Movements in China.

Through a remarkable network of reporters inside China, the Center reports and verifies news of human rights abuses in the PRC which otherwise might never come to light. The Center has been a major source of news, bringing attention to torture of Falun Gong adherents over the past year.

Mr. Lu is a student activist throughout his years at South University of Technology in Hunan Province, he was detained for a year for his role in organizing student demonstrations about the time that I was in China at the time of Tiananmen Square. He was detained again in 1993 for ongoing human rights activism; eventually escaped to Hong Kong, where he was granted asylum and where he established his remarkable center.

Mr. Lu, you should know that for those of us who every day turn on our computers to find out what the latest news is, time and again, it is the information that you provide that is the most incisive, most up-to-date, most accurate information, that we find nowhere else. And that has been a blessing for all of us in our work.

Our

final witness in this panel, Ms. Mickey Spiegel, who is known to anyone who works in this field or in the cause of human rights. She's been an analyst in Human Rights Watch Asia as a specialist on religious freedom issues in China since 1992. A social worker specializing in child development and an anthropologist by training for the past decade. She's devoted her life to the cause of human rights and has specialized in issues of religious freedom and political prisoners, helping the Human Rights Watch to prepare its annual reports in these areas. And that is invaluable to us. Her 1997 book, "China's State Control of Religion," and subsequent updates are essential reading for those seeking to truly understand the complexity and nuance of religious issue in China.

We are delighted to have all three of you here today. Let me just take one minute to make two other contextual comments here. First, Elliott Abrams, well-known to anyone here about these issues, is going to help with the chairing of the session today. We'll be going back and forth introducing panels. We've asked the witnesses to provide opening comments about ten minutes long so that we will have adequate time for questions and discussions.

We

will be inviting you in the audience to partake in the questions. If you want to ask a question at the end, we'll come to that time. We will pass out cards to you, and you can write down what questions you want. If you raise your hands, the staff will come and give you a card. They'll collect them from you, and Steve will consolidate those questions to make sure that issues that we may not be addressing to help further discussion are put on the table as well.

Mr. Wei, let me ask that you begin.