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By Elliott Abrams

The latest move in China's ongoing anti-religion campaign is as subtle as a sledgehammer. Literally.

In the eastern province of Zhejiang, officials boast that they have destroyed, confiscated or shut down 450 Roman Catholic and Protestant churches and Taoist and Buddhist temples. A Hong Kong-based human rights observer puts the number at nearer 3,000. Some have been blown up; others demolished with sledgehammers.

The targets of this demolition derby are congregations that have operated openly for years but refuse to register with the authorities, lest they be forced to join the state's puppet religious organizations. To do so means, among other things, turning over membership lists to the authorities and accepting state-dictated theology and censorship of sermons. Catholics, for example, are forced to deny the authority of the pope, a step most refuse to take.

"In order to maintain social stability, the local government demolished underground [unregistered] churches and temples and other illegal places," a spokesman for the Wenzhou city foreign affairs office helpfully explained to Agence France-Presse.

The destruction of houses of worship is part of Beijing's comprehensive and intensifying crackdown on independent religious expression, which began in earnest in July 1999 with the banning of the Falun Gong spiritual movement and several mainstream Protestant Christian groups as "evil cults." Consider the following reports:

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In the brutal campaign against the Falun Gong and Zhong Gong spiritual movements, at least 59 Falun Gong practitioners have died, usually from police beatings and torture. The Hong Kong observer counts 20,000 Falun Gong practitioners temporarily detained, 10,000 thrown into labor camps without trial and 600 sent to mental hospitals. Several leaders have received prison terms of more than a decade.

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At least 24 Uighur Muslims from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region have been executed this year on charges of separatism. Muslim Uighur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer remains in jail, her appeal of an eight-year sentence--for sending her U.S.-based husband Chinese newspaper clippings--rejected.

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Harassment of Protestant and Catholic Christians who refuse to join the state organizations is in full swing. Many Protestants and Catholics have been arrested for participating in unregistered church services. While several bishops and priests loyal to Rome remain missing or under arrest, Bishop Fu Tieshen of the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Conference has twice this year ordained bishops and priests without Vatican approval.

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Police have ransacked homes in Tibet, destroying Buddhist objects and pictures of the Dalai Lama. In July, 30 monks were expelled from the Jokhang Temple, one of Tibetan Buddhism's holiest shrines.

The U.S. government has a moral obligation to let the Chinese government know that such abuses are unacceptable. But more is needed. The Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that the U.S. again initiate a resolution to censure China at the annual spring meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and urge other governments to join it. The U.S. also should use its diplomatic influence to ensure that China is not selected as a site for the Olympic Games until it makes significant improvement in human rights, including religious freedom.

And to show progress in improving religious freedom, China should:

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Release all religious prisoners.

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Respond to inquiries about people who are imprisoned, detained or under house arrest or missing for reasons of belief.

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Permit international human rights organizations and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom unhindered access to religious leaders, including those imprisoned, detained or under house arrest.

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Open a high-level dialogue with the U.S. on religious-freedom issues.

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Ratify the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which it has signed.

No one wants to isolate China. But the choice is not between engagement and isolation. It is between silence and vigorous protest. In fact, the continuing escalation of this brutal campaign to repress freedom of religion is in the long term a great peril to Sino-American relations and to China itself.

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