

The New York Sun

April 18, 2006

By Michael Cromartie and Felice D. Gaer

President Hu will visit President Bush at the White House this week. The two leaders will talk about trade and Taiwan, but they should also talk frankly about Jigme Gyatso, a Tibetan monk imprisoned for 15 years for his association with a group of monks seeking greater respect for human rights in Tibet, and Cai Zhuohua, a Protestant pastor who was given a three-year prison sentence for distributing Bibles.

The list of such prisoners is long and growing longer each day. The Chinese government habitually makes public promises to protect the freedoms of its growing and diverse religious communities. Mr. Bush should press China to keep these promises.

In March 2005, the Chinese government publicly claimed that it does not restrict the religious education of minors. However, in August 2005, police in Jiangxi province raided a training class for Protestant Sunday School teachers and arrested 35 high school students for participating. Later that month, police broke into the house of Aminan Momixi and arrested her for teaching the Koran to 37 students, some as young as 7. She was accused of "illegally possessing religious materials and subversive historical information." The children remained in police detention until parents paid fines ranging from \$800 to \$1,200, a huge sum to poor Muslims in China. Aminan Momixi's whereabouts remain unknown.

When the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom went to China last August, local officials in the far western province of Xinjiang proudly told us that they actively restricted the religious activity of minors. Although Chinese officials continued to insist to us that children are allowed to receive religious instruction, the local officials stated that young people in Xinjiang cannot attend mosques or engage in religious education until they complete "nine years of compulsory schooling." We learned of similar restrictions in place in Tibet.

The Tibetan Buddhist community continues to be severely repressed. The Chinese government acknowledges that more than 100 Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns are in prison - and according to human rights groups, they are subject to torture and ill treatment. Dozens of monks and nuns were expelled from monasteries over the past year for refusing to participate in "patriotic education" sessions. China has continued to refuse international requests - including from the United Nations - for access to the 16-year-old boy the Dalai Lama designated the 11th Panchen Lama, and has instead claimed that another boy the government selected is the "true" Panchen Lama.

As China seeks investors to "modernize" and "develop" places such as Tibet and Xinjiang, the White House should begin discussions on ways to allow foreign journalists, diplomats, and other international humanitarian organizations unrestricted access to Xinjiang and Tibet, including through agreement on new U.S. consulates in both these regions.

In March 2005, China issued new National Regulations on Religious Affairs. Chinese leaders hailed the regulations as "a significant step forward in the protection of religious freedom." But instead of protecting freedom, the regulations imposed additional restrictions on religious practice, giving government authorities more control over religious groups and their activities.

The new regulations are particularly dangerous for religious groups that do not register with one of the five government-approved religious organizations - Buddhist, Daoist, Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim. Over the last year, hundreds of unregistered Catholic and Protestant religious leaders have been arrested or detained and hundreds more intimidated in efforts to force them to publicly affiliate with the government-sanctioned religious organizations. Local officials are rewarded for their success in the number of unregistered religious venues they shut down or the number of unregistered believers arrested.

The same rewards go to security personnel who uncover and arrest followers of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which was banned in 1999. Thousands of Falun Gong followers have been sent to prison, labor camps or mental health institutions for re-education due to their affiliation with what China calls an "evil cult." They include sisters Wei Yumei and Wei Yufen, each sentenced to 10 years in prison for producing and distributing Falun Gong literature, and a U.S. citizen, Charles Lee, who was imprisoned for three years and subjected to harsh treatment and forced labor for disseminating information about Falun Gong into China.

Mr. Bush should press China to release all those who are imprisoned or detained because of their practice of religion or belief. More is needed than a few symbolic releases of prisoners, however. China must end its crackdown on religious and spiritual groups and keep the promises it made in a bilateral agreement with the United States in March 2005 on children's religious rights, a visit to China by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and provide a clear definition of religious gatherings in homes.

Although China has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion to children, the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child criticized China in September 2005 for violating the treaty. China should issue a national decree guaranteeing the right of children to manifest religion and the right of parents to provide their children's religious education.

China should ratify and implement the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a treaty it signed in 1998 that guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It should also strengthen its legal system to protect the rights of its citizens, and punish officials responsible for violations.

The U.S.-China relationship is not only about trade and security. The Chinese government must be persuaded that matters related to thought, conscience, and religion or belief are personal and cannot be regulated by the state. Individuals who peacefully exercise these rights should not be subject to intimidation, violence, or arbitrary restrictions, in China or anywhere.

Mr. Bush should remind Mr. Hu that international respect is not gained by economic freedom alone. Rather, a nation's greatness is measured by the social and religious freedoms guaranteed its people.

Mr. Cromartie is vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. Ms. Gaer is director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee in New York. They are respectively chair and vice chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (www.uscirf.gov).