

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

Angela Stephens, Assistant Communications Director,

*(202) 523-3240 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting (202) 523-3240 en
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, ext. 14*

WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today welcomed the reported release of Roman Catholic Bishop An Shuxin and urged the People's Republic of China to free other imprisoned religious leaders. Reports indicate that Bishop An has received permission to resume his pastoral work but remains under Chinese government surveillance.

"Bishop An's release is an important-but long overdue-step from Chinese authorities," said Felice Gaer, Chair of the Commission. "We hope it will be followed by the release of numerous Catholic clergy and other religious leaders who refuse to submit to Chinese government control over their religious beliefs and practices."

Chinese authorities arrested Bishop An in 1996 during a larger crackdown on religious activities in Hebei Province. According to the Cardinal Kung Foundation, Chinese authorities permitted An to leave prison only once during his decade-long incarceration for a brief visit with his ailing mother. An serves as the Auxiliary Bishop to Bishop Su Zhimin, was also arrested in 1996 and has not been seen in public since 1997.

During its August 2005 visit to China, a delegation from the Commission raised the cases of Bishop An and Bishop Su in official meetings with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Administration on Religious Affairs. In a written response from the Chinese government on August 31, 2005, authorities refused to acknowledge the arrests, stating only that "the relevant department did not detain or punish them."

"The Commission continues to voice profound concern over the incarceration of Bishop Su Zhimin, Bishop Jia Zhiguo and four other Roman Catholic bishops who remain imprisoned, along with several priests and nuns," noted Gaer. "We urge Chinese leaders to be more candid in the future and to provide access and a full accounting of the whereabouts and treatment of political and religious prisoners when the U.S. government raises such inquiries. This could advance confidence in the utility of diplomatic communications between our two countries."

Though encouraging, An's release occurs against the backdrop of continuing restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in China, including the systematic harassment, arrest and imprisonment of unregistered Protestants and Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and practitioners of Falun Gong. Chinese authorities also continue to harass and intimidate Chinese attorneys and other local activists who attempt to use the law to uphold the rights of religious believers to worship freely.

"Human rights remain crucial within the broader context of U.S.-China relations," observed Gaer. "Improvements in the area of religious freedom will help bring China into line with its international obligation and strengthen ties between our two countries."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer
- Michael Cromartie

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