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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed concern today over the continued persecution of Uighur Muslims and the Chinese government's violent response to the Uighur protest in Urumqi in the Xinjiang autonomous region Sunday, that left more than 150 dead and thousands injured.

Media reports from the scene said that Uighur protesters, with legitimate grievances, were forced to disperse by government security forces. When they failed to disperse, force was used that led to the deaths of more than 150 Uighurs. Reports also indicate that, amidst the violence, Han Chinese were killed by Uighur rioters.

In a swift statement, the Chinese government said its violent crackdown was in response to a protest by Uighur separatists who rioted, burning hundreds of shops and cars. More than 700 persons were detained.

“The heavy hand of Chinese government repression displayed at Tiananmen Square and last year against Tibetan protesters appears evident again. We call on the Chinese government to end its violent response to the protests and act with moderation and restraint in dealing with Uighur unrest in Xinjiang, and to allow peaceful demonstrations and greater religious freedoms,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair.

“While the specifics in this tragedy are not fully clear, what is known is that the Chinese government has systematically repressed the human rights and religious freedom of Uighurs,” said Leo. “This violent response leading to at least 150 deaths is an obvious overreaction and we urge the U.S. government and the international community to stand up for the rights of Uighurs and other religious minorities in China. USCIRF demands a full accounting of all persons detained, that they be given the right to access to independent doctors, lawyers, and that they be allowed to notify relatives.”

Xinjiang Province is home to an estimated eight million Uighurs, the vast majority of whom are Muslim. Because of enduring restrictions on Uighur religion and culture and growing ethnic tensions between the indigenous Uighur population and newly arrived Han Chinese migrants, Xinjiang is sometimes called “China's other Tibet.” Chinese restrictions on peaceful religious activity and expression in Xinjiang are particularly draconian in scope. Chinese authorities have often equated the peaceful religious practices of Uighur Muslims with religious extremism and separatism and use the global war on terror as a pretext to crack down on peaceful forms of religious activity and expression.

Religious freedom abuses are also widespread for other religious communities in China. Tibetan Buddhists, Protestants and Catholics who refuse to join the government-controlled religious organizations, Falun Gong adherents, human rights defenders and lawyers, and Uighur Muslims have all faced government abuses.

China has been listed by USCIRF as a “country of particular concern” (CPC) since 1999. USCIRF commissioners visited Urumqi and Kashgar in 2005 and in June 2009, USCIRF commissioner Felice Gaer testified before the Subcommittee on Human Rights, International Organizations, and Oversight of the Committee on Foreign Affairs on China's history of persecution of Uighurs. (The full text of the testimony is available [in pdf on our Web site](#) .)

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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