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WASHINGTON, D.C. - As the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges the Obama Administration to raise prominently the issue of religious freedom in China, particularly the wide-ranging restrictions on peaceful religious activity and assembly faced by ethnic Uighur Muslims.

Beijing recently launched a program of accelerated economic development for Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) after ethnic violence that followed demonstrations last year. Unfortunately, Beijing's new policy is intended to bring stability to the XUAR but it does not address longstanding Uighur grievances over religious, cultural, and political controls, said USCIRF.

"Beijing's new policy will not be able to buy off Uighur demands for universally guaranteed freedoms of religion and expression," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "Promises of future economic development are no substitute for concrete action now needed to release prisoners and end restrictions on peaceful religious activity. During the holy month of Ramadan, we hope that Beijing will consider ending its repression of Uighur Muslims as a first signal that it will seriously address long-standing Uighur concerns."

Religious observance is growing in China, as hundreds of millions of Chinese seek to worship and exercise the right to religious freedom guaranteed by China's Constitution and international human rights conventions to which China is a party. Religious organizations are a large segment of China's civil society and Chinese officials, including President Hu Jintao, have stated publicly that religious groups can play a beneficial role in the development of Chinese society. However, in a speech extolling the new XUAR policy, President Hu urged continued vigilance in carrying out current ethnic and religious policy. Religious freedom restrictions are an ongoing source of resentment for Uighurs. Beijing continues to view peaceful Muslim religious activity with suspicion and as a source of "extremism and separatism." In its May, 2010 Annual Report, USCIRF outlined the religious freedom abuses caused by Beijing's current ethnic and religious policy in the XUAR. Teachers, professors, university students, and other government employees are prohibited from observing Ramadan and engaging in daily religious activities such as reciting prayers, distributing religious materials, and wearing head coverings. Minors under the age of 18 continue to be denied access to some mosques and to religious education. Uighur Muslim clerics and students have been detained for various "illegal" religious activities, "illegal religious centers" have been closed, and police continue to confiscate large quantities of "illegal religious publications."

"As the U.S.-China relationship continues to grow, the Obama Administration should make a public and persuasive case about why religious freedom is in China's interest," said Mr. Leo. "At the same time, the United States must firmly support the release of those who are in prison or

unacknowledged detention, and end the harassment of persons for peacefully seeking the rule of law, religious freedom, and other human rights.”

USCIRF’s 2010 Annual Report has more information and recommendations for the U.S. government regarding religious freedom protection and promotion in China, including targeting officials or security agencies in the XUAR with sanctions if conditions there do not improve. 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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