

For Immediate Release
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WASHINGTON, D.C. - During Christianity's holiest week, China has renewed pressure on Christians who refuse to subject themselves to government control. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges the Chinese government to allow all Easter services to proceed without harassment or detentions, including planned public worship by Beijing's Shouwang Church.

Over 100 members of that church were detained last week for holding public prayer services to protest restrictions on their access to property purchased in 2009. The Shouwang Church which has over 1,000 members, tried to legally register independent of the government-controlled Protestant organization, and bought property on which to build a church, raising about \$4 million, according to the NGO ChinaAid.

"Beijing has again responded with ruthless intolerance to peaceful religious activity," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "The Shouwang Church tried to play by rules that the Chinese government keeps changing. Beijing's action further alienates the fast growing number of religious believers in China, particularly during Easter, the most sacred week in Christianity."

The detentions of Shouwang Church members come amid a broader crackdown on scores of advocates, bloggers, lawyers, artists, and writers that began in February in a campaign to forestall any public protests within China similar to the "Jasmine Revolution" in the Middle East and North Africa. Detained and disappeared advocates include Teng Biao and Fan Yafeng.

Lawyer Jiang Tianyong resurfaced this week after disappearing for over two months. However, Liu Xia, the wife of imprisoned Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, remains under strict "house arrest;" she is reportedly not allowed visitors and no one has heard from her since

October 18, 2010.

Crackdowns on the public worship activities of the Shouwang church are more than attempts to maintain public order, they are evidence of renewed efforts by the Chinese government to control independent religious practice. In a February 2011 speech, Wang Zu'on, head of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), called on government officials to renew efforts to "guide" unregistered Protestants to worship in state-sanctioned churches and "break" large churches like Shouwang into small groups. He also outlined efforts to further deny Chinese Catholics the freedom to make bishop appointments with the Vatican's approval, require Muslims to pass political tests to go on pilgrimages, and better manage Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and unregistered shrines.

"Renewed calls to restrict and control the activities of Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists are particularly troubling," said Leo. "Obviously, China does not see the rule of law or religious freedom as being in its long-term interests. The United States cannot be silent, thinking this will allow more flexible economic and security arrangements with Beijing. We should speak publicly on behalf of those peacefully seeking reform, coordinate action with allies concerned about human rights, and raise prominently religious freedom issues at next month's U.S.-China Economic and Strategic Dialogue."

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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