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WASHINGTON, DC - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) urges the State Department during this week's Human Rights dialogue and the upcoming Strategic and Economic dialogue with China to raise religious freedom issues prominently and demonstrate it is a critical U.S. interest. The urgency of raising religious freedom as a priority concern was demonstrated again during Easter week when authorities prevented members of Beijing's Shouwang Protestant Church from peacefully holding a public Easter service in the Zhongguancun area of northwest Beijing's Haidian district. According to Shouwang Church senior leaders, starting the night before Easter Sunday 500 members of the congregation were detained in their homes. In addition, at least 34 church members who made it to the designated site of the worship service were also detained. Twenty-four were detained in police vans at the site and at least eight others were taken to police stations. All those detained were allowed to go free within a few hours, though the church leaders remain under house detention. Also, released late last week was human rights defender Jiang Tianyong, a lawyer known for his defense of Falun Gong and unrecognized Protestants, who returned home after being "disappeared" for two months.

"A robust religious freedom agenda ought to be a prominent part of U.S.-China relations," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. "The Administration should create an inter-agency human rights action plan and coordinate its implementation across the U.S. government and with allies, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists. At all levels, the United States must signal clearly, publicly, and unambiguously that religious freedom is a vital U.S. interest that affects the flexibility and scope of U.S.-China relations."

In its 2011 Annual Report (released tomorrow), USCIRF will recommend that religious freedom and related human rights should be a more important part of U.S.-China policy and pursued at all levels of the bilateral relationship. Religious freedom is directly related to key U.S. interests in expanding the rule of law, developing civil society, aiding stability in ethnic minority areas, expanding the freedom of expression, and bringing China firmly within the international system through implementation of universal human rights obligations.

Detentions of the Protestant Shouwang Church members over the weekend show the Chinese government's continued unease in dealing with independent religious communities. The Chinese government issued new guidelines in February 2011 to make it more difficult for independent religious groups to operate and gather. The fast growth of unrecognized or underground religious groups is viewed as a potential political challenge to the Communist

Party. Increasingly, educated and urban religious believers are willing to stand up and speak up publically for their rights; and, in some rural areas, religious believers greatly outnumber Party members.

“The Easter detentions may be the tip of the iceberg,” said Mr. Leo. “Beijing has a decision to make—will it repress religious practice it cannot control, or will it find ways to fulfill the promises of the Chinese constitution and accommodate the spiritual desires of an estimated two hundred million people in China? U.S. leadership is required to demonstrate why allowing greater freedoms is in China’s long-term interests.”

In its Annual Report, USCIRF recommends that in the planning and structure of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the U.S. government should:

- prioritize human rights and religious freedom issues in the Strategic Dialogue’s agenda, raise a full range of religious freedom concerns in high-level discussions, and seek binding agreements on key religious freedom and human rights concerns; and
- ensure that religious freedom priorities raised in the Strategic Dialogue are implemented through appropriate U.S. government foreign assistance programs on such issues as legal reform, civil society capacity-building, public diplomacy, and cultural and religious preservation and exchanges.

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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