

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom condemns the Chinese government's crackdown on human rights defenders and the so-called "campaign to root out foreign infiltration," which penalizes religious communities that do not enjoy official sanction, targeting their activities involving foreign coreligionists. Chinese government leaders have recently used these two campaigns, which have been explicitly endorsed at the highest levels of the central government, to violate human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. In particular, the Commission deplors the recent conviction of Yang Maodong, a prominent Chinese legal activist and human rights defender sentenced to five years in prison following a 13-month trial during which he was tortured, according to human rights organizations. The Commission calls on the U.S. government to urge the Chinese government to release Yang Maodong and other recently imprisoned human rights defenders.

"Chinese leaders have publicly stated a commitment to uphold the rule of law, yet they have also pursued a crackdown on rights defenders who attempt to strengthen the capacity of Chinese citizens to protect civil and political rights, including the right to religious freedom," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "The sentencing of Yang Maodong once again demonstrates that even though China has introduced laws and regulations to respect and protect human rights, the government remains unwilling to implement substantive legal reforms. China's vows to fully implement the rule of law remain empty promises," Cromartie said.

Prior to his arrest in September 2006, Yang Maodong, who is also known as Guo Feixiong, was closely involved in the legal defense of Gao Zhisheng, a lawyer who received a suspended prison sentence in December 2006 on charges of subversion largely related to his statements opposing China's crackdown on Falun Gong. Yang also authored articles calling for an end to human rights abuses against the Falun Gong and for the release of Christian pastor Cai

Zhuohua, who served a three-year sentence for distributing Bibles to unregistered Christian house churches.

As China arrests and harasses lawyers and human rights defenders, it continues to use legal and administrative measures to restrict peaceful religious activities. A recent example is the current campaign "to root out foreign infiltration," which has allowed Chinese authorities to close businesses and target unregistered religious groups that have overseas contacts.

In two recent cases, foreign businesses with longstanding operations in China have been ordered to close their offices, reportedly due to their contacts with local leaders of unregistered house churches. In October, a company that is owned by a Christian couple from Australia was raided and fined over US\$13 million in a move that was reportedly motivated by the company's employment of large numbers of Christians. The China Aid Association reports that in the last two weeks, three Chinese employees of the company have been detained and its business license has been officially revoked. In September, owners of two American companies in Xinjiang were ordered to cease operations. An indictment that orders the visas of the business owners revoked concludes they were "engaged in religious infiltration activities... in the name of doing business" reportedly due to activities of the owners to hold Bible studies on the premises and to support unregistered house churches in their locality.

Authorities in Henan Province also recently implemented a directive referring to "the fight against infiltration activities by hostile overseas forces under the guise of Christianity" as part of a central government-backed effort targeting local Christian house churches to "resolutely stop their activities." The directive is now being used to bolster ongoing efforts to repress local unregistered house churches and punish religious leaders who refuse to register.

The campaign against foreign infiltration also targets the religious activities of ethnic minorities. After the Dalai Lama was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in Washington, the Chinese government scorned the Tibetan spiritual leader's activities as acts of foreign infiltration. Several monks were arrested at Drepung Monastery in Lhasa for participating in celebrations of the award, according to the International Campaign for Tibet.

"China is actively seeking foreign investment and in nine months, Beijing will host millions of visitors at the Olympic Games," Cromartie said. "On the one hand, China

invites international attention to its sporting events and its business communities, but on the other, seeks to punish contact with foreigners against those who seek to worship freely and without interference. This policy is unsustainable in a globalized world."

In its 2007 Annual Report, the Commission recommends that the U.S. government, through the newly instituted Human Rights Defenders Fund, make support available to Chinese lawyers and others who defend the internationally recognized rights of individuals and communities targeted because of their religious belief or practice. In light of the ongoing crackdown on rights defenders in China, the Commission calls for immediate implementation of this recommendation. For a full list of the Commission's recommendations on China, see the 2007 Annual Report (www.uscirf.gov).

The Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan, independent federal body, is mandated by Congress to monitor abuse of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights around the world and to make recommendations to the President, State Department and Congress on ways to address religious freedom concerns.

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.

Michael Cromartie