

China Aid/USCIRF Press Event: National Press Club – Wednesday Oct. 28, 2009

Michael Cromartie, vice chair US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Remarks

INTRODUCTION:

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent, bipartisan federal agency created by Congress in 1998 to review religious freedom conditions globally and provide recommendations to the President, State Department, and Congress.

The Commission has traveled to China and closely followed religious freedom conditions there over the past ten years. We have provided numerous recommendations for U.S. policy that can be found in our 2009 Annual Report.

Though religious practice has greatly expanded in China, religious freedom abuses have also expanded. Arrests, detentions, mistreatment, fines, confiscation of property, disappearances, torture, and other severe restrictions target Tibetan Buddhists; Uighur Muslims; unregistered Protestants and Catholics; spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong; and human rights lawyers who seek to protect vulnerable religious communities. Among Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, severe religious freedom restrictions continue to be a source of deep resentment and unrest.

The Commission has urged the Obama Administration to listen carefully to China's dissidents, rights activists, and religious believers and demonstrate unwavering support for those who are in prison, have disappeared, or who are under pressure in China for seeking greater government accountability, the rule of law, religious freedom, and other human rights. These issues are as important to a healthy future U.S.-China relationship as trade and climate change.

President Obama has made eloquent statements about why religious freedom is an American interest rooted in our nation's history, but the Commission urges him to speak more clearly about why religious freedom is in China's interest, rooted in international human rights obligations.

The international community cannot soft-pedal persecution in China. Human rights protection and the rule of law are critical components of continued economic progress and government transparency. The Obama Administration should be detailing the tangible diplomatic, political, social, and economic benefits China can gain by fully protecting and promoting religious freedom and related human rights. At the same time, the Administration should be signaling to Beijing that continued repression and human rights abuses will hinder the growth and flexibility of U.S.-China relations.

We are here today to discuss religious freedom and the rule of law in China with a courageous group of human rights defenders. In a moment you will be hearing from individuals on the frontlines, peacefully seeking legal reform and human rights protections in China. They are courageously speaking out today, at some risk to their own careers and personal safety.

But they feel like they have to speak out: Over the last several years, the Communist government in China has pushed human rights lawyers up against the wall.

Lawyers who take up controversial cases or speak out publicly about legal reforms have been beaten, threatened, imprisoned, and had their legal licenses denied. No lawyer should be harassed, beaten, disappeared or imprisoned because of the clients they defend or the cases they take.

When the President travels to China in two weeks time, the issue of religious freedom and the rule of law should be prominent in his discussions with China's leaders. As a former constitutional law professor, the rule of law ought to be one of the President's signature human rights issues. The rule of law touches on every major human rights concern, from torture, to treaty compliance, to the rights of Tibetans.

When the President goes to China we urge him to meet with embattled human rights lawyers and ask about the whereabouts of lawyer Gao Zhiseng (GOW ZZER-SHUNG), ask why lawyer Yang Maodong (YAN MAO-DUNG) is in prison, ask why so many detained religious believers cannot get adequate legal representation, and ask why so many lawyers have been intimidated and stripped of their legal licenses for trying to protect vulnerable individuals and religious groups.

President Hu Jintao has said that he is committed to creating a rule of law society, but the evidence is not yet there that China is fully committed to this development. Human rights lawyers are peaceful advocates for universal freedoms not dangers to social stability. If they are China's future, the U.S.-China relationship will be prosperous, peaceful, and world changing. The lawyers here today have faced persecution or have courageously taken up cases of individuals who have faced persecution. Particularly, they have taken up cases of repressed religious groups in China—Tibetans, Uighurs, Falun Gong, and “house church” Protestants.

I want to let them tell their stories.

INTRODUCE BOB FU:

I want to introduce Bob Fu from China Aid, Inc. China Aid does extraordinary work documenting religious freedom restrictions in China and is an extraordinary source of information about religious freedom conditions in China. Bob has also done important work networking and training human rights lawyers and defenders in China for the past five years. The Commission has worked with Bob in this effort. I want him to come to the podium to introduce our news-makers.