



## Investigate Religious Persecution China

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Next week the first American religious delegation to investigate reports of widespread religious persecution in China will arrive in Beijing. The visit is a welcome concession by Chinese leaders to an ongoing international effort to study and improve human rights in China. If officials give the delegation a free hand, the visitors will be able to document the treatment of Chinese worshippers who refuse to join the state-sanctioned churches. The danger, however, is that Beijing will use the trip as a propaganda opportunity, forcing the delegation to participate in a censored tour that will give them a distorted picture of religious freedom in China.

Religious persecution in China is not getting any better according to a human rights report released last month by the U.S. State Department. Beijing is a signatory to the United Nations Charter of Human Rights and the Chinese constitution guarantees its citizens religious freedom, yet worship remains highly regulated. People of all beliefs are required to register with the state religious bureau and must belong to the Patriotic Association, the official "church."

Any religious activities that are not approved by the government are illegal. That includes Roman Catholic Masses, Protestant house church prayer services and other unofficial religious worship. Those who refuse to submit to the state's rules are subject to searches, confiscation of personal property, house arrest, detention in camps and/or imprisonment. All such consequences can occur with or without a police warrant, and with or without a trial.

Examples of such persecution are numerous. One of the more dramatic cases occurred in November 1996, when some 300 Roman Catholics were arrested in Jianxi in an effort to quash planned prayer services during the Christmas season. Earlier that year, 5,000 soldiers sealed off Dong Lu village in Hebei province, where a Catholic shrine was located. The soldiers destroyed the shrine and confiscated the statue of the Virgin Mary. Bishop Su Zhimin, Auxiliary Bishop An Shuxin and many priests were arrested. They are still in jail.

Unfortunately, such incidents are not aberrations, but part of a systematic effort by the government to wipe out unofficial religious activity. Beijing's current policy to eradicate the underground Roman Catholic Church is detailed in an internal government document that the Cardinal Kung Foundation published in January 1997. The document urges the leadership to employ "resolute, decisive, and organized measures" to stamp out the "illegal" activities of the underground Catholic Church.

The Chinese government denies all allegations of religious persecution. The leaders in Beijing are eager to establish China as an important power in the international community, and they know that criticism of their human rights record is a key obstacle to smooth trade and political relations. Consequently, at his landmark summit with U.S. President Bill Clinton, President Jiang Zemin invited an American delegation to investigate religious freedom in China.

The Chinese government can demonstrate to the world its sincerity and impartiality by allowing the delegation to make a free and accurate report. To accomplish this, the Chinese government must confirm that:

- The delegation will have the freedom to travel to any part of China without restrictions, unaccompanied by government officials when preferred by the delegation.
- The delegation will not be required to submit to the government an itinerary in advance of all the places it intends to visit. It will have the right to speak to anyone at any place and at any time.
- People whom the delegation may choose to interview will not be harassed, arrested, or inconvenienced in any way by the government once the delegation has left the country.
- The delegation will have the freedom to visit any prisoner, to search, examine and duplicate court records, and have free access to all Chinese prisons or labor camps.
- Representatives of the underground churches, who are now considered subversive by the Chinese government, will be allowed to meet privately with the delegation.
- The delegation should be permitted to employ interpreters from outside China rather than designated official interpreters.
- The delegation should have the freedom to utilize photographic, audio, and other equipment to record any event.
- The delegation should be assured that it will be completely free of any eavesdropping or any other kind of surveillance.

Unlike previous visits of religious groups to China, next week's delegation is not a social call, nor is it a meeting to exchange ideas. The visitors are charged with an extremely important and well-defined mission: investigating religious persecution. This mission can be achieved only if there is no official interference and no fear of adverse consequences for people who are interviewed. That is why, before it leaves for China, the delegation must insist that the Chinese government unequivocally agree to the points listed above. The alternative is to risk becoming a propaganda tool for Beijing.