



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Testimony by Nury Turkel, Commissioner
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**Hearing on
“Religious Freedom in China: The Case of Bishop James Su Zhimin”
Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

July 30, 2020

9:00 a.m.

2172 Rayburn House Office Building

Good morning, Co-Chair Smith, Co-Chair McGovern, and Honorable Members of the Commission. Thank you for inviting the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, to testify at this important hearing about the Chinese government’s ongoing persecution of Christians and other religious groups.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body that is dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. USCIRF is led by nine Commissioners who are appointed by the White House and the leadership of both chambers of Congress from both parties, supported by a non-partisan professional staff of about 20. USCIRF seeks to defend religious freedom internationally for people of all faiths, and for those who hold no faith at all. Throughout the year, we monitor religious freedom conditions abroad and make policy recommendations to the President, Department of State, and Congress.

As a Uyghur-American, I have experienced firsthand the totalitarianism of the Chinese Communist Party. I was born in a reeducation camp during the height of China’s Cultural Revolution. I was fortunate to be afforded the opportunity to attend college in the United States in 1995. I received political asylum and have since been proud to call myself an American citizen. I cofounded the Uyghur Human Rights Project and have served as president of the Uyghur American Association.

As you know, USCIRF works closely with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on a variety of issues. Several years ago, we sponsored Bishop James Su Zhimin for inclusion in the Defending Freedoms Project. USCIRF is deeply saddened by recent reports that Bishop Su might have died during his unjust imprisonment. We urge the Vatican to make determining his fate a priority during any ongoing negotiations with the Chinese government and to refuse to recognize any replacement bishop for Baoding city in Hebei Province.

The news about Bishop Su comes during the worst persecution of religious groups in China in decades, and is illustrative of larger trends. I will give an overview of religious freedom in China, and then will share greater detail about how this is affecting Christians in the country.

The revised Regulation on Religious Affairs—which went into effect on February 1, 2018—requires religious groups to seek approval from local authorities before holding religious activities in school or publishing religious material online. It also transferred control over management of religious affairs to the United Front Work Department, which is an organ of the Communist Party.

This past February a new Regulation on Religious Groups went into effect. This regulation allows local authorities to review the charter and annual work plan of religious organizations, and to monitor their compliance with national and local laws. Religious groups must also provide interpretations of religious doctrine and canons that comply with “socialist values.”

In addition to these regulations, Chinese authorities have used criminal and national security laws to target religious believers of all faiths. The government has detained millions of Uyghur and other Muslims in concentration camps as part of a counterterrorism program. Yet, leaked Chinese government documents show that many detainees were targeted because of their religious practices, such as growing a beard or wearing a veil. The government has used these camps as a source of forced labor. Earlier this year, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute estimated that 80,000 Uyghurs have been sent to work in textile, electronics, and other factories across China.

Meanwhile, according to the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, the government’s use of forced sterilization and other repressive population control policies led birth rates in the Uyghur region to plummet 24 percent in just one year. USCIRF believes these policies might meet the legal definition for genocide under the Genocide Convention.

The Chinese government has also intensified its ruthless campaign of forced assimilation against Tibetan Buddhists. Local authorities have increased restrictions on Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and appointed Communist Party cadres to their management boards. During the past few years, the government has destroyed significant parts of the famous Larung Gar and the Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist complexes in Sichuan Province and expelled thousands of monks and nuns. These acts irreparably damaged the cultural heritage of the Tibetan people.

USCIRF is increasingly concerned that the Chinese government will try to interfere in the selection or reincarnation process for the next Dalai Lama. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the young boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the next Panchen Lama, has been missing for more than 25 years. USCIRF continues to advocate on his behalf alongside Co-Chair McGovern through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project and the Defending Freedoms Project.

The sinification campaign also violently targets Christians. Most of China’s estimated 70 million Protestants refuse to join the state-run Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Chinese authorities have raided or demolished countless underground house churches, most recently Xingguang Church in Xiamen city, Fujian Province. Even when authorities do not destroy churches, they have

removed hundreds of crosses and replaced images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi Jinping. As we learned during our hearing last week on Chinese surveillance of religious minorities, government agents have installed cameras in the pulpits of churches so they can monitor who attends services. Last year, there were even reports that some Chinese localities, including Guangzhou city, offered to pay cash rewards to individuals who reported on underground church activity.

USCIRF is particularly concerned by the lack of transparency around the Vatican's provisional agreement with the Chinese government. The Vatican agreed to end the excommunication of seven bishops in return for a veto over future appointments of bishops by the Chinese government. The state-affiliated Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, or CCPA, has recognized five underground bishops, most recently Bishop Paul Ma Cunguo of Shuozhou Diocese. However, authorities continue to target and imprison others, including Guo Xijin and Cui Tai, who refuse to join the CCPA. The provisional agreement is set to expire in September.

Although the Chinese government has not outlawed any of these religions, Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code makes belonging to the Falun Gong movement a crime punishable with three to seven years' imprisonment or more. Chinese authorities continue to harass and detain Falun Gong members simply for distributing literature about the group's practices.

The Chinese government claims that it ended the practice of forcibly harvesting organs from prisoners, including Falun Gong practitioners, on January 1, 2015. However, human rights advocates, medical experts, and Falun Gong practitioners have presented credible evidence that the practice continues. USCIRF is particularly alarmed by the disparity between the number of voluntary organ donations and the number of transplants each year.

Because of the Communist Party's long history of systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF has recommended the State Department to designate China as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act every year since 1999. Although the State Department has designated China as a CPC since then, the U.S. government currently fulfills its requirements under IRFA by counting sanctions it had already enacted against China for other purposes. USCIRF recommends ending this practice of "double-hatting" because it sends mixed signals about our commitment to promoting religious freedom in China.

In addition, USCIRF urges Congress to build upon the success of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act by passing other legislation designed to promote the freedom of religion and belief in China, including the Tibetan Policy and Support Act and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. I know Co-Chair McGovern, Co-Chair Smith, and other Members of this Commission were involved in drafting these bills and thank you for your efforts.

Finally, I urge more Members of Congress to work with the Defending Freedoms Projects in order to adopt religious prisoners of conscience in China. The scale of the Chinese government's war on faith is overwhelming, and so highlighting individual cases can be a powerful way to remind the world of the human face of this tragedy. The DFP has had successes in securing the release of individuals by consistently raising their cases with foreign government officials. In

addition to Bishop Su, USCIRF had also sponsored Gao Zhisheng, a lawyer who defended Christians in Xinjiang and Falun Gong practitioners, and Pastor Zhang Shaojie, a Three-Self church pastor from Nanle County.

In closing, I would like to thank Congress, and this commission in particular for your consistent and vigorous efforts on behalf of religious freedom in China. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.