

Press briefing at the European Parliament on freedom of religion in China

Parliamentarians urged Chinese authorities to invite UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to assess the situation of religious freedom in the country

HRWF Int. (31.05.2006) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: www.hrwf.net - At a press briefing organized on the eve of the visit of the Dalai Lama to the European Parliament, MEP Simon Coveney, Spokesman for Human Rights of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats (EPP-ED) in the European Parliament and Member of the EP Committee on Foreign Affairs, urged the Chinese authorities to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief to assess the situation of religious freedom in the country.

The press briefing was organized by MEP Simon Coveney in collaboration with Human Rights without Frontiers Int. (HRWF Int.) with the objective to draw attention to China's policies of repression against religious activities that are considered to be outside the scope of the state-controlled religious system. Simon Coveney, who hosted the event, highlighted that the briefing was organized in order to "facilitate open discussions between representatives of religious minorities in China and the media here in Europe". The audience had the opportunity to listen to the testimonies of Buddhist, Muslim Uighur, and Falun Gong representatives.

A Buddhist nun testified that the years of imprisonment and the moral suffering inflicted on her because of her religion and culture had built up her resolve to step forward and talk about her experiences.

A Falun Gong female practitioner talked about her one-month detention in the Tuanhe detention centre in Beijing and one-year detention at a forced labour camp in the period between February 2000 and November 2001. She also referred to stories of practices of "organ harvesting" on Falun Gong practitioners. In a comment to this testimony, MEP Edward MacMillan-Scott expressed his conviction that the European Parliament should initiate an investigation into allegations of organ trafficking.

The leader of the World Uighur Congress spoke of the situation of Muslim Uighurs in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and the

systematic policies of religious intolerance and discrimination practiced by Chinese authorities for the last 55 years. He also evoked the desperate situation of Uighurs seeking asylum in Europe, who are extradited to China or to Central Asian countries, from which they are then re-directed to China. Several cases of execution of people sent to China were quoted.

In his introductory remarks, the HRWF Int. director Willy Fautré elaborated on China's policies aimed at subordinating religious organizations to the state. In a statement distributed at the press briefing, HRWF Int. called on the Chinese authorities to ratify and implement the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; to invite the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief to assess the situation of religious freedom in the country; to allow access for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief to the Panchen Lama designated by the Dalai Lama; to grant access to the Laogai forced labour camps where believers of all faiths are allegedly detained on the ground of their religious beliefs and activities; and to release all prisoners detained on the ground of their religious beliefs and activities.

In his concluding remarks, MEP Simon Coveney expressed his conviction that the European Parliament had levers to induce positive changes due to the fact that China is sensitive to outside pressure. He called on the Chinese authorities to invite Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, to assess the situation of religious freedom in the country.

MEP Simon Coveney calls for freedom of religion and belief in China

Coveney.ie (30.05.2006)/ HRWF Int. (31.05.2006) - Website: www.hrwf.net – Email: info@hrwf.net - In the last few months, Beijing has sent out contradictory messages concerning its relations with the main faith communities active in China. While the Chinese Government claims that it is liberalising its policy on religion it has recently adopted a number of measures that have angered the leaders of the main religious communities, and their followers.

Speaking on the eve of the Dalai Lama's visit to the European Parliament in Brussels Fine Gael MEP Simon Coveney and his EPP-ED colleague Charles Tannock MEP called on the Chinese authorities to invite Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, to assess the situation of religious freedom in the country.

Coveney who is human rights spokesman for the EPP-ED Group said: "I am happy to host this briefing to facilitate open discussions between representatives of religious minorities in China and the media here in Europe.

"China's constitution states that its citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief, but this is not the case. For each of the five officially recognised religions there is a Government-affiliated association to monitor and supervise their activities: the Chinese Buddhist Association, the Catholic Patriotic Association, the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the Chinese Islamic Association and the Chinese Daoist Association. All religious groups are obliged to register with the appropriate religious organisation. I believe the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief should be able to assess the situation concerning religious freedom - or the lack of it - in China, and she should also be granted access to the Laogai forced labour camps where believers of all faiths are detained.

"Unfortunately, hopes of restoring diplomatic relations with the Vatican received a blow when bishops were ordained by the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association without the approval of the Vatican. I urge the Chinese leadership to open up a constructive dialogue with the Vatican (as did my fellow EPP-ED colleagues on their recent trip to China) and not to take it upon themselves to appoint bishops. Such a dialogue would improve the country's relations with Catholics living in China."

Dr. Charles Tannock MEP, Vice President of the Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, said: "China is the EU's second

largest trading partner but this commercial closeness is not matched by the PRC's lamentable track record on a whole range of human rights issues. Many people are familiar with the repression of the Tibetans and the Buddhists but less is known of repression of religious minorities particularly Falun Gong practitioners, unregistered Christian groups and Uighur Muslims. China in its defence claims that, as it is the largest country in the world with 1.3 billion people, it cannot afford western style freedom of expression and conscience, as this would lead to a breakdown of national cohesion and law and order. However India, also with over 1 billion people, manages to be a democracy and have a largely tolerant multi-cultural society in spite of its enormous size and it still grows economically and has a thriving free press. China in contrast even feels it has to censor the internet! Its systematic use of torture and the inappropriate use of the death penalty has also led to widespread condemnation in the west.

"We know that China is sensitive to outside western pressure and that a tough message from us gets through to Chinese leading opinion formers that elected representatives in the EU do care how China treats its own people."