

Human rights key to China's development

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NEW YORK -- During a recent visit to Beijing, U.N. rights envoy Louise Arbour called attention to the serious human-rights situation in China and the need for improvements according to international human-rights standards. An important step in that regard would be for China to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Beijing signed in 1998.

There are presently two areas where the human rights situation in China needs special attention: trafficking of women and children, and freedom of religion. In China, as in many other countries, millions of women and children continue to be smuggled across borders, and they end up as beggars, doing forced labor or working as prostitutes.

Through a series of policies and regulations the Chinese government sharply limits freedom of religious belief. Although China's constitution states that all Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief, this article only applies to the five religions officially recognized in China. Those that don't belong to one of these religions, or organize outside state control, become outlaws.

The situation is particularly serious in the Tibet Autonomous Region and in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, an oil-rich area that borders eight other nations in the northwest. Human Rights Watch has been particularly active in denouncing the situation in both regions.

In the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Chinese government exerts strict control over the number of monasteries and the number of monks in them, and pays informants to keep an eye on monks' activities. Rebellious monks are subjected to detention and torture.

At the same time, China claims the right to vet all reincarnations. Even more seriously, on July 19, the Chinese-appointed chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region stated that China will choose the next Dalai Lama, an insulting attitude toward Tibetans and a clear interference with their religious beliefs.

China's repressive policies are also evident in the case of the Muslim Uighur people in Xinjiang province. The Uighurs are a Turkic-speaking minority group of approximately 8 million people who have fought relentlessly to protect their cultural identity despite the massive arrival of over 1 million Chinese settlers over the last decade.

The Human Rights Watch report "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang" draws a complex picture of policies and regulations that deny Uighur citizens religious freedom and stifles all kinds of religious activities. Brad Adams, Asia director for Human Rights Watch states, "While Chinese enjoy a growing freedom to worship, the Uighurs, like the Tibetans, find that their religion is being used as a tool of control."

Chinese government officials exert tight control of all Uighur activities, from the celebration of public holidays to determining who can be a cleric, what version of the Quran is accepted, and the number and quality of religious gatherings. Violation of these norms leads to punishment, including detention in China's now discredited program of re-education through labor.