

US report slams China's religious freedom record

Written by Taipei Times

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US Secretary of State John Kerry has released Washington's 16th annual report on religious freedom, which showed stark differences between Taiwan and China.

While there were no reported cases of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice in Taiwan last year, it was a much different story across the Taiwan Strait, the report showed.

The report said that Beijing "harassed, assaulted, detained, arrested or sentenced to prison" religious adherents and there were also reports of "physical abuse and torture in detention."

Kerry said that China was a "country of particular concern" and that, along with eight other nations, it engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Severe violations were defined as "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom, including torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention of persons."

"Nations that protect this fundamental freedom will have the partnership of the US and the abiding commitment of the American people as we seek to advance freedom of religion worldwide," Kerry said.

The report said that the world last year witnessed the largest displacement of religious communities in recent memory.

"In almost every corner of the globe, millions of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others representing a range of faiths were forced from their homes on account of their religious beliefs," it said.

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“Out of fear or by force, entire neighborhoods are emptying of residents, communities are disappearing from their traditional and historic homes, and dispersing across the geographic map,” the report said.

However, with one exception, the report was favorable toward Taiwan.

The one area it singled out for change is a Taiwanese labor law that does not guarantee domestic workers and caretakers the right to a day off, making it difficult or impossible for them to attend religious services.

Despite this, the report said that the Constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, and “in practice” the authorities generally respect religious freedom.

According to the report, 35 percent of Taiwanese consider themselves to be Buddhist and 33 percent Taoist.

“Researchers and academics estimate that as much as 80 percent of the population believes in some form of traditional folk religion,” it said.

The Falun Gong Society of Taiwan, with more than 1,000 branches nationwide, said that its membership list exceeds 1 million.

Religious groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Catholics, Protestants and Muslims.

Over eight pages, the report detailed some of the worst individual cases of religious intolerance in China and said Beijing fears that religion might threaten state or Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests.

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It said CCP members are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practices — a significant ruling, because “the vast majority of public-office holders are CCP members.”

Unregistered religious believers and Falun Gong adherents are among those reportedly in detention solely for their religious association in 24 high-security psychiatric hospitals for the criminally insane, the report said.

People in these hospitals are reportedly given medicine against their will and sometimes subjected to electric shock treatment, it said.

Cash rewards are offered to citizens who inform on Falun Gong practitioners, and practitioners who are detained are subjected to various methods of physical and psychological coercion in attempts to force them to renounce their beliefs, the report said.

Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims experience “institutionalized discrimination” throughout China, because of their religious beliefs as well as their status as ethnic minorities with distinct languages and cultures, it said.

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