

*On the situation of human rights in China, and in particular the increasing restrictions on and violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.*

Thank you for inviting me to speak.

Human Rights in China have deteriorated to an unprecedented low level. One Chinese Human Rights lawyer, Gao Zhisheng, has described the situation under President Xi Jinping as the “harshes and most brutal political oppression since the end of Mao Zedong’s rule.” In 2016 and 2017, the Communist Party has launched blatant crackdowns on human rights lawyers and activists, intensified restrictions on the free dissemination of speech, ideas and information, and conspicuously extended control and suppression of religious activity.

An intense focus on security and control of civil society has led to the imposition of increasingly strict measures regulating the existence and operation of religious organisations and activities. Conditions are worsening for non-government-sanctioned religious groups. Protestant churches in particular are under increasing pressure to register with the state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement (the TSPM), and non-registered churches face confiscation of property, fines and the detention of church leaders and members.

One example of this is the case of Living Stone Church in Guiyang city, Guizhou Province. Founded in 2009 by 20 people, this Protestant Christian church grew to have over 700 members. Noticeable because of its size, its social outreach activities, and because lawyers in its congregation used their expertise to help other smaller churches in the area facing pressure from the authorities, in 2013 Living Stone Church became increasingly subjected to state monitoring, interference and pressure to register with the TSPM. Church leaders and members were watched, arrested and detained on spurious charges. Every single church attendee was individually asked to sever ties with the church and threatened not to associate with it. When Living Stone Church decided to buy a bigger meeting space, the authorities posted notices warning members of the public not to participate in the “banned organisation’s” “illegal religious activities”.

A secret directive for “dealing with” Living Stone Church was produced by the Guiyang municipal government and leaked in December 2015. It listed the name of every church attendee and recommended that they be inspected and put under “stability control”, a euphemistic term for surveillance. Pastor Yang Hua was told by the Religious Affairs Administration that the church should voluntarily close its doors or it would be outlawed by the government. When Living Stone Church did not retreat, this threat was put into effect. On Sunday 9 November 2015, 300 police and law enforcement personnel were mobilised to shut the church down. They sealed off all of its buildings and placed over 200 people under house arrest. Seven church members were arrested and detained, including Pastor Yang Hua, who was later sentenced to 2-and-a-half years in prison for “illegally possessing state secrets”.

On 7 September China’s State Council released a set of revisions to the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs. These strengthen state control over religious activities in China, continuing the practice of protecting only “normal” religious activities by state-approved groups. In practice this means there is virtually no space for religious communities that do not wish to register with the government for reasons of conscience. Although the revised regulations do not come into effect

until 2 February 2018, the case of Living Stone Church illustrates their potential impact, and acts as a precursor to the even wider crackdown on religious activity which some church leaders fear will occur in the coming months and years.

The revised religious Regulations maintain and strengthen powers of the State to scrutinise and interfere with religious activity. Vaguely-worded provisions emphasise the need for “management and supervision” of religious affairs. Compulsory registration and oversight of registered churches is tightened, which could be interpreted as an attempt to place limits on registered churches which have become too “independent” and to bring them in line with the direction of the TSPM. This would be consistent with China’s “wujin, wuhua policy” and rhetoric on the sinicization of religion. Treating religion as a national security issue and using this as a pretext for repression also aligns with other recently introduced legislation; in particular the National Security Law 2015, which identifies religion as a potential tool for “foreign infiltration”.

It is not just Christians that the crackdown on religion affects. The effects of securitising religion have been felt most keenly in Xingjiang, where Uyghur Muslims have been subjected to severe rights violations. As part of a “strike hard” campaign allegedly aimed at combating religious extremism, police have raided so-called “illegal” religious meetings in villages, arrested Imams for “illegal teaching” and subjected whole religious communities to mass “re-education” including lengthy periods of incommunicado detention. Tibetan Buddhists have also been targeted for repression through a “renovation” campaign launched in July 2016, which resulted in the demolition of hundreds of homes at Larung Gar Buddhist institute in Sertar, Sichuan Province. Formerly one of the largest Buddhist teaching centres in the world, the population at Larung Gar has now been halved, with over 5,000 residents’ homes destroyed. Other unregistered religious minorities have also been labelled as dangerous “cult organisations” and members have been charged with criminal offences under anti-cult legislation.

The downward trend in religious freedom is also part of a broader pattern of increasing human rights abuses under President Xi. Civil society space is shrinking fast, and lawyers and activists have been especially targeted for intimidation and imprisonment. One prominent case is that of Gao Zhisheng, a human rights lawyer best known for defending Christians, Falung Gong adherents and other vulnerable groups. Gao Zhisheng has a long history of pursuing justice and suffering at the hands of the State because of this. In the latest iteration of persecution, he was disappeared in August 2017 and has not been seen since. Although he is believed to be in police custody in Beijing, his condition remains unknown and international calls for his release have, so far, fallen on deaf ears.

In 2016, Gao Zhisheng wrote a commentary on the human rights situation in China, in which he stated that although the Communist Party is the primary perpetrator of abuses, silence of some actors in the international community as a contributing factor cannot be ignored. As we gather here today, therefore, it is important not only to highlight the intense suffering experienced by religious communities and those supporting them in China, but also to identify positive action the EU can take to protect their fundamental rights. In that regard, CSW has four key recommendations for the EU:

- First, the EU must be stronger in holding China to international human rights obligations. It should urge China to set out a clear timetable for ratification of the ICCPR and use this as a benchmark for progress at all human rights dialogues and other bilateral meetings.

- Second, the EU should demand the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience detained in connection with their religion or belief, and specific cases of detained or disappeared persons should be raised by EU officials in all bilateral meetings.
- Third, all EU delegations visiting China should meet and engage with both registered and unregistered religious communities, in order to give legitimacy to independent religious practice.
- Fourth, when high-level visits take place, talks should be made conditional on discussion of human rights violations. China's human rights record and specific incidents should be raised both in public and in private, and rights abuses should be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

Unless firm action is taken, the state of human rights in China will rapidly get worse. The EU must use every opportunity to raise concerns and cases with officials, naming perpetrators where appropriate. And it must urge China to repeal all laws, policies and measures and cease all actions which restrict the universal right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.

Thank you.