



tears of the oppressed

...a Christian human rights organisation

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Attn: Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into China-Australia Relations

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1. Who is 'Tears of the Oppressed'?

- 1.1 Tears of the Oppressed (formerly Christian Solidarity Australasia) is an interdenominational Christian human rights organisation. Its primary focus is religious freedom, particularly religious freedom for minority Christian communities suffering severe religious persecution in other parts of the world.
- 1.2 Tears of the Oppressed has a particular interest in China because of the large number (current estimates 90-100 million) of Christian believers who are at risk of persecution by the Chinese authorities because of their religious convictions.

2. Human rights and the Committee's terms of reference

- 2.1 It is with concern that we note the terms of reference of the inquiry do not explicitly include human rights as a legitimate and complementary consideration to a discussion of China's relations with Australia. Tears of the Oppressed will therefore seek to address human rights issues under part (b) iii, of the Committee's terms of reference: "Political, social and cultural considerations that could impede the development of strong and mutually beneficial relationships between Australia and China".

3. Acknowledging human rights in Australia-China relations:

- 3.1 While there are undoubtedly economic advantages to be had with an Australia-China Free Trade agreement and the deepening of ties with China, it is still in the interests of not only the Australian people, but also the Chinese people, to see the language of human rights employed in any such discussion.
- 3.2 The human rights abuses committed by the Chinese Government in the past – and which continue to be committed in the present – have been well documented and exposed by many different human rights organisations.
- 3.3 Tears of the Oppressed considers China a "country of concern", given that Christian believers in China experience government-imposed restrictions on their religious freedom, which give birth to a whole range of other human rights abuses. While perhaps not directly related to the trade agreement, or other economic concerns in a relationship with China, it is important not to neglect the government ideology and practices of any partner Australia is dealing with.

4. The Plight of Chinese 'House Church' Christians, in brief

- 4.1 The only legalized churches in China are those controlled by the State - the *Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)* and the *Catholic Patriotic Association*. The teachings of these churches are strictly controlled by the government, which has the right to appoint the church leaders. The teachings often conflict with traditional Biblical Christianity, and most Christians in China refuse to belong to the official churches.
- 4.2 This has given rise to a network of underground "house churches". House churches are Christian groups which are not registered with the Chinese Government and which aim to operate outside of government control. Instead of offering their allegiance to the Communist Party, they seek to give their first allegiance to Jesus Christ. As house churches are not registered with the government, they cannot legally own property (e.g. church buildings). Instead they meet in homes for worship, bible reading, prayer, teaching and mutual encouragement.

- 4.3 These acts are perceived by some in the Communist government as a threat to national security, since the activities of “underground” house churches cannot be controlled. Members of TSPM churches are often sent to bully house church Christians known to them, in order that they give up their house church and join the TSPM.
- 4.4 The Chinese Government’s Communist ideology, with atheistic beliefs at its core, is a key motivator in the persecution of “insubordinate” Christians. Chinese house church Christians often express a sense of disappointment that the government misunderstands the purpose of the house churches (corporate worship and encouragement) and mistakes their religious practice for some kind of “evil cult”.
- 4.5 The “insubordination” of Chinese house church Christians is punished by authorities in the following ways:
- Arresting house church members, especially leaders, and either holding them without charge, or sentencing them to labour camps
 - Torturing Christians into falsely confessing to crimes, or torturing them to make false accusations against other Christians
 - Torturing Christians in an attempt to have them renounce their faith
 - The destruction of buildings used for worship or prayer meetings
 - The confiscation of Bibles and other religious materials
 - The beating of Christians by police and government officials
- 4.6 It is important to note that China has made significant efforts to improve its public image in recent years, particularly in regard to human rights and freedom of religion. This has included the reduction of the length of prison sentences, the construction of more State-controlled church buildings, and the allowing of the printing and distribution of Bibles through the official churches. However, there is evidence to suggest that despite government proclamations, in some areas, the cruelty and harassment of Christians has grown worse. Also, the confiscation of Bibles (even those officially distributed), and the bulldozing of unofficial church buildings continues. The treatment of, and attitude towards, house church Christians is not uniform throughout the country; the attitudes of local authorities and personalities significantly affect the degree of persecution experienced by house church Christians.
- 4.7 Chinese house church Christians are not the only group to suffer religious repression. Treatment of Falun Gong practitioners has also been in the public eye here in Australia. Moreover, other human rights, such as freedom of expression, have long been recognized in the West as being restricted under the Party leadership.

5. Current Australia-China human rights initiatives:

- 5.1 Through DFAT, Australia conducts bilateral human rights dialogues with China every year, and Tears of the Oppressed is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to these discussions on a regular basis (primarily through written submissions and discussions with DFAT staff). While actual progress is slow, Tears of the Oppressed acknowledges the long-term value of these discussions and encourages the Australian Government to continue to host these talks.
- 5.2 Of particular value in the 2004 dialogues was the suggestion, embraced by the Chinese delegation at the Australia-China human rights dialogues, that Australian non-government organizations might pursue parallel talks with Chinese non-government organizations and other Chinese authorities. Although the Chinese definition of “non-government organization” may be somewhat

different to the Australian interpretation of the term, Tears of the Oppressed believes there is great value in closer contact with aid, human rights, and community organizations within China. The facilitation of aid, increased human rights education, and other compassionate initiatives may be enhanced if closer ties are developed between Australian and Chinese non-government organizations.

- 5.3 Likewise, if Australian church organizations were permitted to become involved in compassionate initiatives in China, there is hope of greater understanding that the free practice of Christianity is by no means “a threat to national security”, as the Communist Party would suggest. Tears of the Oppressed hopes that initiatives of this kind would go some way to alleviating the suffering of Chinese Christians.
- 5.4 Even so, the benefits of cooperative relationships or bilateral dialogues with Chinese non-government organizations needs to be evaluated in the light of the Chinese government’s perceived involvement or intervention in such relationships, given that at this point in time, there are few truly “non-government” organizations in China.

6. Australian human rights leadership

- 6.1 In our time, with centuries of recorded history behind us, there is little justification for the neglect of human rights, and much argument in favour of their embrace.
- 6.2 Given our own prosperity, democratic freedom, and stability as a nation, Australia should be seeking opportunities to encourage the recognition of human rights at the highest levels in its dealings with other nations. Indeed, it has done so with some success under the current government.
- 6.3 Though incomparable in size to monolithic China, Australia needs to consider, monitor and develop its role in human rights leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. In pursuing closer economic relations with China, Australia may be perceived by some as condoning China’s human rights violations when it suits economic interests. It is indisputable that China is one of the worst human rights abusers in the world today. Australia must evaluate closer ties with China in the light of such things as:
 - a) the ways in which it will affect the bilateral DFAT human rights dialogues with China, and the success of those dialogues – *i.e. despite human rights rhetoric, economic interests may be perceived by China to be primary.*
 - b) will a Free Trade agreement cause Australia’s authority to speak out on human rights be undermined in any way?
 - c) the effect on workers’ rights.

7. Recommendations

Tears of the Oppressed recommends

- full parliamentary and community debate on Australia-China relations issue before any free trade agreement negotiations begin
- a reasonable and useful profile be given to human rights concerns in any Free Trade agreement with China

- the continuance of annual bilateral human rights dialogues with China, and the continued provision of opportunities for NGOs to give input into these dialogues
- the Australian Government investigate the possibility of assisting non-government organizations to develop relationships with similar organizations in China
- the Australian Government continue to raise concerns about human rights abuses, particularly the persecution of house church Christians, with the Chinese Government, irrespective of trade agreements.

Tears of the Oppressed thanks the Committee for the opportunity to express its views at this time.

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