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CHINA | Prime Minister Asked to Raise Religious Freedom on Visit

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has written to British Prime Minister David Cameron, urging him to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is a specific feature of his visit to China, which starts Dec. 2 and concludes on Dec. 4.

In the letter, CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas expresses CSW's concerns about reports that Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are experiencing significant restrictions on the freedom to practice their religion. The letter also draws attention to the treatment of Protestant Christian house church leaders accused of belonging to "cults", the plight of long-term Catholic prisoners, and the harassment, imprisonment and even torture of lawyers and activists who try to defend religious believers.

Although the right to freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution, protection is limited to believers who worship under the state-sanctioned religious bodies. Those who choose to practice their religion outside the state-sanctioned bodies, or whose religion or belief is not officially recognized, can be accused of participating in illegal activities.

In recent months, CSW has reported on the various restrictions on Muslims, Catholics and Protestants in Xinjiang, and has highlighted the cases of Pastor Zhang Shaojie, a Protestant pastor detained without any formal documentation, and house church leader Li Shuangping, who was beaten and threatened by unknown assailants.

Thomas said, "We believe that freedom of religion or belief is a touchstone for human rights standards in a nation. On the occasion of this visit to China, CSW calls on the Prime Minister to encourage the Chinese authorities to treat all religious believers with equal respect in line with their commitments under domestic and international law."