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AUSTRIA: Vienna Award for Chinese ambassador sparks international criticism

Leading experts and human rights defenders condemn and ridicule the Award of Vienna's highest honor to the Chinese ambassador

FOREF-EUROPE (28.05.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2RnRbVy> – The award of the State of Vienna's Great Gold Medal to Chinese Ambassador Li Xiaosi has drawn sharp criticism from leading experts on human rights and religious freedom in China.

"We are astonished and embarrassed by this

award," stated **Peter Zoehrer**, Executive Director of the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe (FOREF), a Vienna-based non-governmental organization focusing on defending the freedom of religion. **"This decision makes a mockery of efforts to defend the Chinese people, and especially Chinese Muslims, Christians, and members of other minorities, from oppression by the Chinese Communist Party."**

Members of FOREF's network communicated their concerns, as follows:

Dr. Ján Figel', former European Commission special envoy for the promotion freedom of religion outside the EU, and former European Commissioner:

It is a sad decision, neglecting vast abuses of human dignity and justice in the People's Republic of China.

Dr. Yang Jianli, Tiananmen Square massacre survivor, former political prisoner, and founder of Citizen Power Initiatives for China:

It is a great shame for Vienna to honor Chinese Ambassador Li Xiaosi, because Li does not represent himself, but a government that opposes values that the people of Vienna cherish. The Chinese government responded to the COVID-19 epidemic by covering up its outbreak, cracking down on whistleblowers, falsifying casualty data, and misleading the world.

Furthermore, the Chinese government has erected all kinds of barriers to prevent independent experts from investigating the origins of the coronavirus, placing all of humanity, including the people of Vienna, at risk for a future crisis. The Great Gold Medal for Services to the State of Vienna awarded to a representative of such a dictatorial government not only disregards the dignity of the direct victims of this repressive regime, but also insults the integrity of the people of Vienna. I hope this deplorable episode serves as a wake-up call to Vienna, Europe and the free world.

Hon. David Kilgour, former Canadian Secretary of State for Asia Pacific and Nobel Prize nominee:

In the face of the genocide the Beijing party-state is committing against Uyghurs, this is a bizarre initiative by the mayor of Vienna

Professor Massimo Introvigne, sociologist of religion and editor of the daily magazine Bitter Winter, A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights:

While most countries of the world are censoring Chinese envoys' 'wolf-warrior diplomacy,' and an Oxford University report reveals how Chinese embassies pollute Twitter with fake accounts and trolls, the Vienna award is a slap in the face of Uyghurs, Hongkongers, Tibetan Buddhists, and all those persecuted for their religion or for requesting a minimal respect of human rights.

James Wilson, International Foundation for Better Governance:
It defies belief that when the free world is condemning the Chinese Communist Party for appalling crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and Tibet, and calling for a boycott of the winter Olympic games in China in 2022, Vienna city officials should undermine compatriots in Europe and heap scorn on our European values by praising the ambassador of a totalitarian state.

Elisabeth Zimmermann, Senior Advisor of Save Tibet Austria:
Against the backdrop of decades of human rights violations as well as the current genocide by the People's Republic of China, this medal of honor for the Chinese ambassador is a slap in the face of all people, organizations and countries that stand for fundamental human rights. Due to the cover-up at the beginning of the spread of the coronavirus in China and the resulting global pandemic, over 10,000 Austrians died, thousands lost their jobs and many businesses went bankrupt. The City of Vienna's award shames Viennese and Austrian citizens, and makes a mockery of the suffering of all who are victims of the pandemic, and the oppressive rule of China.

Marco Respinti, Director-in-Charge, Bitter Winter: A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights:

The People's Republic of China is guilty of horrible crimes, ranging from organ harvesting to the genocide of an entire people, the Uyghurs, as many countries in the world have officially recognized. China is a massive surveillance state where basic freedom is neglected, and has a staggering record of violation of human rights and religious liberty. The democratic people in Hong Kong are suffering the misdeeds of a police state supported by Beijing. It would be highly interesting to know why the Ambassador to Austria of such a country is being awarded with the token of the highest honor by a city lying at the center of civilization like Vienna.

Willy Fautré, Director, Human Rights Without Frontiers International:

It is a scandal that a capital city of an EU country honors the ambassador of a country, China, which is guilty of egregious violations of human rights on a mass scale, especially religious and ethnic minorities. Shame on Vienna.

Stand with Hong Kong Vienna:

We are stunned by the apparent ignorance, or misguidedness, of the Mayor of Vienna, who is so grateful for the small assistance provided by China, yet forgot that this country's slow reaction and lack of transparency to WHO and the international community was the main cause of the suffering of millions of people around the world. We urge the Vienna government to wake up from China's short-term arbitrage and recognize China as a threat to world stability and peace.

Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of FOREF and former Executive Director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights:

It is beyond understanding why Vienna authorities would ingratiate themselves to China at this time, when European authorities are, correctly, modifying relations with China as a result of the genocide in Xinjiang and other massive

violations of human rights. We believe this inappropriate and disturbing decision does not reflect the moral standards of the community, and indeed discredits them.

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