With religious persecution documented
Americans consider how to fight it

The United States could choose harsh punishments such as economic sanctions on other nations, though some suggest milder approaches to avert repercussions.

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By Mark O'Keefe of The Oregonian staff

BEIJING - Ying Mulan, who also goes by the name Sister Angela Theresa, wears a cream blouse and habit, with a wooden cross dangling from her neck.

Sitting in a dimly lit pew in the rear of South Cathedral, one of six government sanctioned Catholic churches in Beijing, she speaks softly but firmly when asked what she thinks about American worries of persecution in China.

"America is so concerned about many things about other countries," Ying says. "It's just like a policeman. So sometimes you misunderstand China and other countries."

A 1997 U.S. State Department report said that Christians have reportedly been victims of persecution in more than 70 countries.

But when the United States points a long finger of moral indignation, alleging violations of religious freedom, the response is often, "Who asked you?" Even in the United States, many ask: "Can we do anything to help? Should we?"

As the world's premier superpower, the United States long has been the international cop on a wide range of human rights issues. Now that Congress has passed a bill making religious freedom a foreign policy mandate, the United States also will be policing and punishing persecution of all faiths in every country on the planet, including China.

President Clinton says he plans to nominate Robert Seiple as the ambassador at large for religious freedom, as required by the bill Clinton signed Tuesday.

"When we define national interests," says Seiple, a State Department official, "we're not just interested in exporting technology or seeing our men and women in uniform in the trouble spots of the world. We're also interested in the exportation of human values."
"Any step that can be taken will help," expert says

A nine-month, five-country inquiry by The Oregonian reveals that persecution of Christians is widespread and complex. It also shows that, in general, the more desperate Christians see their condition, the more they want the United States to take decisive action.

In Pakistan, Christians are treated as second-class citizens, outside the protection of the law. In Burma, they are the victims of a military strategy that uses religion as a wedge. In Sudan, they are attacked and enslaved as part of a holy war. In Egypt, converts to Christianity face imprisonment and torture. And in China, while believers such as Sister Angela Theresa enjoy relative freedom in government-approved churches, those worshipping in underground churches say they are harassed and imprisoned.

The Rev. Alexander John Malik, the bishop of Lahore for the Church of Pakistan, says the Christian minority in his country needs pressure from the West to make the government drop a blasphemy law used against Christians even if it means more trouble in the short run.

"We always suffer," Malik says. "We don't mind that."

Bona Mawal, a native of southern Sudan who now teaches African history at Oxford University in England, agrees.

"There is no amount of persecution that can be worse than what the people are suffering," says Mawal, who has lost 19 brothers in a civil war the Islamic government of the north calls a jihad. "Any step that can be taken will help."

The bill provides 15 possible responses, from a simple diplomatic reprimand to economic and trade sanctions. In signing the bill, Clinton commended its flexibility, reminding Congress that he has to impose economic measures "only in the most extreme and egregious cases of religious persecution" and that those measures can be waived in favor of other national interests.

In the past, the United States has sanctioned Pakistan, Burma and Sudan for various human rights violations. In places such as Burma, where a civil war has ravaged religious minorities and others for 50 years, there might be little more the United States can do.

But Egypt, which depends on more than $2 billion annually in U.S. aid, and China, a key trading partner, could be jolted by economic sanctions.
Sanctions have been used effectively, for example, to pressure South Africa to end apartheid, but only as part of a wide-ranging effort involving many years and actions by many other countries.

Sanctions are controversial. USA Engage, a coalition of 497 businesses including some Oregon corporations, such as Wilsonville's Tektronix, says sanctions hurt U.S. business without effectively accomplishing their goals.

"How do we set forward what I and others believe is the first human right - the right of conscience, the right to worship God as you please - and at the same time not victimize Americans trying to make a living?" asks U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., a member of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The bill provides for milder actions, such as a public condemnation or the cancellation of scientific exchanges, for less severe persecution.

Some Christians abroad fear a backlash.

M.L. Shahani, formerly Pakistan's only Christian judge and now in private practice, advises caution. He says the Muslim majority in his country will blame Pakistani Christians if the United States imposes sanctions.

"It may result in violence against the non-Muslims," he says. "Even now, the Christians in Pakistan are considered the purveyors of the Western system over the Islamic system."

In Egypt, the Rev. Safwat N. el-Baiady, president of the Egyptian Council of Protestant Churches, says: "This wouldn't be good for Christians here. The majority will think it's the problem of the Christians as to why they are losing the U.S. aid."

Lawmakers in Congress will help coordinate letter-writing campaigns

Some suggest more individual approaches. Two Democrats and two Republicans in Congress have formed the Religious Prisoners Congressional Task Force, which aims to orchestrate letter-writing campaigns on behalf of religious prisoners in foreign countries.

It models itself on similar efforts in the 1970s to help Jewish dissidents in the former Soviet Union and Amnesty International's "prisoners of conscience" campaign to aid imprisoned political dissidents.
Rep. Joseph R. Pitts, R-Pa., a group member, says such efforts can be effective. "When congressional members engage in advocacy with key government officials, prisoners' lives can change for the better, prison conditions alter, torture ceases, and prisoners may even be released."

Religious advocacy groups, such as the Oklahoma based Voice of the Martyrs, long have employed letter-writing campaigns. Only in recent months has the religious movement moved to the church mainstream, with groups such as the U.S. Catholic Conference and the Episcopal Church calling for legislative action and prayer.

It's the latter that many persecuted Christians, such as Chinese house-church leader Allen Yuan, say they need most.

"The answer," says Yuan, who spent 21 years in prison as a result of his beliefs, "is in this one word: pray."

On Nov. 15, hundreds of churches in the Northwest, and 100,000 or more worldwide, are expected to do just that during the third annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

Meanwhile, at Friendsview Manor Retirement Community in Newberg, Anna Nixon and Jane McNally, both 81, aren't waiting until Nov. 15.

The women, friends for 44 years, gather regularly at the retirement home to pray for people they have never seen. They stuff manila file folders with newspaper articles, missionary newsletters and e-mail messages.

"All kinds of persecution is taking place," says Nixon, holding up a newsletter.

Says McNally, "Whenever we hear of it, we pray."