

July 14, 2000: Chinese Persecution of Uighur Muslims May Be Increasing, Commission Says

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today issued a statement deploring what appears to be increasing persecution of Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang region and called for the U.S. government to raise the issue directly with China and in international organizations. Following is the text of the statement: In the Commission's May 1 Annual Report to the Administration and Congress, and in testimony before Congress since that date, we have called attention to the serious deterioration of religious freedom in China during the past year. Since last summer, the authorities have launched a nationwide crackdown on the Falun Gong spiritual movement, sentencing leaders to long prison terms and detaining more than 35,000 practitioners, a few of whom have been sent to mental institutions, have been beaten to death, or have died suddenly while in police custody. Catholic and Protestant underground "house churches" are suffering increased repression, including the arrests of priests and pastors, one of whom was found dead in the street soon afterwards. The repression of Tibetan Buddhists has expanded, with a top religious leader, the Karmapa Lama, recently fleeing to India in January. The increase in religious persecution has touched another group, less known in the West - the 8 million Muslim Uighurs, a Turkic people living in western China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. In the face of Han Chinese mass migration into traditionally Uighur areas, Islamic institutions have become an important medium through which Uighurs attempt to preserve their history and culture. Verifiable information from the region is hard to come by, largely because foreign diplomats, journalists, and human rights monitors are generally barred from traveling there. But in recent years tensions in Xinjiang and reports of sporadic violence against the government have increased. While the government blames "small numbers" of "separatists" for the violence, Islamic institutions and prominent individuals in the Muslim community have become the target of repressive, often brutal measures by Chinese authorities unwilling or unable to differentiate between religious exercise or ethnic identity and "separatist" aspirations. Thousands have been detained, including many religious leaders. Convictions and executions of so-called "splittists" are common, often reportedly on little evidence and with no regard for due process of law. Indeed, residents of Xinjiang region are the only Chinese citizens who are subject to capital punishment for political crimes. Last August, the Chinese authorities stepped up their crackdown with the arrest of a prominent Uighur businesswoman, Rebiya Kadeer. Ms. Kadeer was arrested last Aug. 11 as she was on her way to a private dinner in Urumqi with two staff members from the U.S. Congressional Research Service. She was later convicted in a show trial for "harming national security" and sentenced to 8 years in prison. The evidence consisted of a number of Chinese newspaper articles she had passed on to her husband in the U.S., who commented on them over Radio Free Asia. Kadeer is reported to be in poor health and in need of medical help as a result of brutal treatment meted out to her in prison. In recent days a major Xinjiang newspaper announced the July 6 execution of three accused Uighur separatists by firing squad immediately after their public sentencing on charges of "splitting the country." This follows upon similar executions of five Uighurs immediately after sentencing in a June trial, with two others sentenced to life in prison and the others receiving jail terms ranging from 17 to 20 years. Several weeks ago, the House voted to grant China Permanent Normal Trade Relations status (PNTR). During the debate, PNTR supporters argued that the fruits of engagement with China would be increased respect for the rule of law and international norms of behavior with regard to human rights. As Beijing's violations of religious freedom continue unabated, if not at a stepped up pace, PNTR supporters have a moral obligation to speak out and let the Chinese government know that these abuses are unacceptable. "No one expected improvement overnight, but certainly things shouldn't have deteriorated overnight," said Commission Chairman Elliott Abrams. The Commission reiterates its recommendation of May 1 that the U.S. government raise the profile of conditions in Xinjiang by addressing religious-freedom and human rights concerns in bilateral talks, by increasing the number of education exchange opportunities available to Uighurs, and by increasing radio broadcasts in the Uighur language into Xinjiang. The Commission further recommends that the U.S. move immediately to take up the issue in all appropriate international organizations. The State Department should demand both the humanitarian release of Rebiya Kadeer from prison, an immediate end to summary executions of Uighur "separatists," and free access to Xinjiang for foreign journalists and human rights monitors. Finally, the Commission urges the U.S. Senate to consider the plight of the Uighurs and the state of religious freedom in China as it considers whether to grant Beijing PNTR status.*

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

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