Hearings on Religious Persecution in China:Dr. Dru Gladney Oral Testimony

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(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts

Dr. Dru Gladney

DR. GLADNEY: I studied it a lot. How well I speak it remains to be seen. I'm possibly being challenged. I really want to express my appreciation for the chairman of the Commission, the Commissioners themselves, and to the participants, especially our Uighur guest, who are holding this session, and in his case, through great personal hardship and risk, testifying today. It was very illuminating testimony, and clearly there is so much to be learned there.

I see my role here as trying to put some of his statements in context. I have given you a large paper for you to look at on your own. I would like to try to summarize the main points of that paper and try to refer to some of his issues that he has raised. Basically the paper is divided into an introduction, a cultural review, Chinese Nationalists policy, Uighur response to this policy, international dimensions, and some prospects for the future.

Let me just give some brief summaries in terms of main principles or conclusion that I've drawn from each section. Basically in the introduction I want to argue and suggest that religion and religious persecution is not the main issue for Uighurs in China, and that there is no persecution of Islam, per se. There is oppression and there are instances, as our guest has stated, but that is not the issue. I'll come back to that.

Second, in terms of the history of the Uighurs, the recent rise of Uighur national identity is related to the post-Soviet period and international -- and globalization of events, which I will come back to. It is nothing new,

but it is a history; and it is very important to realize that that history is somewhat unique to this region and intimately related to Soviet policy.

The second point -- the third point is the Chinese Nationalists policy. The Chinese policy, I would argue, is very good in terms of its legality, and it's very positive towards minorities; but like its religious policy, it is not often honored. And that will be the conclusion of my paper; that many of the things that are testified to are against Chinese law, and that is the main issue to be considered.

In terms of international dimensions -- I'm sorry, the Uighur response, struggles to sustain their identity and cultural survival, I would argue that we have a wide spectrum of response. We do not have a unified response. We have cases of violent resistance all the way to accommodation to the Chinese context.

Fifthly, in terms of the international dimensions, I would suggest that it's not only Uighur identity and nationalism at issue here, it is Chinese nationalism, both of which have been on the rise since 1991, and particularly since worldwide issues of globalization. And integrated into that issue is Taiwan, Tibet and other considerations, as well as the Falun Gong movement, and that is a much larger issue that I don't have time to deal with.

In terms of the future, I will argue that there is no such thing as Muslim separatism in China, that China will not fall apart because of these kinds of separatisms, though Uighur activism is clearly on the rise, and that it's not quite clear how much widespread support among the Uighurs in China these kinds of activities receive, though internationally it is quite clear it has a great deal of sympathy.

Let me go back to the first point in terms of the introduction of religion. I reproduced for you the Chinese law, which is quite clearly spelled out, Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution, and I will just read it for you. It's in footnote 5 on page 1.

"Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious beliefs. No state organization, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in or do not believe in any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in

activities that disrupt the public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination."

This policy is often cited by Chinese officials when they're accused of religious persecution toward the Uighurs and other activities such as Falun Gong. I believe this policy is not followed and it's only honored in breach. Many of the issues and activities that our guest has stated do take place on a regular basis; but also there are issues where the government has to restrict local cadres and officials from being against the law and engaged in activities that might incite Muslim or minority activism or restrict it.

Recently, I raised in the paper that there's been a Chinese White Paper on nationalities policy that has just appeared. It is called "National Minority Policy and its Practice in China." In that paper they make a great deal about this freedom of religious policy. But interestingly enough, they acknowledge, I think, for really the first time, increasing problems with minorities in China and increasing international criticism.

I will just read you briefly a summary of some of the statements from that policy, but I will also read from the paper on page 1.

"China has been a united multi-ethnic country since ancient times."

This is a strong Chinese nationalist view of 5,000 years of uninterrupted civilization in China, which scholars such as I have disputed regularly, suggesting that China has been broken apart between north and south, and east and west, and regionally, five kingdoms and nine regions, as long -- as often as it has been unified. Nevertheless, this is a firm Chinese belief, and it is an issue for not only the Uighurs, but also for those in Taiwan.

"Although there were short-term separations and local division in Chinese history, unity has always been the mainstream in Chinese history."

This is the historical gloss-over of those conditions. Nevertheless, it is

taught widely in China, firmly believed by all Chinese citizens, and it is the only view that they get in their schools.

"In China, all normal religious activities are protected by law. The state had offered 16.8 billion Yuan or about $2.2 billion (US) in subsidies in minority areas by 1998."

So the Chinese government looks to its law and looks to its support from minority areas in terms of its economic and infrastructural support and concludes that a lot of good things have been done for minorities and they should be grateful. Therefore, when they hear of these kinds of complaints, they say, "We have a law. We have evidence that support has been given to minority areas, so these people are being unpatriotic and ungrateful."

This document, to some degree, acknowledges problems, but tries to -- more of a whitewash than a White Paper -- tries to summarize all of the great things China has done for its minorities, failing to realize all of the problems that some of these development projects have created as well. The document concludes, interestingly enough, that the Chinese government is well aware of the fact that due to the restrictions and influence of historical, physical, geographical and other factors, central and western China, where most minority people live, lacks far behind the eastern coastal areas in development.

There is an increasing acknowledgment in China today that there's been growing equity between the coastal regions. And really not since Li Vong's (phonetic) visit in 1978 to some of the minority areas has there been recognition that China's policy, though by and large supportive of minorities in terms of -- and it's also on the paper -- in terms of the language preservation policies, the earth planning policy, at least one more child in that area, and other issues, has not cured this problem of inequity. Therefore, there is a desire in China today to bring increasing support. Premier Zhu Rongji has raised this as a major policy.

Let me move on to the section on Cultural and Historical Overview. I think it is important for the Commission to realize that the Uighurs are one of ten separate recognized nationalities in China for whom Islam is the primary religion. This policy is a legacy of Soviet policy, which the Chinese government inherited from the Soviets during the early influence of Russian advisors in China.

The Uighurs were one of the several groups that received designations as a separate nationality in the early '20s and '30s. This was the Soviet's policy, prior to setting up the People's Republic. Under the nationalists the Uighurs were just grouped as Muslims in China, a Chinese term which was Hui, which was a generic term.

It was only under the Soviets they began to delineate separate nationalities based on history, based on language or primarily on politics, and most scholars conclude that this was an effort to divide and rule. If they could separate each of these groups, they could not unify, either on Islamic or on linguistic bases. So the Soviets gave different scripts for the various Turkish-speaking Muslim groups in Central Asia, and China followed that policy; to the extent that today, Karakalpaks, who speak very close -- in fact, the same language virtually, have a different script even today in the independent states. Only in China do we have an Arabicized script for the Muslim Turkish languages, such as Uighur, Kazak. So this policy was inherited.

Therefore, when we talk about Muslims in China, we can't talk about Muslim separatism or Muslim identity. We have to look at each group individually. The Uighurs are as different from Hui, as Protestants are from Catholics, to some degree, and even more so, if you look perhaps at -- the northern Ireland case may be even a better example, in terms that you have ethnic and political differences. So there's a history.

The unique situation for the Uighur is that 99 percent of their population live in this Xinjiang region. Other Muslim groups are spread out throughout China, particularly the largest Muslim group, the Hui. So when we talk about separatism, no other group has a concentrated area where they could literally separate to, and this is an issue that distinguishes Uighur.

Also, in terms of history, I mentioned that the Uighur received their designation as a separate nationality from the Soviets. Prior to 1923, there was not a unified nationality, per se, identified as the Uighur. People had local names. They took the names of their oases. It was only under the Soviet policy inherited by the Chinese that they received a population and a designation. Based on that, there's been a growing strong consciousness of Uighur identity.

But as Joseph Fletcher said, "These are nationalistic identities that are truly part of the modern era." It is very different from the indigenous where you can trace it. Clearly there were peoples in this region. Clearly many of them were the ancestors of the contemporary people known as the Uighur, but there's a lot of diversity. I think this accounts for why differences of opinion

exist within the Uighur about history, about what needs to take place in terms of their situation.

Now let's move to the Section 3 on Chinese policy. I want to summarize here that overall the policy most scholars conclude, in terms of minority peoples and indigenous people -- this is not a term the Chinese government likes to use -- is overall a very good policy in a sense that it recognizes separate groups, it allows the preservation of the languages, particularly taught at the elementary level, and it recognizes religion and religious practice as part of minority nationalities. In fact, if I'll digress, one of the problems with the Falun Gong is that they are not a member of a minority national group. So their religion is less protected under the law as a minority custom or culture.

So the government has the policies there; the problem is the implementation. And under the more radical periods, as our guest talked about as a young man growing up, religion was very restricted. This changed in 1978 with reforms. And we've seen lesser swings of policy, more freedom than certainly the radical periods of the Cultural Revolution. So the issue, I think, is not the policy; it's the Chinese government not following that policy and that law that is clearly spelled out.

In fact, it can be safely said that there are many languages in China that would have disappeared completely if they followed the United States language policy regarding bilingual education. Many languages such as Uighur were preserved, were allowed to be published with government subsidies, and in some cases, were identified and recreated by Chinese scholars. So it goes against the idea that the government has been trying to wipe out these people. To some degree they've done a lot of preservation, but only preservation within the broader policy of Chinese state sovereignty.

Let me get into issues of Uighur responses. Clearly, our guest has shown that there's a growing sentiment in Xinjiang, that resistance to the Chinese government policy is, I think, increasing. And this is -- he cites 1995. I really cite the 1997 uprising, protest starting as peaceful protest, as a marker. Now, this is clearly related to the last section on my paper on international issues to the former Soviet Union demise in 1991.

There was a great deal of hope among Uighurs that China would recognize greater autonomy and that there might be a possibility of independence. Related to this -- and I bring this out in the paper -- is China's own economic dependence on foreign oil reserves, and that the region has had significant discoveries of mineral resources, more so than other minority regions, such as Tibet.

So Chinese have been less willing to be accommodating to some of these Uighur demands than they would have been to the oil practices in China. We can see some of these issues rising.

What I conclude in my paper is that there is increasing polarization, in my feeling, between the average Uighur and your average Chinese regarding the situation. I would say that the Chinese feel that they have been having an active minority policy, supporting infrastructural development in the region, and yet Uighurs are still not satisfied. They see development in the regions; they see modernization, and they expect Uighurs and other groups such as Tibetans to be grateful, rather than the kinds of criticism that they receive.

The feeling in China is increasing that among Chinese nationalists, if these people do not support nationalism, then they should just disappear; and the policy of integration through immigration is a long-term strategy, to the extent that in inner Mongolia, around 12 percent of inner Mongolia is Mongol; about 40 percent now of Xinjiang is Uighur, and about 38 percent is Han. So the Chinese think they can cure this problem through flooding the area with Chinese. I get statistics about increasing Han migration into the area, and also economic investment. But my paper suggested that economic investment often enriches the Han Chinese and the outsiders, rather than the Uighur, leading to further polarization in the region.

Let me just conclude, because I realize you have lots of questions, and I think our guest has many other things he can share -- in terms of religious freedom, as with many other policies, the Chinese Constitution is laudable if honored; but in a country where rule of law often gives way to local and national politics, it is often only respected in the breach. As long as religion is perceived by Chinese officials as a threat to Chinese sovereignty, mosques and religious practices will be observed and in some cases restricted and persecuted.

In light of growing international Islamic interest in the region and in the case of the Uighurs, Chinese officials have increasingly had to be careful regarding any oppressive treatment of religious practice, generally casting it as a splittist strategy or seditious, as in -- the February, 1996 incident started out as a restriction of a Mashrap gathering. So as long as religion is portrayed as part of a separatism activity, not pure religion, then the government will respond very rapidly and very violently.

The key issue for Muslims in China is to demonstrate that religious practice is divorced from political activism, and that is the problem for the Uighur, in that it is so much a part of their expression of

identity that the two are very hard to separate.

I'll conclude there, and give you an opportunity for questions. Thank you very much.