

Testimony of
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on

The Uighurs: A History of Persecution

Before

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Last week we commemorated the brutal crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protestors. Over the past twenty years, Tiananmen has become a vivid symbol of the Chinese Communist Party's abuse of its own citizens' rights to speak out, assemble, and make demands of their government. We rightly commemorate the many students and activists who protested for freedom and paid a steep price. We are gathered here today to examine another kind of abuse, China's systematic and egregious repression of the Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Since September 11, 2001, China has beefed up military and police units in the region; detained thousands of so-called suspected separatists; and severely restricted religious freedoms which are protected under international law and China's constitution.

Unfortunately, suppression of peaceful religious activity and expression is common in China. There are millions of Chinese who have either stood up for the protection of religious freedom or sought to peacefully engage in religious activities who have faced arrest, torture, "disappearances," harassment, and discrimination. Tibetan Buddhists, Protestants and Catholics who refuse to join the government-controlled religious organizations, Falun Gong adherents, human rights defenders and lawyers, and Uighur Muslims have faced such abuses.

Religious freedom abuses are widespread in China, but we should pay close attention to the human rights situation in Xinjiang Province, a region with an estimated eight million Uighurs, the vast majority of whom are Muslim. Because of enduring restrictions on Uighur religion and culture and growing ethnic tensions between the indigenous Uighur population and newly arrived Han Chinese migrants, Xinjiang is sometimes called "China's other Tibet."

Chinese government authorities themselves commonly equate the peaceful religious practices of Uighur Muslims with religious extremism and separatism and use the global war on terror as a pretext to crack down on peaceful forms of religious activity and expression. Though there have been bombings and other incidents in Xinjiang over the past two decades, including several incidents before the Olympic games, the vast majority of Uighurs seeking to enjoy their religious, civil, cultural, and economic rights do so peacefully.

It is understandable that the Chinese leadership should counter real terrorist threats and seek to maintain China's territorial integrity, but the wide-ranging repression of the region's historic Uighur religion, language and culture has only been counterproductive.

China claims that there are terrorist groups active in Xinjiang. Unfortunately, China has not been transparently providing information to the international community about these groups. For example, trials of so-called "religious extremists" are conducted secretly and without proper legal counsel. Numerous experts have stated that China's claims about organized terrorist activity too often are "exaggerated."

China continues to use the pretext of terrorism as an excuse to crack down on all peaceful religious activity, expression, and dissent. For example, during the past several years, Chinese government officials have tightened restrictions on the practice of Islam in Xinjiang (though not elsewhere in China), policed Uighur cultural expressions, destroyed historic Uighur sections of Kashgar, stoked ethnic rivalries by offering economic incentives and reserving government jobs for Chinese migrants, and continued its crackdown on peaceful religious activity and education.

Chinese restrictions on peaceful religious activity and expression in Xinjiang are particularly egregious and draconian in scope. In the year leading up to the Beijing Olympics, government officials in Xinjiang expanded measures to strengthen control over Uighur religious activity. New measures include campaigns to "weaken religious consciousness" among women and young people; rules to expel religious leaders for missing required political indoctrination courses; requirements to monitor students during their school vacations; and campaigns to confiscate so-called "illegal religious publications" and shutter "illegal religious centers."

The government continues to limit access to mosques, including the participation of women, children and communist party members. Teachers, professors, university students, and other government employees are prohibited from engaging in any religious activities, such as reciting daily prayers, distributing religious

materials, observing Ramadan, and wearing head coverings; they are reportedly subject to fines if they attempt to do so.

All imams in Xinjiang are required to attend annual political training seminars to retain their licenses, and local security forces monitor imams and other religious leaders. Imams at Uighur mosques reportedly are required to meet monthly with officials from the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Public Security Bureau to receive advice on the content of their sermons.

Muslims are not the only religious faith to experience severe repression in Xinjiang. Xinjiang province ranked near the top in the number of Protestant “house church” adherents detained or arrested during the previous year. 107 people were detained and three religious leaders imprisoned during the past year. Only three other Chinese provinces had more detentions.

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Let me offer you some recent examples to show how far Chinese officials have gone to curtail and control peaceful Uighur Muslim religious activity.

- In February 2009, officials in Awat county called for the “infiltration” of religious venues and groups to gather information and stop instances of “illegal scripture reading” and “religious interference in marriages.”
- In March 2009, officials in the city of Hotan stated that anyone engaged in “cross-village worship will be charged with a social crime” and subject to detention or fines.
- In February 2009, officials in Kashgar district issued a series of new measures to counter “half-baked” religious understanding among imams, including implementing a detailed system of oversight to enforce political training among imams, expel religious leaders who miss required study sessions, and require Friday sermons to discuss government policy on economic development.
- In February 2009 public security officials closed three “illegal” sites of religious instruction and detained over 20 people in Lop and Awat counties,

as part of their efforts to “strike hard” against separatism and “cult” activities.

- Also in February 2009, officials in Hotan started a campaign to halt “illegal religious schools.” According to press reports, armed security personnel conducted nighttime searches, closing seven schools and detaining 39 people.

Government officials in Xinjiang are taking steps to actively discourage the growth of Islam among young people, restrictions that go beyond China’s national laws in this regard. During the Commission’s 2005 visit to China, local government officials confirmed that minors were prohibited from participating in any religious activity or instruction before finishing nine years of compulsory public education. This policy contradicts statements made by Beijing officials who claim that there are no restrictions prohibiting the private religious education or activities of minors.

Uighurs are prohibited from teaching Islam outside the home to minors, and police have stepped up attempts to halt private religious education programs. Police reportedly are stationed outside mosques to enforce rules forbidding children and government employees from attending services. There are also reports that in some areas, individuals under the age of 30 are prohibited from attending a mosque.

Teachers of “underground” religious education class have been charged with conducting illegal religious gatherings. In some parts of Xinjiang, there are reports that teachers are being urged to refrain from participating in religious activity and required to take part in re-education courses to “battle against separatism.”

The State Department estimates that more than 1,300 people were arrested in Xinjiang on charges related to state security over the past year, a large increase from the previous year. National security charges have been used to detain religious adherents engaged in “religious extremism” or “illegal religious activities.” Due to the lack of judicial transparency, and the government’s equation of peaceful religious activity with terrorism, it is difficult to determine how many prisoners are being held for conducting peaceful religious activity, for

peacefully protesting restrictions on the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, or for engaging in some other legal activity.

Many Uighur Muslims are detained in horrendous conditions. They often are tortured and mistreated in prison, including Rebiya Kadeer's sons. I want to highlight briefly three other cases to demonstrate the varied charges leveled against peaceful Uighur Muslims.

- In February 2009, Abdukadir Mahsum was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for organizing peaceful demonstrations promoting religious freedom and other human rights concerns.
- In March 2008, Mutallip Hajim died in detention after being arrested for his activities helping underground Muslim schools. He was reportedly tortured, but his family was warned not to publicize his death.
- On August 10, 2008, Imam Adil Qarim was arrested, and has since disappeared, allegedly because several suspects in a bomb attack attended his mosque.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

It is important to continue to raise the cases of Uighurs imprisoned in China for peaceful religious activity and expression. Members of Congress should repeatedly raise such cases with Chinese officials and seek to meet with imprisoned Uighurs during official visits to China.

It is also important to continue to raise the cases of Uighurs because the United States is committed to defend the rights and freedoms of all persons around the world. In many places of the world, Muslims, like the Uighurs, are victims of repression. As part of a foreign policy that seeks to promote transparent and tolerant societies, the U.S. should continue to advocate for the religious freedom of Muslims as well as it does for Christians, Jews, Bahai's, and Buddhists.

Uighurs in China merit our ongoing and serious attention. Other than raising individuals cases, what else can Members of Congress do to address the repression of Uighurs in China?

1.) Strengthen The U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue

In April, a Human Rights Dialogue was announced as part of a renewed U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue. In the past, human rights dialogues with China have become “talk shops” that do not lead to concrete results. It is a frustration of diplomats and activists alike. The U.S. should show that human rights are linked to other strategic concerns by setting clear benchmarks and sending delegations with high level U.S. officials. Congress can play an important role in ensuring the success of the dialogues by requiring that the State Department submit a report to the appropriate congressional committees detailing the issues discussed in the previous year’s dialogue and describing the extent to which the Government of China has made progress on a series of issues specified by Congress. Congress has already mandated such a report for the bilateral dialogue with Vietnam (Sec. 702 of PL 107-228) which should be the model of Congressional oversight of the U.S.-China human rights dialogues. Congress also should make sure that difficult issues, such as repression of Uighur Muslims, are part of the bilateral discussions.

2.) Raise publicly concerns about Human Rights Abuses against the Uighurs in appropriate multilateral and international fora, including the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and ensure that preparations for such action are made at appropriately high levels.

Since China’s signing of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the PRC has become increasingly involved in the international human rights system, not always to good effect. By working year-round with international human rights bodies, the United States can help produce the type of multinational attention and action that may command attention in China and improve compliance with human rights standards by the government.

3.) Urge the Obama Administration to take targeted action under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

China has been named a Country of Particular Concern since 1999. The CPC designation requires the President to take a specific action to address religious freedom abuses, including diplomatic, political, or economic sanctions. Previous

Administrations have used “pre-existing” sanctions first put in place after Tiananmen. Such a practice provides little incentive for China to address religious freedom violations, including in Xinjiang.

The Commission has recommended that the Obama Administration should break with the practices of past Administrations and issue a new Presidential action or sanction that would focus on either state agencies or officials who perpetuate religious freedom abuses or provinces where religious freedom conditions are the most egregious. Xinjiang province and its officials should be the target of such sanctions—as one of the worst offenders of religious freedom in China.

4.) Open a consulate in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

The U.S. government should urge the Chinese government to allow a U.S. government presence in Xinjiang, both to expand economic contacts and to monitor religious freedom and other human rights conditions.

5.) Create a transparent mechanism for reviewing cases of persons detained under suspicion of, or charged with, offenses relating to state security, “religious extremism,” “counterrevolutionary” or “splittist” activities, or organizing or participating in “illegal” gatherings or religious activities.

China should give a full accounting of those imprisoned and detained on vague criminal offenses, inconsistent with international standards. Given the large and growing number of Uighur prisoners, such a mechanism is need to review the large number of cases of detained or imprisoned religious leaders and others in Xinjiang.

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The Commission was created to be a resource and advisor to Congress on ways to protect religious freedom and related rights internationally. We look forward to working with you on China, the protection of Uighurs, and the advancement of religious freedom globally.