

## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

**Wednesday, March 10, 2021**

### A Religious Minority Enslaved: Addressing the Complicity of U.S. Companies in Uyghur Forced Labor

Statement by Sophie Richardson, China Director, Human Rights Watch

Thanks to all of the commissioners and to the staff for inviting me to join you. It's an honor to be here.

I have two large questions I'm going to try to tackle in very short order, so I hope you'll forgive a bit of an overview approach. With respect to how the Chinese government under Xi Jinping, in particular, silences those who speak out on behalf of their human rights or religious freedom, I've tried to narrow the list to five particular strategies.

The first, the Chinese government prosecutes people on baseless charges for behavior that is in no way criminal. In that category, we can put cases that range from Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and well-known Uyghur economist Ilham Tohti, all the way through to Zhang Zhan, a citizen journalist who was doing no more than trying to share information about the Covid outbreak in Wuhan. She's currently serving a four-year sentence.

The second strategy is through house arrests or other forms of arbitrary detention. Let's recall the case of the Panchen Lama or of Xu Yan, the wife of baselessly imprisoned human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng. Xu Yan is basically unable to leave her home and is monitored around the clock.

The third strategy for silencing people is through enforced disappearances, either domestically or abroad. In that category, we would place a number of Uyghur men and boys who were detained, disappeared in the wake of the 2009 protests there, through to Tibetan monks who have been detained simply for sharing information with their communities in India, all the way through to Gui Minhai, a Swedish publisher who was enforcedly disappeared from Thailand in 2014.

The fourth strategy we see the Chinese government use is punishments or threats of punishments or implied punishments to foreign entities, those operating inside China or those outside China who want to be operating inside of the country.

Let's all recall, for example, the Houston Rockets. But this pathology now stretches outward and involves institutions like academic universities that silence themselves out of a desire to establish relationships with counterparts in China.

And then last, but not least, I want to also recall the punishments of family members inside China of activists outside China who are simply speaking up, oftentimes on family members' behalf. And, in this category, I'd like to remember our friend Rushan Abbas, whose sister is now serving a 20-year sentence for being Rushan's sister, someone who has committed no crime. So that should give a little bit of a snapshot of some of the ways that people are silenced.

Let's flip it around and talk about what the United States and other governments and members of the international community can do about this.

The obvious step, of course, is to keep speaking out about these kinds of cases and calling at the highest levels for these people's release. But I think there are two other principles to bear in mind as people think through their advocacy.

The first is that I think we need to devote ourselves to the cause of ending the Chinese government's sense of impunity. It has never really been forced to pay any particular cost for horrific human rights violations.

I think the second principle is that, you know, the Chinese government should be treated like other governments that are committing serious human rights crimes. Let's think about the strategy and tactics that have been used for the Rohingya, for example, or with North Korea or Venezuela. Let's not forget that there are strategies and tools available to all of us. In that spirit, Human Rights Watch is a very strong proponent of an independent investigation into the serious human rights violations against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, done through the auspices or under the auspices of the United Nations.

But let's not forget that there are also possibilities for prosecutions at the national level. Universal jurisdiction cases are notoriously difficult, but they are possible. They are possible. And we shouldn't forget that.

We're also strong proponents of the idea that there should be a standing mandate at the Human Rights Council that focuses specifically on China to monitor and report back to the Council about human rights violations.

Targeted individual sanctions. The past administration imposed some on individual members of the Chinese government and placed some companies and entities, like the Bingtron [ph] on the Entities List. We'd like to see more of those for a number of different situations. And that's a strategy that should be coordinated with like-minded governments.

Similarly, I think the U.S. government should be insisting, and legislate the kind of human rights due diligence to combating forced labor. There's a lot of room, I think, also for working with parliamentarians in other countries to bring forward similar legislation.

And then, last, but not least, I think the United States must provide support and safe haven to anyone who is seeking shelter, support, and refuge from the long arm of the Chinese government. That's not just for people who are already here. That is for terrified and desperate people who are standing in some other country in need of protection. U.S. embassies should open their doors and let people in. That should be a priority. It is a powerful statement of a government's commitment to people who have done more than ask that their rights be respected. They need help. The U.S. can lead the way on that, and I see no reason why it couldn't.

I'll stop there. I look forward to hearing from my colleagues.