

Written Testimony before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Hearing: *A Religious Minority Enslaved: Uyghur Forced Labor and Complicity of U.S. Companies*

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March 10, 2021

Chairwoman Manchin, Vice-Chairs Perkins and Bhargava, Members of the Commission: I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony on this vital topic.

Our organization has been researching forced labor in the Uyghur Region, and connections to global corporations, since 2018, and we have reached a conclusion shared by human rights, labor rights, and Uyghur groups around the world: the only way corporations can ensure that forced labor is not used in the manufacture of the goods they sell is to ensure that no element of the production process – from the procurement of raw material to final assembly – takes place in the Uyghur Region.

Because forced labor in the region is systematic, carried out not only in the pursuit of economic profit, but also as a means of social and political control, the risk of forced labor is widespread, affecting potentially any farm or factory. At the same time, the means that a responsible corporation would normally use to verify that labor is uncoerced at a workplace within its supply chain cannot be used effectively in the region. Such due diligence depends on the ability to talk candidly with workers about the circumstances of their employment. Anyone remotely familiar with the climate of fear that prevails in the region understands that the idea of a candid

conversation with a Uyghur worker about the issue of forced labor is a fantasy. As a result, it is a practical impossibility for a corporation to source from the Uyghur region without using forced labor, which means that every corporation that has chosen to stay in the Uyghur region is complicit in the crime of forced labor. If that corporation is importing any goods with content from the region into the United States, whether from China or from third countries, it is doing so in violation of US law prohibiting the importation of goods made with forced labor.

Yet, despite the fact that the crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region have been visible to international observers for a period of years, a vast number of global corporations – particularly but not only in the apparel sector – continue to source goods from the region.

The scope of the problem is vast. Prior to the pandemic, the Uyghur Region was producing one fifth of the global apparel industry's cotton. From Target, to Walmart, from Lululemon to UNIQLO, from Amazon to Zara, the supply chain of virtually every brand and retailer that sells cotton garments runs through the Uyghur Region – unless that brand or retailer has established and executed an official policy to cease sourcing from the region. None of the corporations I have just listed make any claim to such a policy. As a result of the complicity of these corporations, and many of their competitors, millions of articles of clothing with content from the Uyghur Region clear US ports every day.

Our organization is part of the Coalition to End Forced Labour in the Uyghur Region, which has called on apparel brands and retailers to publicly commit to end sourcing from the region. A modest number of brands have made this public commitment. A larger number have indicated privately that they are leaving, and the momentum is growing, but private commitments are inadequate – indeed, their silence serves to embolden the Chinese government.

The problem of corporate complicity extends far beyond apparel. The Uyghur Region is also one of the world's primary producers of tomatoes and tomato-based products, the other sector, besides cotton, that is the subject of the region-wide Withhold Release Order issued in January. The tomato supply chain is hard to trace, but we know that processed foods containing tomatoes from the region are flowing into the US in substantial volume. This is why aggressive enforcement of the withhold release order is vital, in both the cotton and tomato sectors.

Another sector that is substantially dependent on material produced in the Uyghur Region is the solar industry. Several of the world's largest producers of polysilicon, a vital component of solar panels, are located in the region, including GCL-Poly, East Hope Group, and Jinko Solar. These and other firms in the region account for a stunning 40% of the solar industry's supply of polysilicon. Further research is required to determine with precision the prevalence of this polysilicon in solar goods sold in the US, but there is no doubt that a sizable percentage of the solar panels that will be installed on American homeowners' roofs this spring will contain material produced in the Uyghur region. We have heard rhetoric from the solar industry about the issue, but we have not seen action.

At this juncture, no responsible corporation, in any sector, should be sourcing anything from the Uyghur Region. With respect to the US market, if corporations will not end their complicity with forced labor, the US government should utilize all of the policy and legislative tools at its disposal to end that complicity for them.

I want to conclude by noting something that is obvious but bears mention. As we watch, for example, the events unfolding in Myanmar, we recognize that brutal attacks by governments on civilian populations are not a phenomenon unique to the People's Republic of China. Human rights abuses are a global scourge and should be denounced and opposed wherever they occur, regardless of the geopolitical position of the perpetrators, including when US allies are the responsible parties. What makes the human rights abuses in the Uyghur Region a matter of overarching concern, and deserving of the intense focus they are beginning to receive in the United States, is that by scale and nature, these are the worst human rights abuses taking place in the world today and, also, that corporations based in, and selling goods in, the United States are deeply complicit – which means that American consumers, American labor rights advocates, and the American government have the power to do something about these crimes.

Thank you.