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BEFORE THE

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OVERSIGHT**

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HEARING ON

The Uyghurs: A History of Persecution

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Chairman Delahunt, Ranking Member Rohrabacher, and all members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you for holding this hearing. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today about the plight of the Uyghur people. I am also thankful for your interest and leadership in examining the critical issues affecting the future of the Uyghur people, including the problem of economic, social, cultural discrimination, denial of religious freedom, the impact of the “war on terror,” China’s misuse of its global influence, and fate of the 17 Uyghur prisoners in Guantanamo. I and other Uyghurs greatly appreciate any efforts that could help promoting and protecting their freedoms including, the rights to be Muslim.

The Uyghurs are Turkic people and they mainly live in East Turkistan, which was occupied by communist China since 1949. Like Tibetans, Uyghurs have endured decades of discrimination and brutal oppression under Chinese rule. A religious and ethnic minority, they are routinely denied basic civil, religious, and political rights. Uyghurs are, almost without exception, the only ethnic group in China to be routinely executed for political offenses. Since 9/11, Beijing has taken advantage of anti-terrorism sentiment, using the U.S.-led “war on terror” as an excuse to oppress Uyghurs with impunity, persecuting many who have peacefully protested their treatment. China regularly portrays Uyghur historians, poets and writers “intellectual terrorists” and sends them to jail.

Today, Uyghurs face not just daily humiliation and discrimination, but harsh persecution and even the threat of cultural and religious extinction. A few years ago, Chinese Communist Party Xinjiang Chief Wang Lequan said *“Xinjiang will always keep up the intensity of its crackdown on ethnic separatist forces and deal them devastating blows without showing any mercy.”* As promised, over the past several years, Chinese leaders have ruthlessly punished the Uyghurs who even peacefully expressed dissent and opposed China’s ongoing onslaught against Uyghurs’ ethno-national identity. These aggressive policies are mostly targeted on Uyghurs’ religious and cultural identity.

Now, I would like to discuss the challenge Uyghurs face under Chinese rule in greater detail.

1. China's Continued Campaign Against Uyghur Identity

o Cultural destruction

Late last August, Xinjiang communist party chief Wang Lequan has vowed “preemptive strikes” on Uyghurs. He has been also advocating “re-education” drive to enhance Uyghurs’ “identification with Chinese nation and culture.”

China’s cultural repression of the Uyghurs *isn’t reactive* – it is a deliberate policy to control, monitor and sterilize Uyghur culture so it cannot be a vehicle for self-rule or even challenge the state.

Han Chinese generally treats Uyghurs as inferiors and look down on Uyghur culture. Chinese are taught that Uyghurs are backward, “younger brothers” that need help from their more civilized Han “older brothers.”

A key component of this effort is to eliminate literary, academic, and professional use of Uyghur. Since 2002, the “bilingual” education policy has mandated the use of Mandarin Chinese as the primary language of instruction for Uyghur students throughout the education system. Uyghur language schools are being converted to Chinese only or so-called Bi-lingual schools all across the Uyghur homeland. This is a precision attack—a cruise missile if you will—against Uyghur culture, an attempt to dumb it down and subvert it to Mandarin Chinese. I think Beijing’s top man in the Uyghur homeland, Wang Lequan made Chinese intentions clear when he said adoption of Chinese will “improve the quality of ethnic minorities because indigenous languages are out-of-step with the 21st century.”

Mr. Chairman, Uyghurs were the stewards of the silk roads, and our cultural background makes us well suited to promote trade and globalization. The beauty of Uyghur culture does not need Wang’s “improvement.”

Nevertheless, China’s plans for Uyghurs continue. Just last week, the China Daily, the Chinese government’s English language newspaper, quoted the Governor of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—the titular head of government--Nur Bekri as saying that “[t]errorists from neighboring countries mainly target Uygurs [Uyghurs] that are relatively isolated from mainstream society as they cannot speak Mandarin. They are then tricked into terrorist activities.” Mr. Bekri’s comments imply—that those Uyghurs who only speak their mother tongue are inherently terrorist suspects, and therefore government must force Chinese language upon us. In other words, in the parlance of Chinese communist doublespeak-Mr. Bekri is attempting to justify a language planning policy aimed at eliminating the use of the Uyghur language in the education system. Clearly, this is another attempt to label peaceful Uyghurs as terrorist suspects and indicate intensification in the Chinese authorities’ campaign to marginalize the Uyghur language.

Chinese government does not stop at our language, they also openly attack Uyghur culture and history. The current Chinese communist leadership, taking Chairman Mao’s advice to “use the past to serve the present” has engaged in an open, concerted effort to revise our region’s history to fit their worldview that our homeland has been “part of China since ancient times” As a

result, cultural promotion and research are plainly frowned upon by the Communist authorities, with historians, cultural leaders, researchers, and activists detained and subjected to long prison terms. Some writers even accused and punished for advocating “splittist thinking.” For instance, in 2005, a young intellectual, Nurmemet Yasin, was sentenced to a decade in prison for writing an allegory likening the predicament to that of a pigeon in a cage.

The assault on Uyghur identity has recently escalated to include the demolition of traditional Uyghur buildings in Kashgar. Uyghur homes, ancient bazaars, and mosques will be destroyed. Some 200,000 people in 65,000 Uyghur households will be forcibly removed from this historic area, a catastrophe for the Uyghur people and a devastating blow to Uyghur identity. Here’s how Professor Wu Dianting of Beijing Normal University’s School of Geography described the significance of what’s happening in a recent report in *The Washington Post*: “The old town also reflects the Muslim culture of the Uyghurs very well – it has the original taste and flavor without any changes...Here, Uyghur culture is attached to those raw earth buildings. If they are torn down, the affiliated culture will be destroyed.”

I was born and raised in Kashgar. It is a serious blow to know that a thousand years of Uyghur culture and history integrated through the physical space and architecture of the *Old City* will be destroyed as a result of China’s politically motivated policies. It will be an immeasurable loss for the Uyghur people. It also will be a loss for the citizens of the world as the atrophy of our global cultural heritage sites continues. Before the plans are complete, I urge you to attempt to visit Kashgar, if the Chinese will let you, to see my home one last time before it is destroyed.

- **Religious oppression**

I would now like to talk about how the Chinese Communist government has a systematic campaign against the Uyghur practice of Islam. The bottom line is that Uyghurs are denied the freedom to practice Islam. Yet for most Uyghurs the overriding issue is not religion *per se*, but the perceived threat that religious repression poses to their distinct identity coupled with their acute feeling of being colonized. Uyghurs view the tight restrictions placed by the Chinese authorities on Uyghur Islam as an attempt to debase their very identity, as Islam is an essential component of their traditional identity and value.

Chinese constitution, laws, and propaganda all insist that its minorities enjoy religious freedom, but Uyghurs—seen as a threat to Chinese rule—are given significantly less breathing space than other Muslim minorities within China. The reason being that China sees Uyghurs’ ethno-national identity as disloyal to the China state, and Islam is perceived as feeding this Uyghur ethnic identity.

The subjugation of Islam to the Chinese state is used as a means to ensure the subordination of Uyghurs as well. As such, China strictly controls and manages all mosques and religious activities. It stifles standard religious traditions that have formed a crucial part of the Uyghur identity for centuries.

As a result, Uyghur Muslims experience harassment in their daily lives. Observing religious holidays, studying religious texts, or showing one’s religion through personal appearance are

strictly forbidden at schools, government offices, or even in public places. The government has instituted controls over who can be a clerk, what version of the Qur'an may be used, where religious gatherings may be held, and what may be said on religious occasion. For example, government officials, state employees, children under 18, and women are prohibited from entering the mosque and conducting religious activities. Violations of these can result in expulsion, heavy fines, entries into the personal file, administrative punishment, including detention and imprisonment. Uyghur religious figures who have leadership qualities, separatist tendencies, or disloyal political views have faced harsh punishment, including imprisonment. A number of young and progressive minded Imams have been removed or even imprisoned because of their refusal to use mosques to praise the motherland and the Party. In June 2008, a mosque near Aksu city was demolished because of its refusal to put up signs in support of the Beijing Olympics.

According to various media reports during the month of Ramadan in 2008:

- Prayer in public places outside the main mosque is forbidden and an imam's sermon is limited to a half-hour
- Local authorities required some Uyghur-owned restaurants to remain open during the day, when Muslims normally fast
- Free lunches forced to break fasting and most importantly identify believers
- Government employees have been told to shave their beards, and police have been ordering women to remove their veils

A few pundits in the U.S. recently have claimed that the Uyghurs' ultimate goal is to establish a sharia state. This is patently false and strangely echoes Chinese propaganda. We are not wahabists, we are not radicals. In fact, in the early part of the last century, the Uyghurs' homeland of East Turkistan was the first secular and democratic republic to be established in the Muslim world outside of Turkey. The Uyghur case is proudly secular, democracy with guarantees of religious freedom and peaceful enjoyment of this and other human rights. Religious freedom for all, even those who do not share their particular faith, is a paramount issue to the Uyghurs as they struggle to preserve their distinct national and cultural identity.

China's attempt to suppress our fundamental right to practice our religion not only profoundly violates human rights principles, but Ironically, the unreasonable restrictions against Uyghur religion further alienates the Uyghurs. This drives religious expression further underground, and encourages the development of more radicalized and oppositional forms of religious identity. If the current trend continues, moderate voices that could mediate tensions between the Chinese state and Uyghurs are likely to shrink.

On top of all of this there is sheer repression, which the Chinese government tries to justify in the post 9/11 era by saying that it is a response to terrorism. In fact, the repression began long before 9/11, and its purpose was not to stop terrorism but suppress Uyghur dissent. For example, on February 5, 1997, fully armed paramilitary police fired on a peaceful demonstration by 10-15,000 Uyghur youth, who were marching to the municipal government offices to protest racial and religious discrimination.

China effectively exploited the post 9/11 climate that followed the attacks in the US. Arrest of some Uyghurs in Afghanistan/Pakistan helped China to consistently and successfully portrayed Uyghurs as the source of a serious terrorist threat in China. This perception seems to have now become dominant with the Chinese public. The lack of free media made it almost impossible to compare the sources of information and to make independent judgments about these claims. It's mind-boggling that some Western media also helped to further this perception with its reports without careful examination of the Chinese claims.

2. Restriction on Uyghurs' freedom of movement

Uyghurs' domestic and international travel has been restricted in two forms: racial profiling and confiscation of passports.

Chinese government's propaganda campaign against the Uyghur people made them vulnerable for racial profiling in inner Chinese cities. Uyghurs can be easily identified and targeted because of their appearance and ethnic origin. Basic services such as lodging, transportation, even public bath houses are not available for the Uyghurs in inner cities. For instance, in 2008, hotels and bathhouses in Beijing's Haidian District ordered not to allow Uyghurs and Tibetans to use their facilities. These orders were purportedly put in place for the Olympics, but they are still in place. Additionally, a large numbers of Uyghurs evicted from Chinese cities before the Olympics, and most of them are not allowed to return major cities including, Beijing and Shanghai.

A majority of Uyghurs' passports have been confiscated since early 2007. Chinese citizens, with exception of Tibetans and Uyghurs, can obtain passport through a fairly simple process.

The Article 1 of the China's Passport laws, enacted on 1/1/2007, guarantees PRC citizens rights and interests of exiting and entering China and promotes international travel and cultural exchange with foreign countries." Article 6 instructs the authorities to process and issue a passport within 15 days after receiving the application. If it disapproves, the authorities should give the applicant a written explanation and inform him of his right to apply for an administrative review or to lodge an administrative lawsuit." Also, the authorities deny issuing passport if it believes that the person leaving China will do harm to the state security or result in serious losses to the benefits of the state.

China's discriminatory implementation of passport laws and regulations has prevented family reunifications and visits overseas. E.g. Uyghur parents could not attend significant events such as weddings and funerals.

In conclusion, let me say this:

Discrimination, restriction of movement, denial of services at hotels and other establishments makes Uyghurs feel like second class citizens within China. The Chinese have failed at integrating our two controls and giving us a stake in the future of China. Instead, they are using policies which – in my opinion—are being used to marginalize if not wipe out Uyghur identity. Uyghur culture had adapted and thrived for centuries. We do not seek isolation. But Uyghurs must be allowed to worship, speak, write, and think without fear of reprisal.

3. Recommendations to the United States

U.S. government's hasty designation of ETIM as a terrorist organization in 2002 has given a 'green light' to China to intensify its crackdown on political dissent in the region. ETIM designation also provided the Chinese with a very useful propaganda tools that the US is helping China to destroy Uyghurs' democratic aspirations. China opportunistically used the post-9/11 environment to make the outrageous claim that individuals disseminating peaceful religious and cultural messages in E. Turkistan are terrorists who have simply changed tactics. Many devout Uyghur Muslims have been subjected to arrest, imprisonment, torture, and even execution.

America needs to be the Uyghurs' main source of hope. To do that, President Obama should publicly express serious concerns over deteriorating human rights situation in East Turkistan

- Appoint a Special Coordinator for the Uyghurs at the State Department, just like what Tibet has
- A senior State Department official, preferably the new Ambassador, should visit the region to meet with dissidents and family members of political prisoners
- Provide funding for cultural exchange and educational programs for the Uyghurs in East Turkistan.
- Encourage China to grant and restore Uyghur cultural and religious rights during religious and human rights dialogs
- Finally, we should allow 17 Gitmo Uyghurs to resettle in the U.S. I understand there are concerns—but look at the facts. The Department of Defense has determined that men were never a threat to the United States. I would never let anyone harm my new home or embarrass the Uyghur people. But I have met the men and I can assure you—Newt Gingrich's concerns notwithstanding—that unequivocally pose no threat to America. Therefore, this should really be a no-brainer. It would send a strong signal to the Muslim world and our Allies that the United States is able to differentiate between oppressed minorities and violent religious extremists. And Uyghurs all across East Turkistan would know where the United States stands.