



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing
Uyghur Human Rights in China and Abroad

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Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join my colleague and co-chair, Congressman Hultgren, in welcoming you to the Commission's briefing this morning on the human rights of the Uyghur people in China and abroad.

I want to extend a special welcome to Rebiya Kadeer, the president of the World Uyghur Congress. Ms. Kadeer is a brave businesswoman and defender of women's rights and Uyghur rights. She came to the United States after five years in a Chinese prison. We are honored to have her with us today.

The Uyghurs are a largely Muslim ethnic group that lives in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China.

Like the Tibetans, the Uyghurs are the victims of restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities on their religious, cultural and linguistic practices. We will hear about these restrictions today – and also about the related repression of their political views and activity.

The repression of Uyghurs has increased since July 2009, when police attacked Uyghur demonstrators, leading to rioting and nearly 200 deaths. Between 2013 and 2015, clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang public security personnel led to hundreds more deaths, mostly of Uyghurs.

In the aftermath of these kinds of fatal encounters, the Chinese authorities have claimed the Uyghurs were carrying out or preparing to launch attacks against government property or civilians. Credible human rights groups argue that many violent incidents began as peaceful protests.

We have seen this scenario many times before. We're seeing it today in Burma, as that country's military has forcibly displaced more than 600,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. Rather than recognize and respect the religious and cultural practices of minority populations, governments try to crush their identities – risking, even prompting, a turn to violent extremism.

In addition, China is extending the reach of its repression beyond its borders. Last summer, in coordination with China, Egyptian authorities deported dozens of Uyghur university students studying in Cairo back to China for “re-education.” In 2015, 109 Uyghurs were forcibly repatriated from Thailand, and the international community has still not been able to confirm their whereabouts or well-being.

In the long run, these tactics will not increase China's security. They will backfire – they are already backfiring. The question today is what we in the U.S. Congress can do to encourage a change of course. I look forward to hearing your recommendations in this regard.

Let me close by encouraging more attention to the cases of Uyghur prisoners of conscience like Ilham Tohti.

Mr. Tohti is an economics professor known for his research on Uyghur-Han relations and his advocacy for the implementation of regional autonomy laws in China. In 2014 he was accused of “separatism” and given a life sentence. His case is part of the Commission's Defending Freedoms Project, but more action is needed. So I encourage people to speak out on his behalf.

Thank you.