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“Uyghur Human Rights in China and Abroad”

First, I would like to thank the Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Representatives Randy Hultgren and James McGovern for inviting Radio Free Asia to testify at this briefing on “Uyghur Human Rights in China and Abroad.” Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur Service has been working hard to fulfill its congressionally mandated mission of providing the Uyghur people inside China with in-depth, accurate news about the situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) as it affects their daily lives.

While the international community is focused on the global crises posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons and the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in Burma, the Chinese government has been quietly building what has been perceived to be a high-tech police state in the XUAR. For the 11 million or so Uyghur people who live in purported autonomy, Xinjiang has been transformed into a virtual open-air prison where the residents lack the basic freedoms of religious and cultural expression, to speak and learn their language, to practice their faith, to run their businesses, to socialize and play sports, to study abroad, and to travel even within China freely. In fact, Uyghurs cannot even give names of their choice to their new-born babies. There is practically no single aspect of their daily lives that is not restricted, monitored, and documented by Chinese authorities. This stark reality has been one in the making for many years, especially after the July 2009 uprising in Urumqi. But recent policies implemented by Chen Quanguo, who became the Chinese Communist Party Secretary of the XUAR in August 2016, have exacerbated the situation to an unprecedented level of repression.

Before being appointed to Xinjiang, Secretary Chen oversaw the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) during a five-year tenure marked by his stepped-up efforts to crush any kind of Tibetan protest against Beijing’s rule. After his arrival to Xinjiang, Chen wasted no time in implementing the same kinds of oppressive security measures that proved effective in the TAR and an extensive digital and physical network of surveillance.

Escalation of State Security and Detention Facilities

RFA Uyghur has documented China’s recent initiative to dramatically ramp up its security presence that doesn’t just target offenders, but essentially all Uyghurs who are treated as potential threats. It also serves to remind them that any demonstration of “forbidden activities” – such as conducting a public prayer or an unsanctioned peaceful gathering – could be met by the fully armed response of Chinese state security forces. According to research conducted by two scholars James Leibold and Adrian Zenz, nearly 100,000 police officers have been recruited in Xinjiang over the past year, and the regional security spending has increased 45 percent in the

first half of 2017 compared to the same period in 2016. China spent 30 billion yuan (nearly 4.5 billion USD) on security in Xinjiang last year.

In the past 10 months, RFA Uyghur has reported on Secretary Chen's initiative to set up what are called "convenience police stations" every 500 meters in every major Xinjiang city. There are anywhere from 10 to 30 officers stationed in such stations. Some are police officers armed with handguns and automatic weapons, some are anti-riot officers with shields and clubs, and some are unarmed auxiliary officers. They are expected to appear on site of any incident within three minutes. In the capital city of Urumqi, RFA was told that more than 2,800 such stations have been set up.

In addition to these facilities, Chinese authorities have set up thousands of armed checkpoints that single out Uyghurs in cars or on foot, stopping them and checking their state-required IDs, belongings, computers and mobile phones for banned apps, text messages, political, and religious content. Sometimes, the contents of mobile phones and computers are downloaded by police to a handheld device. Uyghurs' faces are also scanned with facial recognition cameras and sometimes body scanners to match their ID cards.

RFA has also reported on the recent creation of hundreds of political re-education centers, which are essentially prisons across the XUAR, where thousands of Uyghurs are sent after being detained by authorities. Uyghurs sent to these detention facilities have been held in custody extra judicially, indefinitely and often without the knowledge of their families. Initially, authorities named the facilities "de-extremification centers," but now it has been changed to the innocuous-sounding "professional skills education and training centers."

The vast majority sent to these camps are men, but the detained also include women and minors. RFA has found that Uyghurs detained in these camps are those who have traveled outside China, studied in foreign countries, have relatives in other countries, have been on a religious pilgrimage to Mecca on their own, who display their faith in their appearance and clothing, have been known to listen to religious sermons in the past, or have been considered suspicious or detained in the past. They include 15-year-olds and the elderly in their 80s, RFA has learned.

A police officer from Aqsaray's No. 2 Village in Hotan's Qaraqash County told RFA he had been informed during an "online conference" in mid-June that his police department was to detain 40 percent of the Uyghur population for showing any sign of "religious extremism," which includes having facial hair or growing a beard. This officer confirmed that 82 people have been placed in re-education camps since the order was given, and 61 of them were later imprisoned in his village of 2,060 people. He also admitted that his department had failed to reach its mandated target, but would send more people to the camps.

For many Uyghur villages, the detention of thousands of working-age men has been detrimental economically. These rural communities subsist mainly by farming, harvesting profitable crops including cotton and wheat. Chinese officials confirmed to RFA that they had sent Uyghur women and children to pick cotton and take on other heavy labor in Korla as an emergency action. RFA also discovered that many Uyghur children whose parents are in detention camps end up being sent to overcrowded orphanages, schools, and other parts of China far from home

and their relatives. A woman working at one regional orphanage told RFA that Uyghur “children were locked up like farm animals in a shed.”

In addition to the omni-presence of security, Chinese military forces have this year have held large-scale joint exercises with Russia, Egypt, Pakistan, and other countries in the XUAR. Chinese security forces have also frequently held large-scale drills in a show of force in major cities, sometimes coordinated for the same day, such as in Urumqi, Kashgar, Hotan and Aksu. In every show of force, up to 10,000 fully-armed Chinese soldiers and police line up in squares with armored vehicles, specialized SWAT vehicles, and police cars parked on the sides. RFA reported that Chinese soldiers and police chanted slogans in support of what China calls the “People’s War on Terror” after speeches by regional officials, such as Secretary Chen or Zhu Hailun, the deputy regional party secretary. Uyghurs tell us that these displays only reinforce the idea that at any given time, a security crackdown can escalate into a fully fledged military operation against unarmed, law-abiding people.

Implementation of Biometric Surveillance

Prior to Secretary Chen’s appointment, authorities had already installed tens of thousands of high-resolution cameras all over the region. These were placed on every major highway, street, intersection, market, mosque, government building, police station, and even specific families’ homes. However, these efforts have recently been strengthened to incorporate biometrics, data, and artificial intelligence technology.

Many Chinese companies, like Xinjiang Xilin Information Technology Ltd., Beijing Wanlihong Technology Co., and Urumqi-based Leon Technology, assisted local authorities in identity verification by installing facial and iris recognition high-resolution cameras and integrating them with computerized police surveillance systems. Uyghurs told RFA that Chinese authorities in Kashgar forced Uyghur-owned businesses to purchase and install security cameras directly linked to local police stations.

Authorities now go beyond checking mobile phones and laptop computers at checkpoints; sometimes indiscriminately confiscating enormous amounts of personally owned technology from thousands of Uyghurs at a time. In August, Urumqi authorities requested almost all residents and business owners of the capital city to submit their personal ID cards, cell phones, external drives, portable hard drives, notebook computers and media storage cards and any similar devices for registration and scanning. Chinese police officers from Baoshan District confirmed to RFA that they were going to check and clean up illegal audio-video content by installing state-sponsored spyware (called “Jingwang,” or “web cleanse”). Uyghurs told RFA that many are giving up their smartphones and devices and reverting back to using older mobile phones to avoid the hassle of having authorities confiscate their phones and scrutinize content deemed “sensitive.”

Authorities have also required that all Uyghur-owned vehicles install GPS-tracking devices and electronic license plates. RFA reported that although this policy initially started in the Bayingholin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, it was extended to the XUAR in June. RFA also

reported that the Urumqi Motorized Vehicle Licensing and Testing Department mandated all ethnic Uyghur to undergo a stringent background check before registering a vehicle in the city.

Authorities have also implemented a reward system for Uyghur informants, promising to 5 million yuan (725,000 USD) to report any suspicious individual, activity or “two-faced” Uyghurs. RFA reported that anyone exposing high-ranking members of the Uyghur community involved in suspicious activity will be handsomely rewarded for their information. Some believe that such policy has the effect of sowing distrust and turning any ordinary Uyghur into a government informant. It further enables Chinese police to break into any Uyghur home under the pretense of suspicion at any time.

Religious, Ideological, and Cultural Purging

RFA has followed closely Beijing’s religious crackdown on Uyghurs practicing their faith, expressing their religious identity as Muslims, and restricting their times and houses of worship. Authorities have essentially criminalized or targeted Uyghurs expressing and participating in a cornerstone of their cultural identity. In recent years, Uyghurs making a pilgrimage alone, praying in public, growing a beard, wearing a headscarf or a long dress, and teaching religion to minors even in the privacy of their homes have been outlawed. Recently, RFA has found that authorities have begun to confiscate Qurans, prayer rugs and other religious items from households and mosques. RFA has also reported that authorities have turned Uyghur mosques into Chinese Communist Party propaganda centers by replacing holy texts on the walls with state propaganda banners and slogans, forcing religious clergy to conduct flag-raising ceremonies and give “patriotic” sermons praising CCP before the prayer service begins.

China has also banned certain Uyghur baby names with religious connotations common to Muslims around the world, such as Muhammed, Medina and Fatima, forcing parents to change them into government-approved names. Authorities have also labeled the concept of the halal diet among Uyghurs as an indicator of religious extremism. RFA reported that fasting during the holy month of Ramadan has become impossible for Uyghur people, especially farmers, as Chinese officials embed in their homes to live, eat, work and sleep with them in order to ensure compliance with official policies. Businesses, including restaurants, are forced to stay open during Ramadan, despite local protests.

In addition, Secretary Chen has also initiated a far-reaching effort to target Uyghur historians, educators, writers, poets, religious figures and respectable members of Uyghur community. Uyghur officials and civil servants can be demoted or dismissed by authorities if they publically support the Chinese Communist Party but hold personal views to the contrary.

For example, RFA has reported that Chinese authorities confiscated the books written by Seyfudin Azizi, the first party secretary and chairman of XUAR, who had written extensively about the history of the East Turkestan Republic founded in 1944 with the approval of Chinese government. RFA also reported that Chinese authorities arrested Sattar Dawut, former head of the regional educational bureau for allegedly promoting “Pan-Turkism” connecting Uyghurs in the Uyghur language textbooks used by Uyghur students. Concerned Uyghurs have told RFA

that they believe the goal of this far-reaching purge is to effectively deny the very existence of Uyghur history, culture, and identity in China.

The use of Uyghur language and Uyghur language texts books have been banned from kindergarten to university-level education in several prefectures, including Hotan. The Chinese authorities have ironically called it part of efforts to promote “bilingual education.” RFA reported that Xinjiang authorities issued a directive to terminate the use of all text books in the Uyghur language in favor of Chinese text books starting with curriculums this fall in these prefectures. Authorities also banned the use of Uyghur language, Uyghur signs and banners on campuses. Tens of thousands of Han Chinese have been hired this year as “bilingual” teachers from Mainland China to teach at Uyghur kindergartens and schools. They however speak only Chinese, not Uyghur. Uyghurs have told RFA they fear their children cannot learn their own language, history and culture, and any attempts by the Uyghur people to preserve their heritage are impossible under these drastic changes. Some Uyghur intellectuals and activists view China’s fast-track push to assimilate the Uyghur people as nothing short of cultural genocide.

Cutting off both Digital and Physical Communication with Outside World

In this 21st century globalized digital world, one can easily communicate with another on the other side of the planet in an instant with Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp, but not for the Uyghur people who currently live often in complete digital darkness. In the past several years, WeChat, a Chinese social media mobile app developed by Tencent, a company which shares all information with the Chinese government, became the app of choice for most Uyghurs both inside China and overseas to communicate with each other. The easy-to-use WeChat became a platform for Uyghurs to express their views and opinions on a wide range of topics and share whatever was of interest. But recently, RFA has seen how Chinese authorities monitor content shared on WeChat, punishing Uyghurs who share anything perceived as having a political, religious, or anti-Beijing perspective. Many Uyghurs have stopped using the app out of fear of reprisal, losing basic connection with their friends and family, both in China and outside the country.

Co-opting and Cooperating with Authoritarian States to Target Uyghurs Overseas

Persecution has become a fact of life for Uyghurs living within China's territorial boundaries. But for years, Uyghurs who lived or studied outside China were mostly spared from Chinese authorities’ intimidation. This year, however, we have seen that change as well. RFA reported this summer on China’s long arm reaching inside Egypt, an American ally in the Middle East, to target Uyghurs students studying in Cairo.

It is unclear why Chinese authorities requested that thousands of Uyghur students studying at Al Azhar University, world’s renowned Islamic university, to return to China. But RFA learned that authorities also made clear after their parents or loved ones faced detention if they did not return. Many of the students who did return were disappeared by state authorities. News of these

detentions alarmed many Uyghur students remaining in Cairo who then refused to return. These students were then arrested by Egyptian police aided by Chinese agents. Authorities in Egypt locked up more than 200 Uyghur students in the notorious Tora prison in Cairo. At least a dozen or more were deported back to China with another 16 simply disappeared over the last couple months. So far, the Egyptian government has not disclosed the reasons, charges, or whereabouts of the detained Uyghurs. Sources have told RFA it is believed that the Uyghur students attending a religious school was reason enough to be deemed suspicious by Chinese authorities. Rights groups fear that without media interest and international concern, the students will most likely be deported to China to face an uncertain fate.

RFA also discovered that Uyghur passports were being confiscated, like they had been in China's TAR during Secretary Chen's tenure there. Uyghur parents can no longer visit their sons and daughters studying overseas and their children do not dare to return out of fear that their passports too will be confiscated or, worse, that they will be detained and sent to a political re-education camp or arrested for overseas activities. RFA reported that Buzaynap Abdureshit, a young Uyghur woman -- who recently was married and supposed to join her husband in Australia -- returned in March to visit her parents in Urumqi. Upon her return, she was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison because of her previous two-year religious education in Egypt. Fearing similar persecution may fall upon their own sons and daughters or relatives abroad, most parents have told them never to return to China, no matter what. In one video-chat, a mother was loudly telling her daughter studying overseas to come home while her sister next to their mother was holding a huge sign saying, "Never come back!"

The unprecedented level of surveillance and repression has created what rights groups see as an atmosphere of terror suffocating the soul of the Uyghur people. While the Chinese government uses the pretense of "maintaining stability" and fighting "terrorists" and "extremists" in XUAR, many Uyghurs feel these sweeping policies were designed to do nothing more than target and punish the entire Uyghur population in China. RFA's reports have been cited in human rights reports by the State Department, respected international organizations, and foreign governments. It's also important that support continues for the role of free press. With repressive regimes blocking access to our reporters, targeting their families and trusted networks of sources in China, the risk is real and high. The demonstrated commitment to free press and free speech, as a value enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, aids Radio Free Asia in doing our job in some of world's toughest media environments where people would otherwise have little or no access to the truth. For the Uyghurs who listen to our broadcasts and access our reports, they tell us that they appreciate this commitment to one of the most basic recognized principles of human rights: the right to reliable news and information about what is happening in their homeland.