

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

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Thank you very much to the Co-chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Congressman Hultgren and Congressman McGovern for organizing this briefing and providing an opportunity to brief you all on the current situation faced by the Uyghur people in East Turkestan.

For decades the Chinese Communist Party has pursued policies in East Turkestan which are repressive towards the Uyghur population in order to maintain control and exploit the resources of the region, creating tensions and dissatisfaction.

Over the past several years, since the beginning of the Xi Jinping administration, the situation in East Turkestan has become more severe. Repression of religious rights, freedom of movement, arbitrary detention and linguistic rights have all worsened under Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. He has used his experience in Tibet to carry out the same securitization policies in East Turkestan to an even greater degree, creating a massive police force and using the latest technology to create total control over society.

Recent legislation passed at the national and the regional level shows that Uyghurs are a particular concern. The national level Counter-terrorism law had a broad and vague definition of religious extremism and terrorism that criminalize legitimate religious expression and undermine the ability of independent observers to report on events that take place in East Turkestan. The fact that East Turkestan is the only area which passed implementation measures for the national level laws underscores the fact that they are targeted at Uyghurs, reemphasizing the singling out of religious practice and placing heavy restrictions on transmitting information on events there.

Yet more repressive legislation was passed in April, the so-called “De-extremification Measures,” which call on all government departments and parts of society to implement them. Policies such as banning certain Muslim names, monitoring and controlling weddings, funerals and other religious services, and extreme control of online communications are given a veneer of legality through these government rules. New national level religious regulations target religious practice as potentially subversive and call for the “sinicization” of religion, with particularly negative implications for the Uyghurs.

The authorities are increasing the practice of entering Uyghur homes and confiscating Qurans, prayer rugs, and other religious books and objects. The Uyghur language is being completely eliminated from the so-called bi-lingual education system. These

policies are aimed at assimilating the Uyghur population by making it impossible for them to speak their language, practice their religion, and speak their minds freely in any degree.

Thousands of Uyghurs are being indefinitely detained in so-called re-education centers across East Turkestan, with all Uyghurs being politically assessed for their religiosity and attitude to the government. This includes Uyghur students abroad being forced home, sometimes disappearing into these camps or being imprisoned. My own family has suffered in this ongoing crackdown by being sent to these re-education camps and disappeared. Three of my sons, Kahar, Abilikim, and Alim and my daughter-in-law Aygul have been detained, but we have no details about where they are being held. My thirty-year-old granddaughter, Kahar's daughter, was also detained three months ago, with the authorities refusing to give any information about why she is being held or where. My sister Xechem, her son Imam, and my brothers Ahmetjan and Gheni have also been detained in the past few months with no information being given to their families. A year ago my sister Atikem, her daughter and son-in-law were also all detained. Many Uyghur families are suffering from the same thing, their relatives being taken away with no reason or indication if they will be released.

There is a particular focus on those who have studied religion and gone on hajj, but it is not limited to them. All Uyghurs are being treated as security threats simply because of their ethnicity. It has always been difficult for Uyghurs to obtain passports, but it is now virtually impossible. Uyghurs are being cut off from travelling overseas and even communicating with friends and relatives overseas both by phone and internet. Many who have tried to escape overseas have been forcibly repatriated against international law, for example from Thailand and more recently Egypt.

The Egypt case was particularly disturbing. China has increased cooperation with Egypt, signing a security cooperation agreement in June of this year. Shortly thereafter Egyptian security forces cooperated with Chinese security forces to round up, detain and deport Uyghurs, particularly those there to study at Al-Azhar University. Some were able to escape to Turkey and elsewhere, but over two dozen were forced to return to China were arrested or detained in re-education camps. China uses the threat of reprisal against family members as a tool to coerce Uyghurs to return from abroad.

Police forces are being massively expanded, with over 90,000 positions advertised this year alone. Checkpoints have been established throughout the countryside as well as in cities, and reportedly stop minorities while allowing Chinese through. Though video cameras have for years been used in sensitive locations, such as inside mosques, 10s of thousands have been set up around cities to ensure that there is nowhere people can go with out being monitored, by camera, police officers and other officials, and online through technology such as apps that the authorities require be downloaded onto phone or GPS satellite trackers on cars.

This is all being done in the name of security, but is out of all proportion to any threat, and is a violation not only of international laws but China's own constitution. The securitization of East Turkestan could inspire other authoritarian regimes in the region, with disturbing implications for human rights around the world. The world must pay

attention to the human rights abuses in East Turkestan as China expands its influence into Central and South Asia.

I offer the following recommendations to U.S. lawmakers

1. Given the fact that it is extremely difficult to ascertain facts on the ground in East Turkestan, U.S. lawmakers should exercise skepticism that the extreme securitization and militarization of the region are reasonable steps in a fight against terrorism inspired by radical Islam.
2. Uyghur issues should be prominent in upcoming dialogues with China such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue and the Human Rights Dialogue. Push China to moderate its repressive policies in East Turkestan, which are at the root of the region's issues.
3. Make efforts to investigate the situation in East Turkestan by regularly sending staff to gather information on the ground.
4. Set up a consulate in Urumqi to monitor the ongoing situation.
5. The State Department should appoint a Special Envoy on Uyghur Affairs to engage the Chinese government at a senior level.