

The Persecution of the Uyghur People
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Shine a Light: 50 Years of Activism

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Good morning,

It is a very great honor to speak to you today. Amnesty International holds a special place in my heart, and in the hearts of the Uyghur people. Just over five years ago, I was in prison for speaking out against the injustices of the Chinese government. For nearly six years I was kept in inhuman conditions and made to witness torture. While hope was a rare commodity in such difficult circumstances, I still carried it with me through the darkness. You, the grassroots advocates of Amnesty International, kept that hope alive in those times. The letters you sent, the vigils you held, and most importantly, the voice you used so that others could one day have theirs gave me hope. This is why I am so honored to be in your presence. Without you I cannot even imagine where I would be now.

Amnesty International has been a consistent supporter of the Uyghur people. Without the means to speak out against torture, arbitrary detentions and sham trials, the Uyghur people have found that Amnesty was always there to expose such egregious human rights abuses. It was Amnesty that brought the world's attention to the Ghulja Massacre in 1997, and Amnesty that reported on the state violence on Uyghur protestors 12 years later in Urumchi. However, Amnesty's achievements over fifty years stretch across the globe, and from humble beginnings Amnesty has grown to become a respected and leading organization in the most influential of international forums. Individuals and whole groups of oppressed people are empowered when Amnesty speaks out.

I am a Uyghur, a Turkic Muslim from Central Asia. I come from a place we Uyghurs call East Turkestan and which the Chinese government calls the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. "Xinjiang", in the Chinese language means "new frontier", an inaccurate description of the land on which the Uyghur people have lived for hundreds of years. Like Tibet, "Xinjiang" is currently an autonomous region of China, and as with Tibet there is no sign of autonomy in my homeland. Both Tibetans and Uyghurs suffer from systematic human rights abuses at the hands of the Chinese government. However, the plight of the Uyghur people, unlike the plight of the Tibetan people, is little known worldwide.

This year, China will enter its sixty-first year under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The pace of economic development in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the inception of the reform era in the late seventies has earned the CCP the admiration of many observers. However, in the rush to praise modern China, a history of political repression and a present-day policy of minority persecution have been obscured.

The Uyghur people of East Turkestan have long been victims of the Chinese Communists' authoritarian rule. In the years since the CCP gained control of East Turkestan in 1949 and before Deng Xiaoping launched his era of economic reforms, Uyghurs were subjected to a number of destructive Communist-led campaigns and movements.

From the purges of East Turkestan nationalists in the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late fifties, to the starvation, exile and destruction of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Uyghurs, along with millions of other victims, were persecuted by the CCP. However, Uyghurs were also subjected to special campaigns specifically directed at them so as to dilute their distinct identity. In the early sixties, the CCP administration instigated a forced resettlement policy with the aims of dispersing concentrations of Uyghurs and of isolating Uyghurs from their communities. In 1961, my family fell victim to this policy. We were forced to leave our home and to relocate far from our friends and our relations.

Documenting the history of Uyghur persecution by the Chinese authorities is a long and detailed undertaking, which is full of personal stories that are lost due to the silencing of Uyghur dissent throughout the years. It is therefore important to focus on the present, and to speak about the current human rights abuses facing the Uyghur people, so that these accounts are not lost to the world.

In the wake of the unrest that rocked the regional capital of Urumchi in July 2009, Chinese authorities have implemented a multi-faceted crackdown on the Uyghur people. Reports from cities such as Urumchi, Kashgar and Ghulja indicate widespread, arbitrary arrests of Uyghurs, which was initially prompted by protests and violence on July 5 but which continued in subsequent weeks and months.

Testimony of witnesses collected by human rights organizations indicates that the mass arrests and detentions of Uyghurs carried out after July 5 violated both Chinese and international law, as security forces did not provide reasons for arresting people, and failed to inform family members of the locations where their loved ones were being detained. Human rights organizations have documented large-scale sweep operations conducted by security forces in two predominantly Uyghur areas of Urumchi beginning July 6, during which young Uyghur men were packed into trucks and jeeps by the dozens.

Uyghurs who have publicized information about police abuses during this time, such as two men living in Khorghas County who told Radio Free Asia about the death of a

Uyghur detainee in police custody, have also been detained. The Chinese government's contradictory statements on the details of trials for Uyghurs detained in the aftermath of unrest in Urumchi indicate an absence of transparency surrounding criminal and judicial procedures, as well as a process driven by political motivations.

Four Uyghur journalists and webmasters were sentenced to prison this year- Gheyret Niyaz, Nureli, Dilshat Perhat and Nijat Azat- simply for exercising their freedom of speech. The Chinese government hides behind charges of "endangering state security," "splittism" or "terrorism" when punishing Uyghur voices, but the simple truth is that whenever Uyghurs contradict the official narrative stating the benevolence of the Chinese Communist Party, they are severely punished.

In the case of Mr. Niyaz, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison, even expressing views consistent with those of the Chinese government was not enough to keep him out of jail. In an interview with a local Chinese publication on Aug. 2, 2009, Mr. Niyaz not only openly sided with much of the Chinese government version of the unrest, but also dismissed my contribution to the Uyghur people. I welcome Mr. Niyaz's considered critique and resolutely defend his right to speak openly and freely. Without the expression of dissimilar voices there is little validity to any political process.

On July 5, 2009, mostly young Uyghur men and women began marching in the streets of Urumchi in a peaceful demonstration against the recent killing of Uyghur workers at a toy factory in Guangdong province, in southern China. According to Radio Free Asia interviews of Uyghurs working at the factory, a mob of Chinese workers and gang members from the local area stormed into the dormitory housing Uyghurs, beating them and hacking at them with machetes. The attack was carried out in response to an unsubstantiated rumor that Uyghur workers had sexually assaulted two Chinese workers.

Had the top two government officials in East Turkestan taken steps to address the killings in Guangdong, together with local officials, the protest in Urumchi might never have happened. However, these officials were clearly not interested in investigating abuses against Uyghurs, or in examining what caused the attack in Guangdong.

According to eyewitnesses interviewed by Amnesty International and the Uyghur Human Rights Project, Chinese security forces used deadly force on July 5, 2009 against Uyghur protestors in the regional capital of Urumchi. Reports published by the two organizations on the anniversary of the unrest contain testimonies of Uyghurs whose description of what happened in Urumchi that day contrasts starkly with the Chinese government's version of events. Interviews conducted separately by these two organizations with Uyghur eyewitnesses revealed a consistent account of deadly live fire and brutal policing on July 5 and in subsequent weeks.

Chinese authorities' indiscriminate killing of Uyghur protestors in Urumchi is consistent with systematic political, economic, social and cultural human rights abuses from a government obsessed with the maintenance of its control of a strategic and resource rich area.

Ethnic relations between Han Chinese and Uyghurs are at their lowest point in decades, and the first step toward creating peace and stability in the region is for the Chinese government to acknowledge that serious problems exist. The Chinese government must take active steps to address these problems, by creating space for dialogue, and putting in place a mechanism through which Uyghurs may express their legitimate grievances.

East Turkestan sits on valuable natural resources, namely oil, and is strategically important due to its proximity to Russia, South Asia and Central Asia. The Chinese government's thirst for energy to drive its economy and its growing dominance in global affairs has made the Uyghur presence in East Turkestan an inconvenience. Uyghurs must assimilate or face extinction.

The United Nations documents lower incomes and higher poverty for Uyghurs compared to Han Chinese in East Turkestan. Job opportunities in the public and private sectors are few for the young and talented Uyghurs graduating from university. Even if Uyghurs speak Mandarin Chinese, they face widespread discrimination in the job market. Recruitment advertisements in the regional capital openly state, "Han Chinese need only apply".

An official policy recruits young Uyghur women from majority Uyghur areas of East Turkestan and transfers them to work in factories in urban areas of east China. Under the policy, thousands of Uyghur women have been removed from their families and placed into substandard working conditions thousands of miles from their homes.

Already, hundreds of thousands of young Uyghur women have been transferred from East Turkestan into Beijing, Tianjin, Jiangsu, Qingdao, Shandong, Zhejiang, and other locations. There were 240,000 from the Kashgar Region to China's eastern provinces in 2006. The eventual goal of this policy, as part of the 11th Five Year Plan of the Chinese government, is to transfer some 400,000 young Uyghur women to China's eastern provinces.

The mass in-migration of Han Chinese settlers and the transfer of young Uyghur women to east China have changed the demography of East Turkestan. Today, Uyghurs are an absolute minority in their own land. The population of Urumchi, once an overwhelmingly Uyghur city, is now 80% Han Chinese.

This economic and demographic degeneration is accompanied by cultural human rights abuses. In East Turkestan, China is actively promoting the "Sinification" of Uyghurs, whereby linguistic, and religious aspects of Uyghur culture are outlawed, banned, or otherwise discouraged.

Students and government employees are not permitted to fast during Ramadan or attend mosques in general. Restaurants are also forced to open during fasting hours in the month of Ramadan. These repressive policies make it very difficult for Uyghurs to perform the five pillars of the Islamic faith.

Recent reports from official Chinese media indicate that authorities are implementing a “residents resettlement project”, which aims to relocate 65,000 Uyghur households (220,000 people) currently in Kashgar Old City. The target of the “residents resettlement project” is to relocate 45,000 Uyghur households and to demolish five square kilometers of Kashgar Old City in the first five years of the project. In 2008, the State Council of the National People’s Congress designated nearly three billion Yuan to the project.

As Kashgar Old City is one of the few remaining centers of traditional Uyghur culture and religion, many Uyghurs consider protection of Kashgar Old City as vital to maintaining a separate Uyghur identity. Kashgar Old City contains over eight square kilometers of traditional Uyghur homes, bazaars and centers of worship, such as the six hundred year old Id Kah Mosque.

Furthermore, Chinese authorities are implementing a monolingual Chinese language education system among Uyghurs in East Turkestan that undermines the linguistic basis of Uyghur culture. Since the mid-1980’s China’s government has moved in stages towards making Chinese the only language of instruction in East Turkestan’s schools. Over the past five years, government efforts at eliminating Uyghur language schools have accelerated dramatically as compulsory Chinese language education has been expanded at every educational level and every township in East Turkestan.

I was once a political prisoner of the Chinese government. I spent over five years in inhumane conditions for the price of my advocacy on behalf of the Uyghur people. In prison I saw for myself the torture and cruelty enacted on my people by the Chinese authorities. Even in exile and among free people in the United States, I am subjected to harassment, including surveillance of my activities at work and at home. The inboxes of the organizations I lead are regularly monitored, sophisticated virus emails are sent, and our websites hacked. This kind of surveillance is pervasive in the Uyghur Diaspora to the point where politically averse Uyghurs, such as academics and professionals, are treated as suspects. Since my release, there has been one attempt on my life- an incident that left me seriously injured for months.

In East Turkestan itself, the everyday activities of ordinary Uyghurs are followed closely by the Chinese party-state. CCTV cameras, informants and harsh sentences keep a tight lid on freedom of expression. My two sons, Alim and Ablikim, currently suffer in Chinese prisons, convicted on false and politically motivated charges. While in prison, they have suffered beatings at the hands of their Chinese jailers. The remainder of my family in East Turkestan is under house arrest, and live daily with the fear of arbitrary punishment. There is barely a Uyghur family that cannot tell you a story of detention, imprisonment and torture.

Why should the United States government and your elected officials speak out over the Uyghur plight?

Stability in China, the Central Asian region, and worldwide are principal goals for the United States. The resolution of Uyghur issues in East Turkestan and the establishment of

a democratic China are key in the realization of these goals.

China experiences thousands of instances of unrest annually that shows no sign of diminishing as the CCP continues to economically marginalize the rural and the non-Han Chinese populations with whose welfare it is charged. Simply put, the marginalized of China do not have a voice in the CCP's vision for China. In East Turkestan, a top down and non-negotiable process determines the direction of economic development- the Uyghur people are not consulted on the future direction of their communities and their region. Consequentially, policies do not reflect a balance of interests and lead to disenfranchisement. These are not the kind of conditions that engender a stable China that guarantees a long-term future for U.S. economic interests.

The United States has made great sacrifices in its work toward the stability of the Central Asia, and the U.S. provides a positive and democratic role model for Central Asian nations grappling with political volatility. China has made known its interest in the Central Asia through its establishment and dominance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has encouraged non-democratic solutions to regional problems. China's undemocratic political system and repression of Uyghurs provides a negative role model for the maturing Central Asian states- many of which have Uyghurs among their population that China wishes to silence. Globally, China has a long track record of propping up the most repressive regimes across the world such as Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan, thereby threatening global security.

The legitimacy of the Chinese government should rest further than its role as the world's creditor. Uyghurs are starved of the voice that a democratic China would bring. Uyghurs, Tibetans, Han Chinese, Mongolians, and all nationalities in China should be interlocutors in Chinese affairs without fear of censure. If this were so, these would be the democratic principles that the people of China will take to the world stage. Such a change would be a significant step to realizing the end of gross human rights violations perpetrated against 20% of the world's population.

Finally, I urge you to continue to speak out passionately- to expose the atrocious human rights abuses against the Uyghur people in East Turkestan, and to raise the cases of Uyghurs, who, just like I once did, languish in Chinese prisons. Raise the issues and cases with your legislators and with Chinese officials. One letter to a prisoner can make all the difference. Whenever Amnesty raised my case, my conditions in prison improved, and I knew that the outside world cared. With the knowledge that people across the world were monitoring the Chinese government, I gained strength. This strength is the gift you can give to the Uyghur people.

Thank you.