



# Information for the Press on the Guantanamo Uyghurs

## Uyghur American Association

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## **Background**

Uyghurs (alternatively spelled Uighurs, Uygurs, Uigurs) are ethnically and culturally a Turkic people living in the areas of Central Asia commonly known as East Turkestan (also known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). The area is vast, constituting one-sixth of the total land area under the control of the People's Republic of China. The Uyghurs have a rich cultural history going back almost 4,000 years. Before embracing Islam in the tenth century, Uyghurs believed in Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity. Today, Uyghurs practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam and lead predominantly secular lives.

Much like Tibetans, Uyghurs in East Turkestan have struggled for cultural survival in the face of a government-supported influx of Chinese migrants, as well as harsh repression of political dissent and any expression, of their distinct identity, however lawful or peaceful.

Reports from East Turkestan document a pattern of abuse including political imprisonment, torture, and disappearances. With only a few extremely rare exceptions, Uyghurs continue to be the only population in China consistently subjected to executions for political and religious offenses. Mosques are summarily closed and the Uyghur language is banned from use in schools. Uyghurs are subjected to compulsory unpaid labor on infrastructures, such as oil or gas lines to transfer East Turkestan's resources to mainland China.



On February 5, 1997, thousands of Uyghurs, mostly young men, took to the streets of Ghulja and marched to the Ghulja Municipal Government offices. They were demanding equal treatment, religious freedom, and an end to racial discrimination. Armed paramilitary police confronted the unarmed demonstrators with batons, tear gas and high-pressure water sprayed from fire trucks. Eyewitnesses report that Chinese police fired indiscriminately into the crowd, killing as many as 30 Uyghur demonstrators and wounding more than 100 on the spot.

In the period immediately following February 5, 1997, thousands of Uyghurs were detained on suspicion of participating in the demonstration. In some cases, family members of those who had participated were also detained. Dozens and possibly hundreds of Uyghurs were executed, some in public, following summary trials. Many

others were sentenced to lengthy prison terms, including life, on charges of ‘hooliganism’. Other people simply disappeared, and are assumed to be either in prison or dead, their remains disposed of without their families being informed. Reports indicate that hundreds of Uyghurs suspected of involvement in the Ghulja demonstrations were executed between 1997-1999.<sup>1</sup>

After the Ghulja Massacre many Uyghurs fled abroad; primarily to the newly-independent ex-Soviet Central Asian nations, Pakistan, Nepal and a small number to Europe. Just as Tibetans flee to the neighboring countries of Nepal and India to escape human rights abuses in Tibet, Uyghurs seek refuge in countries neighboring East Turkestan, often on their way to Turkey, Europe or North America. However, China’s expanding political and economic influence in the region means that Uyghurs are far from safe in second countries neighboring East Turkestan, and even in some other countries.

Since the founding of the Central Asian states in the early 1990s, People’s Republic of China (PRC) leaders have feared that these nations, which are culturally and linguistically related to Uyghurs, would sympathize with the Uyghur situation and support their cause. The PRC government views the approximately one million Uyghurs living in ex-Soviet Central Asian countries as a threat, wary that this population might aid Uyghurs in East Turkestan to resist Chinese control of their traditional homeland.

Since 1991, China’s economic, geopolitical and energy interests in the ex-Soviet Central Asian region have led the Chinese government to pursue relations with the Central Asian states aimed at increasing their influence in the region. The primary mechanism for these relations was the Shanghai Five organization, founded in 1996. The Shanghai Five became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001.

China has forged close “anti-terror” links with several countries under the auspices of the SCO, and has signed extradition treaties with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Numerous Uyghurs have “disappeared” or been extradited from these countries. For example, in 1999, Kazakhstan forcibly returned Uyghur political activists Kasim Mahpir, Ilyas Zordun, and Zulfikar Memet to the PRC, where they were executed.<sup>2</sup>

Even those non-SCO neighboring states with which the Chinese government does not have formal extradition agreements are subject to intense pressure to return Uyghur asylum seekers. For instance, in late 2001 and early 2002, the Nepalese authorities forcibly returned at least two Uyghurs – possibly three – to the Chinese authorities in East Turkestan. One of these men, Shaheer Ali, who had already been recognized by the

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information please see the comprehensive report issued by Amnesty International in 1999 titled: *China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region*. The report is available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA17/018/1999/en/dom-ASA170181999en.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *China: Further information on Torture/Health Concern/Unfair Trial /Fear of Execution*, June 16, 2000.

UN High Commission for Refugees in Kathmandu as a person in need of protection, and issued with a refugee reference number, was executed in or around October 2003.

In the late 1990s, especially after the Ghulja Massacre of 1997, Uyghurs in second countries feared repatriation to China and possible imprisonment or execution. Therefore, some of them sought refuge in Afghanistan, which due to its weak governance at that time offered shelter from China and hostile second countries.

On October 7, 2001, the U.S. initiated Operation Enduring Freedom found the Uyghur refugees in Afghanistan in the wrong place at the wrong time. Once coalition bombing started the twenty-two Uyghurs later detained in Guantanamo escaped to Pakistan. None of these men were picked up on a battlefield, and most of them were captured by Pakistani bounty hunters and sold to American forces for \$5,000 each.

Since their detention, the U.S. government has determined that all of the Uyghurs in Guantanamo are non-enemy combatants. Five Uyghurs were released into Albania in 2006, but no third country has expressed willingness to accept the seventeen men remaining in Guantanamo, reportedly due at least in part to Chinese pressure. As early as 2003, most of the Uyghurs in Guantanamo were cleared for release. In 2008, U.S. congressional representatives from both sides of the aisle called for the release of the Guantanamo Uyghurs to the United States. In a landmark ruling on October 7, 2008 U.S. District Judge Ricardo Urbina paroled the remaining seventeen Uyghurs detained at Guantanamo Bay into the United States. On appeal, a temporary stay was issued on the ruling on October 8, 2008.

### **Uyghur American Association**

The Uyghur American Association (UAA) works to promote the preservation and flourishing of a rich, humanistic and diverse Uyghur culture, and to support the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, democratic means to determine their own political future.

UAA also acts as the voice of the Uyghur-American community. There are an estimated 1,000 Uyghurs in the United States. Consistent with Uyghur traditions of hospitality, the Uyghur-American community is ready to assist the U.S. government with a smooth integration of the 17 Uyghur men in Guantanamo to life in the United States. The Uyghur-American community believes that by helping in this process it can somewhat repay their debt to the United States for providing them with the opportunity to live with freedom, human rights and democracy. The Uyghur-American community intends to ensure that the 17 men become productive residents of the United States.

In 2004, UAA founded the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), a human rights research, reporting and advocacy organization, with a supporting grant from the National Endowment for Democracy. The purpose of UHRP is to promote improved human rights conditions for Uyghurs and other indigenous groups in East Turkestan, on the premise

that the assurance of basic human rights will facilitate the realization of the community's democratic aspirations.

UHRP is a part of the Uyghur American Association, which is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit, tax-exempt community membership organization.

UHRP, while focusing on the repression that takes place in East Turkestan, monitors cases of Uyghurs who have fled to Central Asian countries, the Middle East, and on to Europe, where they seek asylum from their host countries and refuge from the Chinese government.

**Quotes by Ms. Rebiya Kadeer, President of the Uyghur American Association, on the October 7, 2008 Ruling on the Guantanamo Uyghurs**

“On behalf of all oppressed Uyghurs, I want to thank the people of the United States, as well as their legal system and government, for exercising the rule of law, something which Uyghurs have not come to expect in China. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Mr. Sabin Willett and his fellow lawyers, who have worked tirelessly on behalf of the Uyghurs in Guantanamo. Justice has finally prevailed in this case, and the United States has once again exemplified the traits that are so deeply admired by Uyghurs around the world.”

“The fact that today’s proceedings did not even consider returning these men to China shows that they would face certain torture and even execution upon their arrival in China. While it took nearly seven years for this ruling to come about, these Uyghurs would have been executed within two months of being returned to China. Uyghurs in East Turkestan and in exile thank the American government for not sending the seventeen Uyghur men to China to a terrible fate. In the United States, the Uyghur community can offer the support these men need to lead productive lives.”

**Uyghur American Association Profiles**

**Ms. Rebiya Kadeer, President**

Ms. Rebiya Kadeer, 62, is a Uyghur democracy leader, former businesswoman and former prisoner of conscience. An advocate for the rights of the Uyghur people in East Turkestan, she established a multimillion-dollar trading company and worked to provide opportunities for disadvantaged Uyghurs. Previously held up as a model of Uyghur success, she fell from government favor after she began calling upon the PRC government to change its repressive policies against the Uyghurs. She was arrested in 1999 while on her way to meet with a U.S. Congressional delegation that was visiting East Turkestan to investigate the human rights situation there. She was sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment in March 2000, following a secret trial. Forced to spend two years in solitary confinement, she witnessed brutal torture and abuse carried out on her fellow prisoners.

Ms. Kadeer's case received wide international attention as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch publicized her case and aggressively pursued her freedom. In 2000, Human Rights Watch awarded Ms. Kadeer its highest human rights award. In 2004, Norway's Rafto Foundation honored her with the Rafto Award. Then, on March 17, 2005, three days before an official visit to Beijing by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, she was released from prison, ostensibly on medical grounds, and sent to the United States, where she was given refugee status. Ms. Kadeer spent nearly six years in prison before being released to the U.S.



Ms. Kadeer has actively campaigned for the human rights of the Uyghur people since her arrival in the United States. Nominated for the 2006, 2007 and 2008 Nobel Peace Prize, she is widely regarded as the “spiritual mother” of the Uyghur people. In September 2005, Ms. Kadeer founded the International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation in Washington, D.C, which works to promote human rights for Uyghur women and children in East Turkestan. In May 2006, she was elected to the presidency of the Uyghur American Association, also based in Washington, which works to support the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, democratic means to determine their own political future. In November 2006, she was elected as president of the World Uyghur Congress, which represents the collective interests of the Uyghur diaspora, both in East Turkestan and in countries throughout the world.

Ms. Kadeer's children and other family members have frequently been persecuted by PRC authorities in retaliation for her human rights advocacy. Two of her sons, Alim and Ablikim Abdureyim, are currently serving lengthy prison sentences, and their punishments are widely seen as retaliation for Ms. Kadeer's human rights activism on behalf of the Uyghur people. Other family members have been detained, placed under house arrest and otherwise harassed.

**Languages:** Uyghur (translation to/from English and Mandarin Chinese for interviews with Ms. Kadeer can be provided)

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### **Mr. Alim Seytoff, General Secretary**

Mr. Seytoff has been campaigning for the human rights and freedom of the Uyghur people since he came to the United States in 1996. He has written many articles on the political situation in East Turkestan. His articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal,

the Asia Times, the Analyst (a publication of the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute of Johns Hopkins University), and the Berean Review, a publication of Regent University. Mr. Seytoff is frequently interviewed by major newspapers and other media organizations. He has also testified numerous times before the U.S. Congress and briefed U.S. State Department officials on the situation in East Turkestan. Mr. Seytoff holds a B.A. degree in Chinese Studies from Xinjiang University, and another B.A. in Broadcast Journalism from Southern Adventist University. He holds an M.A. degree in Political Science from the Robertson School of Government at Regent University. He also has a Certificate of Graduate Studies in International Politics from the same school. Mr. Seytoff received his J.D. degree from Regent University School of Law.

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### **A Note on Terminology**

The Uyghur American Association strongly recommends the use of “Uyghur” as opposed to “Chinese Muslim” or “Chinese Uyghur” in news reports. UAA believes that the descriptors “Chinese Muslim” and “Chinese Uyghur” are inaccurate and misleading, and would be akin to calling Tibetans “Chinese Buddhists”. Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic people, who possess a vibrant Central Asian culture and language. There are “ethnic Chinese Muslims” who reside primarily (but not exclusively) in western areas of the PRC - they are known as “Hui”. In addition, there would be scant basis to referring to members of the Uyghur diaspora residing outside of the PRC as “Chinese Muslims” - almost without exception, these Uyghurs do not identify themselves as “Chinese”.

### **A Note on Independence Versus Autonomy**

The Uyghur American Association does not advocate independence for East Turkestan. UAA seeks the fulfillment of Uyghurs’ right to self-determination, which PRC practices and policies have denied. UAA believes that, by virtue of that right, they should be able to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.



The Uyghur American Association (UAA) works to promote the preservation and flourishing of a rich, humanistic and diverse Uyghur culture, and to support the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, democratic means to determine their own political future in East Turkestan.



The UAA launched the UHRP in 2004 to promote improved human rights conditions for Uyghurs and other indigenous groups in East Turkestan, on the premise that the assurance of basic human rights will facilitate the realization of the community's democratic aspirations.

UHRP also works to raise the profile of the Uyghur people and the plight of all “minority” peoples in East Turkestan by:

Researching, writing and publishing news stories and longer reports covering a broad range human rights issues involving civil and political rights, through to social cultural and economic rights;

Preparing briefings – either written or in person – for journalists, academics, diplomats and politicians on the human rights situation faced by the Uyghur people and others in East Turkestan.