

Forum on Minority Issues — Oral Statement
Organisation: World Uyghur Congress
Speaker: Peter Irwin

Thank you _____,

I am speaking on behalf of the World Uyghur Congress to bring the Forum's attention to the worsening situation facing the Uyghur community from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

The Uyghur community continues to be subject to highly restrictive policies in terms of religious freedom, freedom of movement, assembly rights and adequate means of legal representation. As it stands today, the only legal religious practice that remains for Uyghurs is for those over the age of 18 and only within state-sanctioned mosques. All activities outside this venue may now be considered "illegal religious practice".

An incredibly broad Anti-Terror Law was also passed in late 2015 that will likely legitimise ongoing rights violations and facilitate future abuses against the Uyghur community. Ensuring respect for human rights acts as an antecedent to peace and stability – it should not be a casualty to insecurity, but a remedial force.

As a result of these cumulative policies, Uyghurs are increasingly fleeing China in hopes of reaching states where their rights can be adequately respected. Many have been forced to turn to human traffickers as the only viable means to leave the region through Southeast Asia. On 8 July 2015, 109 Uyghurs who had been held in an immigration detention facility in Bangkok, Thailand, were illegally and forcibly returned to China in clear violation of the non-refoulement principle underpinning the Refugee Convention and international refugee law.

The UNHCR had reportedly been given assurances by Thai authorities that those in detention would be safe from persecution, as the group made it plainly clear that they did not want to be deported. Although it was reported that a delegation was sent to China in order to check on the state of those returned, no official report or statement was ever released concerning the state of the group and their whereabouts are unknown still today.

As it stands, 60 Uyghurs remain in immigration detention facilities near Bangkok who have been held for nearly three years without access to legal remedy. The chance of arbitrary return to China for this group remains very high considering many cases over the past decade of illegal extradition from a number of states.

These issues have not been limited to China and Southeast Asia however as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey also consist of large minority Uyghur populations as well.

The problem, then, faced by Uyghur asylum seekers today must be approached in terms of roots causes, as well as in terms of addressing the problems faced by these communities in situations of humanitarian crises. We must first understand why it is that members of the Uyghur community would leave to begin with while also ensuring that those that have already left are protected in transit.

Uyghur refugees and asylum seekers must be afforded their rights under international law. Non-refoulement is not a principle that may be cast away in emergency situations, but must be upheld to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are protected when they make the difficult choice to leave their homes on account of unbearable repression.

Only through continued and constructive dialogue can genuine progress be made, and that's something we urge China and all other UN member states and organisations to enter into as a first step.

Thank you.