

The 15th session of the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues (UN Forum)

“Review. Rethink. Reform. 30th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Minority Rights”

Remarks of Zubayra Shamseden, Vice President, World Uyghur Congress

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“There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both, that of women” — Malala Yousafzai

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak; I am honored to be here on behalf of World Uyghur Congress; I am also honored to share the Uyghur people’s situation with many like-minded peoples here.

I am a Uyghur woman, a mother of 3 children, a wife, and a professional rights defender for the Uyghur people. Alongside other minorities in China, Uyghurs are severely persecuted people by the Chinese government.

Uyghurs are not a minority people in our own homeland in East Turkistan. Like myself, all Uyghurs prefer to call our homeland “East Turkistan,” not the Chinese government-imposed name “Xinjiang” or the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” in 1955. Although the name East Turkistan doesn’t imply any political meaning as China claims, it is simply the meaning of Tukiic people’s land in the East.

I have been defending the rights of my people since the late 1980s from a very young age. While my other Chinese graduate friends were dreaming about prestigious jobs and enjoying life after college, I was searching for answers to my questions: why am I treated differently from the majority Han people? What I witnessed and experienced under a repressive Chinese regime in my homeland made me choose a path to become a defender of the defenseless.

The Chinese government has detained an estimated 2-3 million Uyghurs in mass internment camps since 2016, out of a population of about 12 million; Uyghurs call them concentration camps because innocent people are hauled into these camps based on their religion and ethnic identity. There is no judicial process, there is no appeal.

The same kind of repression of Uyghurs existed for many years before this; The Uyghur Human Rights Project, a research based advocacy organization in Washington DC, has documented these atrocities through its reports since 2014, including my brother Abdurazzak Shamseden's case. He was arrested in 1998 in connection with the Ghulja massacre that happened on February 5, 1997, in East Turkistan.

On February 5, 1997, young Uyghurs peacefully protested against the Chinese government's unfair treatment in Ghulja city, my hometown; protesters asked China should allow Uyghurs to have justice and equal opportunities; offer religious and cultural freedom; and to punish Chinese drug sellers to Uyghurs from mainland China. Instead of listening to protestors and investigating the root cause of social disorder within the city, Chinese armed forces opened fire towards the protestors. Young Uyghurs were killed and disappeared after the massacre. Since then, my family has fallen apart; suffering hugely as a result of the crackdown. In the aftermath of the massacre, among the arrested was my sister, my niece and one of my brothers and a few cousins.

In 1999 my brother Abdurazzak Shamseden who I just mentioned was arrested was sentenced to life imprisonment in a secret trial without witnesses, a lawyer or even any family members' attendance. It's been 24 years; he is still in a Chinese jail as a political prisoner.

As many other women human rights defenders from different corners of the world experience, I face many challenges too. However, none of those challenges, whether they are personal or professional, are more challenging than the painful tasks we undertake in order to protect the rights of the defenseless and being a voice of the voiceless. It is even more challenging if you confront a biggest denialist country like China, who denies that they are perpetrating human rights abuses/Genocide against Uyghurs at all.

A historic report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights from August this year found that the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs "may constitute crimes against humanity." In September, 46 independent UN experts said that "profound concerns over systematic human rights violations [...] in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region cannot, and should not, be ignored by the international community."

However, we're still not seeing much action from the international community, as China will continue to white wash its crimes against Uyghurs.

The release of the historic UN report was delayed due to Chinese government pressure; moreover, on October 6, the Human Rights Council rejected a draft decision to hold a debate on the issue, 19 votes against, and only 17 in favour with 11 abstentions of member states.

Uyghur organizations have, for many years, supported the work of the UN human rights office, but access to the system has been a major struggle. For example, in 2017, World Uyghur Congress President Dolkun Isa was attending a forum on indigenous issues at the UN headquarters in New York. Although he was fully accredited to participate in the gathering, Isa said that he was confronted by UN security who told him to leave the premises immediately. He was given no reason for this, and although his accreditation remained valid, he was not allowed to re-enter the building later that day or when the forum resumed on April 28. When Human Rights Watch sought an explanation, the spokesperson's office said it had no information on the specific case.

This was just one incident, but Uyghur human rights defenders and organizations have faced a number of other challenges accessing the UN human rights system.

A growing number of governments have also expressed alarm about the human rights situation in China. The U.S. State Department determined in January 2021 that this treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity, and parliaments in Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and the European Parliament have all passed motions or resolutions condemning the atrocity crimes.

Therefore we urge the UN to put pressure on the Chinese government to implement the recommendations that the UN report put forward in its report.

Recommendations:

1. The UN needs to solve the problem of access to the UN itself—Uyghur or Tibetan groups will never be able to get consultative status because the Chinese government vetoes these applications
2. Because the UN is so state-centric (governments have most of the power), much more needs to be done in all agencies (not just the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights) to address minority rights issues, otherwise governments will feel no pressure to give better treatment to minority groups

3. The UN needs even more channels for minority voices to raise issues, in order to prevent and address conflict and assaults on human dignity; the UN should be a welcoming venue for non-state actors, instead of restricting them
4. Minority communities should work much more closely together given the similarities in their experiences and cases.

Thank you!