

Prisoner Profile: Huseyin Celil

BY MADELINE EARP



Huseyin Celil was born in 1969 in Kashgar, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwest China. A Uyghur Muslim with dual Canadian-Chinese citizenship, he has been branded a terrorist in China, and has reportedly been convicted of political and religious separatism. His present whereabouts are unknown.

Approximately eight million Uyghurs, a Turkic, mainly Muslim ethnic group, make up the majority of the population in the XUAR, where they endure serious violations of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights by the Chinese government. The XUAR, the western portion of which formerly comprised the Republic of Eastern Turkistan, was occupied by Chinese Communist forces in 1949 and became an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1956. Radical religious separatists in the area, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, allegedly have links with Al-Qaeda, a fact which the Chinese government uses to consolidate control over the region's population.

Celil (pronounced Je-lil) is an outspoken activist on behalf of Uyghur rights, which first led to his arrest in China in 1994. He escaped after a month in prison, purchasing false documents to enter Uzbekistan, where he found work as a fabric salesman. He met a local woman, Kamila Telendibaeva, in 1998, and the two were married a year later. They moved to Turkey, where Celil was granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees under the Geneva Convention. In 2001 he moved with his wife to Canada after being granted political asylum there. The rest of Celil's family, including three sons from a former marriage, remained in China.

Over the next four years, Celil and his

wife lived in Burlington, Ontario and had three children. Celil became the imam at a local mosque while studying accounting at Mohawk College; friends describe him as a highly respected and charismatic community leader. Kamila was pregnant again in March of this year when the whole family traveled to Uzbekistan to stay with her relatives. Celil's other three sons joined them from China to discuss plans to bring them to Canada, which had stalled after they were denied papers by the embassy in Beijing.

On March 27, 2006, Celil was detained in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. Concerns immediately arose among family and friends that he was being held so that he could be extradited to China, where he had been sentenced to death in absentia for his alleged subversive activities in China and following his escape, including founding a separatist political party. Amnesty International has monitored a growing number of overseas Uyghurs, including refugees and asylum seekers, forcibly returned by neighboring Central Asian countries to China where they have subsequently been subjected to human rights violations.

Celil had become a naturalized Canadian citizen a few months before his detention, and his case was raised several times in Canadian parliament and discussed in the Canadian press. Many have expressed concern about the implications for treatment of all Canadian citizens in China, particularly in light of the approaching 2008 Beijing Olympic games, if the government is not more active in pressing for Celil's release. Canada has no embassy in Tashkent, only an honorary consulate staffed by an Uzbek national.

International pressure has also been levied on the Uzbek government. In May, the Embassy of Uzbekistan in London responded to appeals from Amnesty International by releasing a statement saying that Celil was Guler Dilaver, and was wanted in Kyrgyzstan for terrorist activities, specifically involvement in an assassination and attacks on visiting Xinjiang state officials in Kyrgyzstan in 2000. Celil's lawyer Chris McLeod denied the allegations on the grounds that Celil was living in Turkey under United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) administration at the time when the incidents occurred.

The Canadian consulate in Tashkent confirmed in June that Celil had been extra-

ditioned to China as feared, in violation of consular agreements between Canada and China, and apparently after his innocence in the Kyrgyzstan case had been established by the Uzbek authorities.

The threat to Celil's chances of a fair trial, and consequently his life, increased substantially on his removal to China due to his involvement in the trial of another Uyghur. Celil was named in the sentencing document of Ismail Samed, whose trial took place in China in October 2005 and who may have already have been executed for separatism. According to the Uyghur Human Rights Project, another of Samed's alleged accomplices, Kurbin Yasim, was executed shortly after being sent back to China following his detention by authorities in Kyrgyzstan. The only evidence against these individuals was the testimony of witnesses who, following interrogation by Chinese police, were themselves executed in 1998.

Canadian Foreign Affairs minister Peter McKay raised the case with Chinese authorities in July, but Canadian officials have yet to be allowed consular access to Celil.

In September, unconfirmed information was passed on to Celil's sister Heyrigul by police authorities in Kashgar saying that Celil had been sentenced in early August to 15 years in prison, and that he might be tried again. This was the first news of him in four months, and prompted speculation that he might be being held in Bajianghu Prison in Urumqi, a facility known for housing political prisoners. Heyrigul Celil, in China, continues to seek confirmation of her brother's exact location. Back in Burlington, Kamila, who gave birth to Celil's youngest son in August, plans protests in Ottawa and waits anxiously for further news.

Sources: Uyghur Human Rights Project (uhrp.org), Amnesty International Canada (amnesty.ca), huseyincelil.com, *The Globe and Mail*, frontpagemag.com, East Turkestan Information Center, homesnotbombs.ca, Wikipedia, Politics Watch.