

A VOICE FOR THE UYGHURS

AN HRIC INTERVIEW WITH REBIYA KADEER

Rebiya Kadeer, a prominent Uyghur businesswoman and political activist, was detained in Xinjiang in August 1999 and subsequently sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of “leaking state secrets” after sending newspaper clippings to her husband in the United States. She was released early on “medical parole” on March 14, 2005 and sent to the U.S. In 2006 Kadeer was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. CRF interviewed her on October 26 regarding her efforts on behalf of the Uyghur people.

China Rights Forum (CRF): It was widely reported in October that you were on the shortlist for this year’s Nobel Peace Prize. What do you see as your main accomplishments on behalf of the Uyghurs since you left China?

Rebiya Kadeer (Kadeer): After the news of my nomination came out, the whole world became aware of the existence of the Uyghurs. The Chinese government has been trying to wipe the Uyghurs from the earth without the world knowing about it. We share the same fate as the Tibetans. But the Tibetans have the Dalai Lama, and he promotes the Tibetan cause throughout the world. The Uyghurs don’t have such a leader. The Uyghur people are like prisoners in China, and the world needs to hear their voice. My nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize has allowed the Uyghur voice to be heard by the rest of the world. It has also opened doors for my activities on behalf of human rights and democracy for the Uyghur people.

The Uyghur people need freedom of speech and economic rights, freedom of access to education and the right to preserve and develop their culture. They also need religious freedom and the freedom to produce their own children, and our political prisoners need freedom. Our women and children especially need support—the situation for women and children is heartbreaking. My nomination has allowed the world to

become aware of this situation, and gives me an opportunity to raise these issues and make people aware of what is happening in East Turkistan.

One indication of the significance of the nomination is that in the past, the Chinese government has not given any special public recognition to people who win the Nobel Peace Prize. But this time the person who won the Nobel in competition with me was invited to China and presented with an award.¹ This never happened before. The Chinese government realized that the Nobel Prize would be associated with the fate of the Uyghur people.

CRF: What do you see as the greatest challenges in working on human rights for the Uyghurs from outside your own country?

Kadeer: Collecting information about what’s happening in East Turkistan is the most difficult part, because the Chinese government strictly controls information flow. Another challenge is that wherever I go, whatever country or organization I visit, there is always an intervention from the Chinese government saying the Uyghurs are terrorists. China has become an economic power with trade and diplomatic interests in countries all over the world. The Uyghurs have to cooperate with Tibetans, Mongols and Chinese democracy activists to promote our cause for human rights and democracy. It’s difficult against such a strong country, but by cooperating with one another, we can win.

CRF: Some of your children have just gone on trial, and this isn’t the first time something like this has happened to your family. Can you describe what kind of personal price you and your family members have paid for your work on behalf of the Uyghurs?

Kadeer: The Chinese government destroyed all of my business. All of my friends and relatives have been interrogated by the police. Some of my close friends have lost their jobs as a result. People close to me are all having a difficult time in China. My granddaughter was expelled from her school. My own relatives have stopped having any communications with me. After all that, they attacked my family. My four innocent children were arrested by the Chinese authorities in June 2006, and two were charged with tax evasion. There was a trial on November 26 in

Urumqi.² I haven't heard from my other children; one is under house arrest.

I wish I could go back to fight for human rights for the Uyghur people in my homeland. I wanted to earn money to help Uyghur people, to help children who can't afford to go to school, and also to financially support Uyghur women, but now I can't. Currently I am facing some financial difficulties, but at least I can promote the Uyghur cause and let the Uyghur voice be heard in the international community.

CRF: Isn't it true that if you went back to China, you would probably be arrested, and then the Uyghurs would lose that voice?

Kadeer: That's why I can't go back. Every time I hear news of my children, I feel horrible. But I'm not the only person paying the price for this cause. There were young Uyghurs shot dead in front of their parents because they participated in the 1997 Ghulja Uprising. I saw their parents crying, and some became mentally ill from the anguish. So no matter what price I pay, I have to help these people to get support from the international community and also from among the Chinese people themselves.

CRF: Recently, Xinjiang's Communist Party secretary, Wang Lequan, was quoted as saying, "The bottom line is that cultural life is based on people having enough to eat. If people cannot eat enough, nobody can sing or dance."³ What do you think of that statement?

Kadeer: We have rich natural resources, including gas and oil. We've been living in this beautiful land for centuries. Before the Chinese occupation, we supported ourselves and we didn't even use any of our natural resources. After the occupation there was a massive Han Chinese migration, and we've been feeding millions of Han Chinese migrants. The Uyghurs who graduate from college can't find jobs because the job market is already dominated by Han Chinese migrants, and some have been forced to commit crimes. All the jobs in government are taken by Han Chinese migrants. At the same time, our economic and political rights and our cultural and religious freedoms have all been restricted by the Chinese government, so now we've become a people who can only dance and sing—for the Chinese!

Wan Lequan has no role in feeding Uyghurs. He came to our land to rob us of our resources and crack down on Uyghur activities. Even the Han Chinese migrants, those who came to East Turkistan early on, say Wang Lequan has Uyghur blood on his hands. The massive Han Chinese migration violates the law of autonomy given to the Uyghur people. Under regional autonomous law, the number of Chinese migrants cannot exceed the number of indigenous people and the capacity of our natural resources. If millions of migrants come in, how can we feed so many people?

The benefits of the region must go to the indigenous people first, not to support the economy on the coastal areas of China. Chinese businesses use their superior political rights to

take away natural resources and also jobs, leaving the Uyghurs unemployed and impoverished. In fact, Wang Lequan isn't feeding the Uyghurs, the Uyghurs are feeding illegal Han Chinese migrants. Wang talks about feeding the Uyghurs as if they were animals while he destroys our culture.

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CRF: Your group doesn't call for an independent Uyghur state, but there are groups calling for independence for Xinjiang, Tibet and other autonomous regions. The Chinese government is particularly sensitive to these demands. Is it worth bringing up the question of independence, or should that question just be left off the table in hopes of leading the Chinese government to improve the conditions of the Uyghurs and others under Chinese control?

Kadeer: Yes, there are Uyghur groups that call for an independent Uyghur state. But at this moment, I want to focus on human rights, religious freedom and democracy for the Uyghur people as my priority. I hope the international community will help our struggle by challenging China on its treatment of the Uyghurs and other minorities. Governments could also help by funding research on the political, economic, social, cultural and religious situation in East Turkistan, because very little is known about our plight in the outside world.

NOTES

1. Muhammad Yunus, a citizen of Bangladesh, and his Grameen Bank were awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for developing micro-credit as an instrument in the struggle against poverty. Days after the announcement of the prize, Yunus was invited to China, where on October 24 he met with Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing. Li congratulated Yunus on winning the prize for his efforts in helping promote social development in Bangladesh. See "Chinese Foreign Minister meets Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus" on the Chinese government official Web portal Gov.cn, http://www.gov.cn/misc/2006-10/24/content_422372.htm.
2. Two of Rebiya Kadeer's sons, Kahar Abdureymim and Alim Abdureymim, were put on trial on tax fraud charges on October 26, 2006. According to a news article quoting Kadeer's daughter, only four family members were allowed to attend the four-hour closed-door trial. A verdict was scheduled to be announced around November 6. According to reports, another son, Ablikim, was still in detention on subversion charges and was hospitalized after been beaten by police. A daughter, Rushangul Kadeer, is also reported to be under house arrest. "Sons of exiled Muslim leader tried in China, sister says," AFP, October 29, 2006, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/asiapacific/detail.asp?GRP=C&id=93961>; Following detentions, formal charges brought against Ms. Kadeer's sons," Uyghur Human Rights Project, June 14, 2006, <http://www.uhrp.org/articles/167/1/Breaking-news-Following-detentions-formal-charges-brought-against-Ms-Kadeers-sons/Breaking-news-Following-detentions-formal-charges-brought-against-Ms-Kadeers-sons.html>.
3. Wang was quoted in "East Turkistan: China Defends Control over Religion," *Gulf Times*, October 18, 2006, posted at <http://www.unpo.org/article.php?id=5650>.