

Written Testimony of Rushan Abbas

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for

U.S. Congressional Executive Commission on China

“The PRC’s Universal Periodic Review and the Real State of Human Rights in China”

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Chairman Smith, Chairman Merkley, Ranking Members, Members of the Commission and Staff,

I express my gratitude for this opportunity to submit my testimony. My purpose is to document my observations during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group session held in Geneva on January 23, 2024, where the international community took stock of China's human rights record. I will also provide an account of reports, side events, and claims made by the Chinese Communist Party during the UPR session.

Universal Periodic Reviews are intended for a genuine exchange within the UN framework. This one, however, occurred amid an ongoing genocide that the United Nations and its member states have chosen to ignore, except for a select few. More than anything else, this UPR session underscored the difficulties in holding China accountable for its human rights atrocities against Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hong Kongers, Southern Mongolians, and Chinese dissidents, as well as the systemic challenges China poses against the international system.

In Geneva, I witnessed how a totalitarian state aiming to silence dissent and legitimize its oppression worldwide worked to exploit this UN mechanism to receive an international seal of endorsement. The event that unfolded in Geneva made it evident that a significant accountability gap exists within our global framework concerning human rights and justice.

I would like to underline, by providing a telling example, that the UN system is under immense pressure by China. The main takeaway of the August 2022 report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was that Beijing’s actions in the Uyghur Region could constitute “crimes against humanity.” This is a grave allegation that the UN cannot – and did not – raise without compelling evidence. However, it was disheartening to see that the UN’s official compilation of its own reports as part of the UPR process conspicuously left this conclusion out.

As much as Campaign for Uyghurs was relieved to see that this damning conclusion of a report by the UN itself was at least mentioned through our organization in the summary of the civil

society reporting produced by UN, the fact that the UN is debilitated to the point of not being able to refer to its own reporting without hiding behind a civil society organization shows the level of China's undue pressure under which the UN system currently operates.

This UPR was marred by the PRC's manipulative tactics aimed at stifling genuine critique and dialogue. Before the session began, we could see droves of pro-Chinese students and Chinese Government-Organized NGOs sent to overcrowd the venue to restrict access for authentic human rights representatives. The mission of these operatives was clearly to limit civil society participation, and it took our persistent efforts with the UN Secretariat to secure access to the hall that clearly had more available space.

Defying the UN's clear protocols, pro-China individuals spent hours in the upstairs gallery photographing member state delegates and activists from Uyghur, Tibetan and Chinese dissenter groups, including myself during the review. Another pro-China attendee was taking pictures of Tibetan and Uyghur rights defenders as we were standing in the line to enter the hall, and unfortunately, it took repeated cries from activists to get the UN security to stop this individual.

I saw a pro-Chinese attendee jotting down notes on his phone while looking over at an Uyghur activist's computer. This deliberate surveillance occurred inside the UN, a space meant for secure and open discussion on human rights. These are common tactics used by the CCP to intimidate and monitor human rights advocates in international forums, especially those dedicated to unveiling the true state of human rights in China.

At the session, a record number of 163 countries requested to speak during the interactive dialogue between Member States, and each was granted just 45 seconds to provide recommendations. Of these, over 120 countries either chose to ignore China's dark record or commend its so-called progress. This included nations that, by their own account, should stand against repression – and not endorse it. It was jarring how sharply this orchestrated praise contradicted the realities of the PRC rule that put marginalized groups under an indefensible persecution in so-called re-education camps.

Surreal praises from countries, such as for "bolstering religious tolerance in Xinjiang," and hailing of China's so-called "commitment to guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion or belief," ring hollow against the backdrop of over a million Uyghurs detained in an ongoing genocide, with their basic human rights stripped away. Similarly, endorsements of China's policies by nations like Russia reflected a disturbing alignment with the PRC's attempts to eradicate Uyghurs, Tibetans, Southern Mongolians, and Hongkongers at the expense of their rich cultural diversity and identity. Witnessing the subversion of the UPR process was a gravely worrying sight to behold.

At this point, I want to applaud U.S. Ambassador Michele Taylor for her resolute stance among the 28 countries which spoke against human rights atrocities. In just 45 seconds, Ambassador Taylor delivered eight recommendations on the ongoing Uyghur genocide and violations in Tibet, Hong Kong, Macao, and mainland China.

As the session was underway, we became aware that China released a white paper on "counterterrorism" timed to distort facts and spread misinformation about the Uyghur people. This move aimed to divert attention from the ongoing genocide and shape a narrative more favorable to China's interests. Despite conclusive research and survivor testimonies, side events organized by the Chinese Government and NGOs presented propaganda to cast doubt on the established evidence.

This white paper alleges to provide a legal framework for what China misleadingly calls counterterrorism, when reports from several credible sources show that Uyghurs are being arbitrarily detained on false terrorism charges, even for uttering a common Islamic greeting, "Assalamualaikum," which means "Peace be unto you" – a common wish of Abrahamic religions.

Participating in religious activities such as attending religious classes, fasting, and going on religious pilgrimages is also considered grounds for arrest. The release of this new white paper, strategically timed to be published as the UPR session was underway, should be understood as an indicator of China's confidence on the overall outcome of its Universal Periodic Review, a victory lap as China successfully cajoled and coerced many nations into silence on its abysmal human rights record.

At side events organized by pro-China groups and aided by the Chinese Mission in Geneva, several speakers tried to whitewash China's human rights atrocities. In one such attempt, a so-called scholar from the Chinese Medical Association presented fabrications on the Uyghur Region, disputing the evidence of forced medical treatment and forced sterilization among ethnic minority groups to suppress Uyghur birthrates. In another instance, China Society for Human Rights Studies had brought a "token" Uyghur by the name of Remina Xiaokaiti who showered praises for what she called a significant progress in employment and human rights in Xinjiang, attributing it to Chinese modernization efforts. This individual also accused Western countries of fabricating "forced labor" claims as a means to impose sanctions and undermine China's prosperity.

Another individual by the name of Suolang Zhuoma from another government-organized NGO, China Tibetology Research Center, praised China for its efforts to sustain traditional Tibetan culture through investments in preserving key cultural relics, encouraging young people's interest in traditional art, and supporting cultural festivals. Continued references to Xizang, a

name constructed for Tibet by the Chinese Communist Party, unfortunately pointed to a worrying trend adopted by the CCP to improve its efforts to gradually erase the name of Tibet from the United Nations system.

China's manipulation of the UN and blatant abuse of the international system undermines principles of justice, human rights, and fair representation. Their maneuvers compromise the UN's integrity and pose a direct threat to global stability and human dignity. In my opinion, China's calculated attempts were indeed successful in shielding its egregious crimes from scrutiny and eroded the UN's founding principles and purpose. The international community must unite against such tactics to preserve the UN as a beacon of peace, free from exploitation.

Overall, my observation is that what transpired in Geneva was not an isolated incident but a symptom of a much larger issue. The PRC's conduct at the UPR, and the permissive attitude in that room, served as a microcosm of China's broader disregard for international norms, human rights, and the dignity of Uyghurs and other persecuted communities.

It must be said: China is bent on trying to silence those who can speak about the real state of human rights in China. It became clear to me that in Geneva, the PRC operates with an audacious sense of impunity, treating the UN as if it were their own playground and getting what they want. The United States must recognize the gravity of this situation and the urgency with which it demands a response. It's high time nations stood firm against such bold affronts, ensuring that the UN remains true to the vision of Eleanor Roosevelt rather than a rubber stamp for a global offense on freedom.

According to the rules of the UPR's interactive session, civil society organizations are not granted an opportunity to speak. I am grateful for this opportunity to correct the record and speak on the real state of human rights in China.

Thank you.