

TESTIMONY OF
ENES KANTER FREEDOM
CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA
HEARING ON JULY 11TH, 2023

Chairman Smith and Co-chair Sen. Merkley, and members of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

I'm a basketball player. My job is to go out there, and compete with my teammates and try to win an NBA championship. I ask people when they call me a retired NBA player not to, because I refuse to accept that my career ended the way it did. My entire life I worked so hard to achieve my NBA dream, and I made it. However, because I wanted to stand up for what is right, my career ended in a very brutal way.

I have been talking about the human rights violations in my home country Turkey for the last 11 years. There are many innocent people in Turkey being prosecuted by Erdogan's regime. Due to my outspokenness about the human rights violations and political prisoners in Turkey, Turkish President Erdogan fired my dad from his job as a scientist. My sister went to medical school for 6 years, and she still can't find a job. My little brother was playing basketball and he got kicked off every team because he shares the same last name as me. They were affected so much, that they had to put a statement out publicly disowning me. The letter is still on the internet. The Turkish government didn't believe it, and they sent police to raid my house in Turkey. They took all their electronics away because they wanted to see if I am still in contact with my family or not. They couldn't find evidence, but they threw my dad in jail. The US put so much pressure on Turkey, and they finally let him go.

After that, they revoked my passport, tried to kidnap me in Indonesia, put my name on the Interpol list, put a bounty on my head, and in 10 years they sent 12 arrests warning for me.

One of the reasons I was fighting so hard against this brutal regime is because I had so much support from the NBA. Support from the commissioner, Adam Silver, my teammates, and every organization I played for (5 different teams - Utah, Oklahoma, New York Knicks, Portland, Boston). Especially the support from my teammates and the NBA gave me so much hope and motivation to fight.

When I was playing for the New York Knicks, I didn't travel to London for an exhibition game against the Washington Wizards because I was scared for my life. Commissioner Adam Silver came out in a press conference and said "as an NBA family we support Enes Freedom and his fight against Turkish Regime, we support every player to stand for whatever they wanna believe in" I wanted to cry that day because of how much support I felt.

3 years ago, in 2020, Covid hit and the NBA took us to Orlando to continue to play the games. It was during the George Floyd protests that the NBA told every player that this is all about social justice, and that they are here to bring change. We are more than athletes. I respect everyone who peacefully protests. During those times NBA put Black Lives Matter logos on the floor and put those phrases behind our jerseys (which it was controlled by the NBA, we couldn't pick what we wanted to pick) and

every interview we were doing, the NBA was telling us to talk about social justice issues. All the players were putting these social justice message on their shoes and we brought lots of attention about what's going on.

My activism towards China started with a simple basketball camp. I had a beautiful basketball camp in New York. In fact, Congressman Hakeem Jeffries joined me at that camp. After the basketball camp, I sat down and was taking pics with the kids one by one. I remember taking a pic with this kid and their parent called me out front of everyone and said "how can you call yourself a Human Rights Activist when your Muslim brothers and sisters are getting tortured every day in concentration camps in China" I was still smiling for the camera, after I took a picture with his kid. I turned around and said, "I promise I'm going to get back to you."

That day, I canceled everything and went back to my hotel and started to educate myself about what's going on. I know on the Internet you can find all kinds of news, so I called my manager and told him that I need him to find me a concentration camp survivor. In a couple weeks, he found a lady who was a survivor. Me and her had a one-hour conversation about all the torture methods, gang raping, forced sterilization and abortion methods. I couldn't believe my ears. At the end of our conversation, I asked her "what can I do to help?" She answered "nothing." I said "What do you mean nothing? So, we had this 1-hour conversation for no reason?" She said "Listen, I live in America, I can do whatever I want, I can say whatever I want, I can eat whatever I want, I'm free. I have my freedom here. Help those 2-3 million Uyghurs who are in concentration camps, getting tortured, and raped every day."

At that moment, I said to myself, I don't care what it takes, I'm going to help these people.

I wanted to do it in a unique way, because when I was a kid watching an NBA game, the first thing I looked at was the NBA players shoes. I looked at the color, the brand, if they're comfortable or not, and the next day I was asking my dad to please buy them for me. Every kid loves shoes, so I want to inspire the young generation with something I knew they would pay attention to.

I reached out to artists around the world who were oppressed by their regime, and I told them to put all of the struggles, pain and stories on the shoes. I created these shoes without using slave labor.

My first topic was "Free Tibet." I was playing for Celtics, and it was our first game of the season against the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden. Because it was opening night at the Garden, everyone was there to watch that game. Knicks and Celtics is always a good rivalry so the whole country and world was watching that game. I put my "Free Tibet" on my shoes and started to warm up with my teammates. We sang the National Anthem, and it was 1 min left till the game starts. We are in a huddle front of our bench when two gentlemen from the Celtics came up to me and said, "You need to take your shoes off immediately." I asked him why and they said, your shoes have been getting so much attention internationally and we are getting many calls so please take them off.

It was the perfect moment for me because I was just getting ready for my citizenship test. So I closed my eyes and said -- ok Enes, there are 27 amendments and my 1st amendment is freedom of speech. So, I opened my eyes and told them "No, I'm not taking my shoes off."

They kept telling me to take them off, and I said, "even if I get fined, I'm not taking them off." They said, "we are not talking about a fine, we are talking about getting banned."

So, they were really threatening me to ban me from the NBA because of my shoes.

I played 0 min that half and after the 1st half, I went back to my locker room and checked my phone. There was thousands of notifications and I clicked on the one that my manager sent me saying, "China just banned every Celtics game on television." It literally took China 24 minutes (1 quarter 12 minutes, 2nd quarter 12 minutes) to ban every Celtics game. The game went into overtime and we lost the game. I played 0 minutes that night after previously playing in every game before that. After the game, every media outlet wanted to talk to me, and I told my manager no, because I don't want my teammates to think I'm doing this for attention.

After the first game, the NBPA (The NBA Players Association) called me and said "The NBA is pressuring us so much. You can never wear those shoes ever again." They were calling me and my manager every hour, wanting to make sure I'm not going to wear them ever again. I spoke about the problems happening in Turkey for the last 10 years without consequence, yet I speak about China for 1 day and my phone was ringing every hour asking me to stop what I'm doing.

The NBPA told that if I didn't stop, they will change the rules so that no player can put any kind of message on their shoes ever again. I couldn't believe how much they were pressuring me because I paid thousands of dollars to the players association every month to protect my rights against the NBA, but on this topic they were on NBA's side.

At one point I was so frustrated, and I told them "Ok I promise that I'm not going to wear Free TIBET shoes ever again." They asked me a few times to promise them and I said, "I promise" and they said ok problem solved.

The next game I wore "Free Uyghurs" shoes. The NBPA called me after the game and said, "Enes, you are a liar, you lied to us, we can never trust you ever again." And I told them that I never lied to you. I just said, "I'm not going to wear Free TIBET shoes ever again, but I never said I'm not going to wear free Uyghurs shoes." So, at that point, they understood that they are not going to be able to make me delete my tweets, apologize to the Chinese government, and put any false statements out there.

After the 3rd game, one of my teammates walked up to me and said, "Enes, you know this is your last year in the NBA right, if you ever criticize China, NIKE then you never gonna be able to play basketball in this league. So have fun, smile and I hope we win a championship this year because this is your last year, and your basketball career is going to end.

My agent called me after the 4th game and said, "Enes, I work for you, I don't work for the NBA so I have to keep it honest with you. If you say another word about the Chinese government, then you never going to play basketball in this league. No team will sign you, and all the owners who look like they care about social justice in reality all care about money and business so you won't be playing again."

After the 5th game, I had a conversation with the commissioner Adam Silver. We had a 30-minute phone conversation and at the end, he even admitted the following: "We are a business, Enes, it's a different system in China." I asked him "What do you think about China banning every Boston Celtics game on television" and he said, "It's not true." I told him that there are lots of legit reports out there and he said "I don't know about it" which was a lie.

It was the perfect moment for me because it was right before the Beijing Winter Olympics, so I tried to reach out to everyone. forget about NBA players, I tried to reach out to NFL, MLB, MLS, NHL, WWE, and even the Olympians.

But unfortunately, they all said the same thing: “Enes, what you are doing is so amazing, so courageous, so inspiring. we love you; we support you, but we cannot do it out loud, I asked them why? And they said: “we have shoe deals, endorsement deals, jersey sales, and we want to get another contract with the league that we play with.”

I asked them one simple question: Put yourself in their shoes. if your mother, your sister, or your daughter was in those concentration camps getting tortured and raped every day, would you still pick the money and business?”. They usually turned around and left the room.

After a couple of months, one of my friends called me. His name is Daryl Morey. He was the first guy who Tweeted and said, “Stand With Hong Kong” and the NBA lost millions of dollars because of it. I was playing for the Boston Celtics when he tweeted, and the Celtics made media unavailable for 2 weeks because I was the only player in the NBA that supported Morey’s tweet publicly. When we had a conversation after a couple of months regarding me talking about China, he said “Enes, don’t give up, when I tweeted about Hong Kong, the NBA made me take my tweet down, they made me apologize, they made me put some statements out there which I didn’t wanna put. But you don’t give up and you keep going.”

February came, and there was a trade deadline. Many of my teammates knew that I just played my last game in the NBA and they were telling me you will get traded or let go.

And they were right.

The Boston Celtics traded me to Houston Rockets, (which is known to be China’s team because of players like Yao Ming). And the Houston Rockets released me immediately.

It was over, and everyone in the NBA knew it too.

After I got released, about 3 weeks later, China put the games back on television. ESPN did an investigation and found out that 49 NBA owners have 10 billion dollars tied up in China. I had a conversation with the ex-owner of the Milwaukee Bucks and he even said: “China’s taken a very aggressive stance, which is ‘if you want to b---h about us, you’re out – which I get it, it’s business.”

I played 11 years in the NBA, I had 100s of teammates and 100s of coaches, yet not one of them reached out to me or texted me to say good luck with whatever is coming next. They were so scared that if I ever do an interview, that I would mention their name saying he texted me or he supported me. They knew that if I ever did, it would affect their contract situation or their endorsement deals.

I just turned 31 years old. I’m young, healthy, and love basketball. I still workout almost everyday and I’m in a really good shape. Everyone knows that the only reason I’m not in the NBA is because of the things that I spoke about. I averaged a double-double with Portland the year before I was outspoken about the issues in China.

I have NO regrets. If I had to do it all over again, I would do it even stronger. This is bigger than me, bigger than basketball and bigger than the NBA.

People keep talking about me losing my career, but they need to realize that I lost my family because I want to stand up for the human rights violations in Turkey. Me losing my career is nothing compared to losing my family.

Freedom is not free, and it's going to come with some consequences. But someone had to stand up for the innocent around the world, no matter how much money or business I have lost because of it.

According to my manager, I lost around 50 million dollars, with all the NBA contracts and endorsement deals that I could've signed.

I sleep in peace at night knowing that I did the right thing. My only question is: How can the biggest dictatorship in the world, China, control an 100% American made company and fire an American citizen?

Thank you all...