**HEARING OF THE CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA**

“**Surveillance, Suppression, and Mass Detention: Xinjiang’s Human Rights Crisis**”

**124 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

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**Statement of Gulchehra Hoja**

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Co-Chairman, and distinguished members of the Commission, it’s my privilege to participate in today’s hearing on a topic that deeply affects me personally and professionally as a reporter working for an organization with a congressional mission of bringing reliable news and information to people in China.

My name is Gulchehra Hoja, I’m a journalist with Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur language service, and I’m a U.S. citizen. I grew up in Urumqi, the capital of the Uyghur Region in China, where I began my career in broadcast journalism before coming to the United States in 2001 to work for Radio Free Asia (RFA). It was a great sacrifice to leave my homeland, where I had enjoyed success as a television journalist and where my parents, family and friends would remain. But coming here guaranteed me freedom -- something that could never be realized in China. There, censorship and the pressure to toe the official line make truthful, objective journalism impossible. Being part of RFA, which broadcasts trustworthy news daily into Xinjiang, was for me the dream of a lifetime. Through this outlet, I could share this newfound freedom with those loved ones left behind. What I didn’t know then was the price for making this dream a reality. Nor did I know that it would be my family who would be forced to pay dearly for my freedom to live and work as a journalist in the United States.

As I testify before you here today, it grieves me to no end to say that my parents remain under threat, and more than two dozen of my relatives in China are missing – almost certainly held in re-education camps run by authorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

I last saw my mother when she visited me here in the United States in 2005. Only one of my three children has ever met my parents – my oldest daughter, when she visited them with my husband in 2008. I had no choice but to miss that family trip. Because of my work, it’s too dangerous for me to go back to China.

For the 17 years since I’ve worked for RFA, local police and authorities have harassed my family. They’ve watched their every step, monitored their movements, and constantly questioned them about my whereabouts and whether I plan to return. The treatment my family has had to endure is because of my decision to come to America. Authorities considered it a betrayal. When I left the XUAR I had established myself by launching and hosting the first children’s program in the Uyghur Region for Xinjiang TV. (To this day, I hear from Uyghurs living in China that they saw me on television when they were children.) Chinese state media officials recognized my appeal with Uyghur audiences and rewarded me with national recognition and elevated status. But I always knew in my heart, as someone who witnessed repression in daily life for Uyghurs, that this success was not enough. I wanted to use my voice to bring issues into the light. Without even knowing it then, I wanted to be a real journalist -- one who is unafraid to ask questions and unafraid to seek answers.

I was raised by educated parents who taught me to value culture, history, and, most of all, open and free dialogue. It troubled me to witness how Chinese authorities not only downplayed these aspects of Uyghur identity -- including religion and language -- on state media, but also sought to erase them entirely. When I first heard Radio Free Asia during a trip to Europe, I knew right away that I had found my calling. To hear a report about a protest by Uyghurs in Germany against Beijing’s restrictive policies in the XUAR that would otherwise never be reported on -- let alone known inside China, was amazing. Shortly after, I contacted the director of RFA Uyghur and asked about working for the broadcaster. He warned that I would have to give up everything if I were to leave China and work for the organization. It was a difficult choice, I told him, but it would be hard to live with myself if I didn’t make it.

Since coming to RFA, I have felt fortunate to continue my work as a member of the world’s only Uyghur language news service outside of China. For the roughly 12 million Uyghurs living in China’s Northwest, one of the world’s most restricted media environments, my colleagues and I are the only credible source for in-depth news and information of what’s happening in their towns, cities, and villages. RFA first reported on the July 2009 unrest in Urumqi, the following 10-month communication blackout in the region, the harsh restrictions preventing Uyghurs from observing the holy month of Ramadan and practicing their faith, the banning of the Uyghur language being taught in many schools, and the mass arrests and disappearances of men suspected of participating in protests and unrest. I have followed these stories with concern for my loved ones back home.

But early last year, my worries grew as my colleagues and I uncovered even more disturbing evidence that China was building a security state of vast reach and scope. We reported on the wide-sweeping use of technology to track Uyghurs, the building of convenience police stations that dot the streets of Kashgar and Urumqi, even in mosques and elementary schools, and the confiscation of passports to bar any travel or movement out of the region for most Uyghurs. Chinese authorities showed barely any restraint in rounding up people, taking their smartphones, and contacting and detaining their family members. Authorities even began recalling hundreds of Uyghurs studying abroad in Egypt and detaining them upon their return. These individuals were being held in “re-education centers’’ -- mostly in Kashgar, where thousands of people would be held at a time, with little if any contact with friends and family outside.

My worries proved true when I first heard that my brother Kaisar Keyum was detained at the end of September last year. Police had taken him when he was driving my mother to a doctor’s appointment, leaving her alone in a car without explanation as she waited for her son who’d never return. Other family had to come get her. Kaisar was being held, my family learned later, in one of the so-called re-education facilities. We have not seen him since.

In February, my parents, both elderly and suffering from life-threatening ailments, went missing. Not being able to talk with my mother and father, or to learn how they were doing, was almost too much to bear. Being almost 7,000 miles away, I felt helpless -- even more than when my brother was taken. I tried contacting other family but could not reach them. I learned in February that my aunts, cousins, their children -- more than 20 people had been swept up by authorities. I found out later that all had been detained on the same day. No one has confirmed their whereabouts. But I strongly suspect they are being held in these camps, which sources say hold over 1 million Uyghurs -- men and women, youngsters and the elderly -- in cramped and squalid conditions. My parents, whom I later discovered were held in medical facilities in detention camps, were allowed to leave in March -- probably because of their poor health. Authorities had questioned my parents about me, my whereabouts, and my working for an organization they alleged is “anti-China.”

Nobody should suffer such treatment. But at least five of my colleagues at Radio Free Asia have also faced similar situations where family members in China have been detained. Often they too have heard reports of authorities questioning family and friends about their work for an “anti-Chinese” organization. Like me, they know little if anything about their relatives -- whether they are well or even alive. It’s a cruel irony that we as journalists can find out so much about what’s happening inside China’s Northwest, yet so little about our own families and loved ones. We are afraid to ask our friends and others there, because any contact and communication could endanger them as well.

Despite these threats, I know -- and my colleagues know -- that we must continue for the sake of not letting a light be swallowed in the darkness, extinguished forever. We ask only that the United States and the international community makes clear in its dealings with China that this treatment of our families in our former homeland is unacceptable. I hope and pray for my family to be let go and released. But I know even if that happens, they will still live under constant threat. I came to the United States to realize a dream -- a dream of being able to tell the truth without fear. And it may be difficult, but I’ll keep trying and I’ll keep working.