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Testimony to the Congressional Executive Commission on China

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and thanks very much to the CECC for inviting me to take part in this important discussion. As a journalist and not a scholar, I'd like to focus primarily on the difficulties journalists face in reporting on Xinjiang, and how the strict barriers to reporting on the region have left the international media with a general lack of facts and understanding about what is happening there.

When deadly riots erupted in Urumqi last summer, foreign correspondents in China expected the same kind of scenario we had encountered the year earlier when violent riots hit Tibet. Most of us believed that Xinjiang would be blocked off to reporters and the outward flow of information tightly controlled.

So it was a pleasant surprise to find that the capital of Xinjiang was relatively open to foreign correspondents. Though Chinese media were not allowed free access to the region, foreign reporters flocked to Urumqi, where dozens of them found they had relatively open access to the city.

There were some problems, some hassles with police (including one incident in which reporters were beaten up), but given the violent and potentially dangerous situation, reporting conditions in Urumqi were far less difficult or complicated than most had expected. I personally did not go to Urumqi but was told by several colleagues who did that they moved about with relative ease, and that a government-established press center with a dedicated Internet line was quite helpful in their work. The region's Internet was shut down, so journalists were scrambling to file stories and communicate.

A few months after the riots, Chinese officials acknowledged that they had made a deliberate, top-level decision to open the Xinjiang capital to foreign journalists, saying that they believed it was in China's best interest to let open reporting prevail and allow the facts to come out. In many cases, the facts did emerge from Urumqi. Foreign journalists were able to talk with both Han Chinese and Uighurs who were involved in the riots, and detailed accounts emerged from Urumqi.

But the entirety of Xinjiang was far from transparent. Kashgar, the political and cultural heart of Xinjiang, was largely shut off to foreign journalists and remains so to this day.

Reporters have been turned away at the airport upon landing in Kashgar, followed and warned by police and ordered to leave the city. In my own case, I travelled to Kashgar at the end of last year and managed to escape police notice for nearly a week. That ended on my last night in town, however, when I had to check into a hotel on my own passport, which contains a journalist visa. The manager did what is required in all of China and notified police that a foreign journalist had checked into his hotel. Within 30 minutes, five officers were knocking on my door, demanding to know why I was in Kashgar and when I would be leaving. One officer took my passport and checked me in for the first departing flight back to Urumqi.

And even though was able to stay in Kashgar for several days before being noticed, reporting was extremely difficult because locals did not want to be interviewed. I was told there were clear directives that residents should not be speaking with foreign journalists and that all local tour guides had been issued guidelines to report journalists to the local police. This has been borne out by the experience of other journalists who have tried to work in Kashgar over the past year. It's a marked turnabout from conditions before the riots, when Kashgar was relatively open to reporters and locals talks with journalists without extreme fear of reprisals. That's no longer the case.

As a result, the flow of information from Kashgar and other parts of Xinjiang has been barely a trickle. This should perhaps not be a surprise. After all, the root of the riots likely started in Kashgar, though we still don't know exactly what or how things transpired.

The initial spark for the riots was ignited at a toy factory in Guangdong Province in late June, when what has been described as either a fight or an attack left at least two Uighurs dead at the hands of Han Chinese coworkers. After several days and no arrests in the Shaoguan toy factory murders, it seems that Uighurs began organizing protests which later escalated into the July 5 riots in Urumqi.

As I mentioned earlier, I didn't go to Urumqi during the riots or their immediate aftermath. Instead, I travelled to Shaoguan to try to find out what had happened at the toy factory. What I found was that hundreds of Uighur workers (most from Shufu, a suburb of Kashgar) who many say had been pressured to moved to Guangzhou under the governments outward migration push, were sequestered off from the rest of the factory, the bosses said for their own safety. Residents, businesses owners and factory workers around the giant toy factory had been told not to speak to journalists, but many did. Still, despite the chatter, what emerged was a picture as clear as mud. There was a clear atmosphere of ethnic tension between Uighurs and Han Chinese in the factory town in the aftermath of the murders, but it was far less clear what tensions led to the incident. Wide disagreement remains to this day over what sparked the brawl and how many people were killed.

Uighurs I spoke with in a nearby factory town said they were forced through economic pressures to leave Kashgar and work in Guangdong. They said their friends in Shaoguan were under tight controls and directed not to speak of the incident. They had very real concerns for their safety and that of their families.

To this day, essential facts remain unknown about what happened last summer, and what caused Urumqi to devolve into China's deadliest ethnic riots in decades. What led to the riots, how they were organized, and what happened to those involved are all questions that have not been satisfactorily answered. China has earned credited for allowing free flow of information during the Xinjiang riots, but the flow was not free enough to answer imperative questions.

In a recent survey of our correspondent members, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China found that most journalists who responded believe government restrictions make it impossible to do balanced and accurate reporting on Xinjiang. Travel restrictions and intensive pressure on sources are major barriers. Even though Xinjiang is ostensibly open to foreign journalists, correspondents liken it to Tibet – the only part of China where journalists are still required to get prior government permission to visit. Correspondents reported being harassed and monitored while working in Xinjiang in recent years, particularly in Kashgar and other non-Urumqi locations during and after the riots. The pressure seems to have ramped up even higher around the one-year anniversary of the riots earlier this month.

Reported one correspondent who travelled to Xinjiang last year: "We were followed and forced to leave Kashgar by the police. Some people were too scared to talk to us."

Too often in Xinjiang, this seems to be the case. Sources face very real repercussions for speaking to journalists, which has become an effective tool for containing information. Without the ability to investigate the facts or talk to people who live there, we may never know the real story of the Xinjiang riots and so many other things about life and politics there.

Thanks very much for your attention and I look forward to the discussion.

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