

Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Hearing
on
China's Zero-COVID Policy and Authoritarian Public Health Control

Tuesday, November 15, 2022 – 10:00 a.m.
Virtual via Cisco Webex

Statement of Senator Jeff Merkley
Chair
Congressional-Executive Commission on China

- Good morning. Today's hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China on "China's Zero-COVID Policy and Authoritarian Public Health Control" will come to order.
- Before we turn to the subject of this hearing, I'd like to announce that the Commission will publish our annual report on human rights conditions and rule of law developments in China tomorrow. This report once again marks the culmination of a year of work by the Commission's non-partisan research staff to produce an extraordinarily detailed, comprehensive, and credible account of the situation in China. Just a huge thanks to the staff of the Commission for really incredible work.
- The Annual Report outlines the systematic and often brutal efforts by the government of the People's Republic of China to censor, torture, and detain ethnic and religious minorities, critics of Chinese Communist Party policy, and advocates of basic rights. This past year, transnational repression has been a particular concern for this Commission, and the report details the tools used by Chinese authorities to reach into other countries to silence critics, to enhance control over diaspora communities, to conduct surveillance, and to force the repatriation of their targets. Within China, the report documents evidence that top leaders directed the genocide in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including policies of forced labor, sexual violence, and family separation. This year's reporting also shines a spotlight on the pervasive problem of violence against women, with high-profile cases showing the vulnerability of women across society. Meanwhile, coercive population control policies directed at ethnic minority populations amount to eugenics, while the broader policies continue to intrude on families' decisions about if, when, and how to have children.
- Both at home and abroad, General Secretary Xi Jinping seeks to promote what he calls a "Chinese view of human rights." This report punctures that narrative. People in China and the diaspora communities around the world deserve the same fundamental human rights as everyone else.

- The 2022 Annual Report reflects the view of our commissioners that the human rights abuses the report details require a whole-of-government response by the United States and coordinated action with other countries. In partnership with our newly appointed executive branch commissioners, which we are so delighted to have, I look forward to continuing to work across our government to advance the recommendations in the report so we can protect those fleeing persecution, those facing transnational repression, those fighting coercion, those fearing the destruction of their culture.
- The Annual Report shows how the Chinese Communist Party seeks to dominate daily life to control how citizens live. Nowhere has the intensity of this political and social control been more apparent over the last year than in the implementation of the draconian zero-COVID policy. As senior leaders staked the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party on this policy, authorities implemented disproportionately harsh public security measures, often using coercive quarantine controls that infringed on privacy rights, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and due process. At the height of the Shanghai lockdown this spring, there were an estimated 373 million people under lockdown throughout China. To enforce these lockdowns, authorities often tape up entrances and erect fences to prevent residents from leaving their homes. They sweep up residents of entire buildings for mandatory quarantine in makeshift facilities. They marshal the full power of the surveillance state to monitor – and often control – people’s movements and health. They aggressively censor and detain critics of the policy. And they leave vulnerable populations unable to access medical care for other conditions.
- As we will hear this morning, China’s zero-COVID policy comes at great cost to fundamental rights and may be unsustainable or even counterproductive in protecting overall public health. Leading experts in public health, information suppression, and Chinese political leadership dynamics will help us better understand this policy, what it has meant for the people of China, and where it may go from here.
- The testimony we’ll hear recognizes that these policies have resulted in some protection of the population from the ravages of the virus the world has grappled with for nearly three years. Every country has wrestled with how best to protect public health from COVID-19 and there are no easy answers. But we all have an obligation to protect basic rights and this hearing will help us understand a policy so central to what it means to live in China today.