

## **Testimony of Jewher Ilham before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

February 3, 2022

My name is Jewher Ilham. Thank you, Senator Merkley and Congressman McGovern, for hosting this hearing and inviting me to testify.

In April 2014, I testified before this committee on behalf of my father, Ilham Tohti, an economics professor at Beijing Minzu University who had been detained that year. It has been eight years and my father is still in prison, now serving a life sentence for the alleged crime of separatism. The Chinese government accused my father of being an extremist and advocate of violence. These are nothing more than fabricated charges. He never incited violence or promoted separatism as the Chinese government claims.

My father is a renowned scholar who dedicated his life and work to brokering peaceful dialogue among Uyghur and Han people. He was well-loved by his colleagues and many students. That is why his arrest generated such an outcry from not only the international community, but also from many inside of China. On his website, Uyghur Online, he hosted articles that evaluated the disparities in the Uyghur region and opportunities – or lack thereof – for economic growth and development. He proposed constructive solutions to the Chinese government in efforts to develop the Uyghur Region. My father believed that if you analyzed problems thoroughly, meaningful solutions would follow.

Instead of engaging in constructive dialogue, the Chinese government locked him up. My father was sentenced in September 2014. While in prison, he has been shackled, beaten, and denied food twice – each time for ten days – and those are only the times that we are aware of. He has not seen a lawyer since his second trial in 2014. Our family has not been able to visit him since 2017. Now, my family doesn't know whether he is even alive.

That is also the case for many other Uyghurs, who are being held captive by the Chinese government: a number of them were scholars like my father, and some were my father's students.

**Atikem Rozi**, a former student of my father's, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2014 for alleged crimes of separatism and endangering state security. Her association with my father and her contribution to the website Uyghur Online were reasons for those charges. Atikem Rozi's term ended in 2018, but she remains detained.

**Rahile Dawut** is a renowned anthropologist, scholar, and expert in Uyghur folklore and traditions. She has been missing for four years. In the summer of 2021, the Chinese government finally confirmed that she is imprisoned, but shared no details of the charges against her or of her alleged crimes. Rahile Dawut's daughter, like me, lives in the United States without her family, does not know her mother's current status, and is fighting for her release.

**Yalqun Rozi**, a scholar and publisher, was sentenced in 2018 to 15 years of imprisonment for inciting subversion and ethnic hatred. Yalqun Rozi published Uyghur-language textbooks that authorities claim “incorporated ethnic separatism” and “terrorism,” even though the Chinese government had permitted use of his language textbooks for years, until PRC officials ramped up their repression of the Uyghurs and their language and culture.

I raise these names as examples, in addition to my father’s, because it is important to remember that those imprisoned on fabricated charges, and the over one million Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples who have been arbitrarily detained in internment camps, are not just numbers but real people – who have parents, children, and friends.

We need to lift up the names of individuals who are imprisoned in violation of their human rights and draw attention to their individual cases. We need to impress upon people who are unmoved by the Chinese government’s pervasive and systematic repression in the Uyghur Region that the detention of over one million people is not an abstract idea. It is a horrifying reality that is destroying the lives of individuals and families, like mine, like Rahile Dawut’s, and like Atikem Rozi’s.

As I noted, I was last here in front of the Commission eight years ago. Sadly, the only change since then in the Uyghur Region has been for the worse. I am grateful to see the U.S. government’s support for the Uyghur people: once fully implemented and enforced, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act will counter the regime of state-sponsored forced labor that is

taking place on a massive scale. But there is more that can be done to call for an end to the Chinese government's oppression against Uyghurs. This includes raising the names of Uyghurs who have been unjustly imprisoned for being outspoken on human rights and highlighting the human toll of the repressive policies. This can help personalize the large-scale atrocities that are taking place in China, and hopefully the growing indignation and outcry will move governments that so far have remained silent on the repression of Uyghurs to action. Through building more united and concerted international pressure, we will have a greater chance at changing the Chinese government's human rights abuses.

I look forward to working with you to address these tough issues. And I really hope that in eight years from now we are not having the same conversation.