

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing, and
Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

**Hearing
on
China, Genocide and the Olympics**

**May 18, 2021- 1:00 p.m.
Virtual, via WebEx**

Rayhan Asat
Yale University

I am grateful to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and China-Congressional Executive Commission for convening this important hearing in response to one of the most pressing human rights concerns of our time, the genocide and crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic ethnic groups.

I appear before you as a human rights lawyer and a sister to a victim of the Chinese government's 21st-century prison camp, Ekpar Asat. Today, I recall 2008, when China hosted the Olympics. I was a young college student in Wuhan, among the few Uyghurs studying there. My friends and I got up early to watch the Olympic torch relay, a historic and glorious moment for China. We in China at that time were totally unaware of the discussions taking place outside about our own government's human rights abuses and support of the Sudanese government's state-sponsored violence in Darfur. But not every Uyghur was lucky enough to live a normal life. In Beijing, authorities 'cleaned up' for the Games by expelling many Uyghurs who were living there.

Soon after, I left China to study in Canada, then later Harvard. Before I made the US as my permanent home, I also worked in Turkey. I used to visit my family regularly until the spring of 2016, when my life was changed forever. Before the Uyghur crisis began, I was just like many other Americans who are living their lives, exploring the world, and contributing to our society in different ways. All my life, like my brother, Ekpar, I believed in building bridges. Since I grew up in Xinjiang, China, I always hoped for a prosperous Xinjiang and thereby a prosperous China. Wherever I went, I spoke at or organized conferences to foster relationships between China and the countries I lived at that time. For example, I organized the very first Turkey-China conference hoping that through my role, the Chinese government would see the Uyghurs as a powerful link between itself and other Turkic communities. While mindful of its deep flaws, I was among those who believed China was making progress. Many others had their doubts. My contribution to the Chinese society demonstrates that like many people who love China, I sought to be a friend and ambassador of goodwill. But that did not help. I learned the hard way, that as long as we're born Uyghurs, persecution always looms.

Soon after, I left China to study in Canada, then later at Harvard. Before I made the US as my permanent home, I also worked in Turkey. I used to visit my family regularly until the spring of 2016, when what had been my own government declared a People's War on its own people, *my* people.. Before the Uyghur crisis began, I was just like many other Americans who

are living their lives, exploring the world, and contributing to our society in different ways. All my life, I believed in building bridges just as my brother Ekpar did. Growing up in Xinjiang, I wanted to work not only for the prosperity of my own region, but of the whole country. Like many other Uyghurs, I was a model citizen, and I was serious about it. Since I grew up in Xinjiang, China, I always hoped for a prosperous Xinjiang and thereby a prosperous China. For example, I organized the very first Turkey-China conference in hopes that my country would recognize what great ambassadors we Uyghurs could be to the rest of the Turkic world. Hoping that through my role, the Chinese government would see the Uyghurs as a linkage between itself and other Turkic communities. I truly also believed China was making progress despite its deep flaws, and that Uyghurs would be at the center of the country's bright future. My brother and I were the very sort of citizens CCP propaganda claims to valorize, but in the end, that was no protection. My contribution to the Chinese society demonstrates that like many people who love China, I sought to be a friend and ambassador of goodwill but that did not help. I learned the hard way, that as long as we're born Uyghurs, persecution always looms.

Since 2016, with the so-called "strike hard campaign," China has taken a twisted view of "progress." To the Party, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities are inherently "backwards"--even my forward looking, visionary brother who they once celebrated.

My brother Ekpar is a tech-entrepreneur, media founder, and philanthropist. His tireless work of peacebuilding through entrepreneurship and philanthropy landed him recognition within China and outside China alike. The Chinese media outlets extolled him a star in the tech world, a positive force for humanity, and a bridge-builder. However, even Ekpar could not escape the detention and prison camps the Chinese government has built--the largest since World War II--for the past 5 years. He disappeared into the prison camps immediately after returning from the State Department's International Visitors Leadership Program. The camp is the implementation of the Strike hard campaign, which has since pursued China's stated goal to "break our lineage, break our connections, break our roots, and break our origins."

Today, we are gathered to debate whether China should host the Olympics whilst committing horrific acts against humanity. Detaining millions of people, forcibly separating families, residential schooling designed to eradicate Uyghur identity, prohibition of religion, destruction of religious and cultural shrines, forced sterilization of women, installation over a million Han officials into Uyghur homes as spies, promotion of forced marriages between Han and Uyghur people, and facilitation of mass rape in the prison camps are just a few egregious entries from the long, long list of China's atrocities. As each day passes, life is being lost in these camps, human dignity suffers, families are separated, and innocent children are raised without their parents' embrace. Thus, my recommendation as an attorney, reflects how our actions will directly affect the victims and how we can best mitigate the unspeakable human suffering. I analyze the complexity of rejecting China hosting the Olympics *vis a vis* endorsing China to host this fine game and will seek to present a nuanced perspective.

1. Use the Olympics as an opportunity to demand the Chinese government to free the innocent people and close the prison camps; This requires united effort from the democracies.
2. Diplomatic boycott should be exercised if the Chinese government remains undeterred to cease its repression.
3. Provide an opportunity for the impacted community to meet with the athletes to debrief them about the ongoing crimes against humanity.

Does the Olympic Present an Opportunity for the International Community to Secure Human Freedom and Champion for Human Rights?

While the Chinese government bears the responsibility for the state-sanctioned terror and violence it unleashed in the Uyghur region, we as the international community will be complicit if we choose to look away. The ongoing violence against the Uyghur people doesn't just dehumanize the people it's inflicted upon – it also dehumanizes anyone who stands by and lets it happen. Now we have a chance to make it right.

Five years on, the Chinese government has shown no sign of ceasing its repression. Instead, China scrambled to make its actions “legal” by creating mass imprisonment. Prisoners are now receiving formal prison sentences for 5, 15, or 20 years with trumped up charges--sometimes even life--for such “crimes” as having WhatsApp downloaded, refusing to drink alcohol, or having relatives who have been to a foreign country. The Chinese government and its cruelty have only intensified. I learned that my brother had been held and continues to be held in **solitary confinement** in Aksu, far from home, since **January 2019**. Perhaps due to my consistent advocacy the past year, two months ago, he was seen by my family in a 3 to 4 minute video call; my brother looked gaunt and a shadow of his former self. The physical torture coupled with mental isolation has destroyed him. Would I ever see him coming out alive from these barbaric prison camps remain to be seen? Many Uyghur families are suffering the exact same pain to varying degrees.

Thus, I believe that the Olympics presents an opportunity for the US, allies, and democracies around the world to put pressure on China to close the prison camps and put a stop to the ongoing atrocities in Xinjiang. I urge the US to coordinate a united front to defy China together. Last week, at the UN side event, Turkey also joined in expressing grievances over the abuses and violence against the Uyghurs. To safeguard the rules-based order that the US and allies assembled together, it is important for the democratic country leaders to invite other countries to join in their combined effort to free the detained, enslaved, and imprisoned Uyghurs. There is no shortage of crises in the world right now, but we must still not lose focus on the Uyghur crisis. Leading democracies must make conscious, deliberate, and coordinated efforts to seek solutions that compel Beijing to free the innocent. After all, the bare minimum the international community is calling for is “Let the Uyghurs Live with Dignity and Be Free.”

If China remains undeterred and continues to hold these innocent Uyghurs, Kazaks, and other people despite the world's best collective effort, we must consider relocating the Games to another city. Such a boycott might seem extreme, but it is proportionate to the magnitude of what it would serve to prevent. Do we want another Olympics like the games held in Germany in 1936, which helped Hitler's Germany advance its public image and set the groundwork for mass atrocities to come?

Why Should We Boycott the Beijing Olympics?

The debate around the Olympics has presented two opposing views. Many argue that since the purpose of the Games is to build international friendship through athletic competition, the presence of political concerns would taint the spirit of the Olympics.

But is the capital of a state actively committing genocide really a place to build friendship? Would it not be absurd to cheer for our beloved athletes knowing that millions of people are held in the concentration camps just a four-hour flight away? How could corporations who pledged to promote diversity, gender equality, and racial equity sponsor such a shameless glorification of a

county currently attempting to delete its ethnic minorities? How could we bear witness to the Uyghurs dancing for the camera while holding back tears in the inevitable government-orchestrated performances? Make no mistake, the universality and popularity of the Olympics will provide a golden opportunity for China to consolidate global complicity in its genocide.

Some say that the Games should continue in Beijing precisely *because* of what China is doing, since they will provide the chance to draw attention to Xinjiang in a way no one will be able to ignore. I don't find this argument persuasive. Prominent sports brands like Fila have been either covertly or self-avowedly involved in Uyghur slavery. There will be a strong financial disincentive for both advertisers and athletes to speak out. Unless we take specific steps to make sure the athletes are aware and shocked by the horror of the camps, they'll most likely remain silent.

I am keenly aware of the enormous challenge that a potential boycott would present to leaders, advocates, the Uyghur community, the sports industry, and many more stakeholders. I also don't want to take the athletes' chances away from celebrating their hard work. But, if the world can postpone the game for COVID, surely the Olympic Committee can postpone it in the face of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Another dissenting view against the boycott is that it would be ineffective. Given the enormity of the crisis and the depth of the destruction taking place, we should not merely regard effectiveness as a deciding factor. We must try to understand what the victims seek from us. I can imagine the cries for help of the imprisoned. They would not want us to let this chance pass by.

Whatever measures we decide to take, it is already clear that corporations will stand in the way of what is right. Sponsors of Beijing 2022 include Coca-Cola, which lobbied against the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in order to protect its sugarcane supplies; and Airbnb, which allows Chinese listings to ban Uyghur renters. American vested interests here are on the side of genocide to uphold the US laws. Coca-Cola, despite its commendable opposition to racist voting laws in the United States, cannot express the same solidarity with the victims of concentration camps who are dehumanized, tortured, sterilized, forcibly disappeared, and raped. Uyghur lives matter, and no corporate profit margin can ever be allowed to come before our very survival and dignity. Congress must demand answers from companies who choose to disregard the suffering of the Uyghur people and instead enable the Chinese government to further repress the Uyghurs and other Turkic communities.

When China hosted the Olympic 2008, many hoped it would lead to China's democratization and that China would become a country that actually values diversity, inclusion, and pluralism. How did that turn out? Allowing China to host yet another Games would not only create a culture of impunity when a country commits crimes against humanity, it also sends a message that the rules don't matter when you're big enough to break them. Our complicity in China's Olympic propaganda will undermine the genocide declaration reached by the State Department. Such a determination must not be a tool of cynical geopolitics. My people are suffering. If we are prepared to disregard your own judgement when it suits us, why make any judgements at all? Never again is now.

Addressing Hypocrisy of the IOC

The IOC's stance is that "it has neither the mandate nor the capability to change the laws or the political system of a sovereign country." No one is asking the IOC to change China's political structure but rather we are asking the IOC to uphold the very values it claims to stand for. The

IOC's working principles are "Universality and Solidarity," "Unity in Diversity," "Autonomy and Good Governance" and "Sustainability". But the IOC *refuses* to stand in "solidarity" with those being denied their "universal" human rights. The IOC refuses to say anything against China's attacks on ethnic "diversity" within a purportedly "autonomous" region. And we know that this is not "sustainable". The IOC seems to have forgotten what it stands for. Let's remind them, and urge them to move the Games to another city that actually espouses the values of the Olympics--potentially Tokyo, as the facility can be reused.

Contrary, IOC offered a contract for the Tokyo 2021 Summer Olympics and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics to a Chinese textiles company that has an affiliated factory in Xinjiang and that openly advertises its use of Xinjiang cotton. (Axois)

International pressure made the IOC take a position against the South African apartheid state. The same can and must be done for China. When the Olympics stood up against the apartheid, apartheid fell. It is not too late for them to change course.

The parallels with that time touch me deeply, especially the story of an esteemed South African Judge named Albie Sachs. While jailed for resisting apartheid, he would in solitary confinement to fight the isolation. A song of his goes,

So this is what prison is like.
The quiet is complete
and I am alone in my cell,
the shock of the slammed door still echoing in....

Those echoes persist today. I hear them as I think of my brother. I don't know how he finds solace in his solitary confinement, but if he has any will to keep going, I believe it's because he is holding on to hope. And I cannot betray that hope. I cannot give up without at least trying to implore the world, our athletes, and leaders to reject a totalitarian government's illusion of normalcy as it pursues a racist campaign of erasure against Uyghur families.

Should the Athlete Boycott?

My brother loves sports. I recall the days when my dad and brother would watch the Olympics together. To recruit me in their enthusiasm, they would patiently explain the basic rules and norms no matter how uninterested I appeared. I keep wondering how my brother would feel now that the game he loves will be hosted in his own country while he and millions of others are wasting away--or worse--behind barbed wire.

Whatever happens, I ask to be given an opportunity to have a face-to-face exchange with the athletes. It will be important for them to know what is going on in China, to hear Ekpar's ordeal from my own words. I believe I have a shot at convincing the athletes to take action. The athletes should have a choice to choose whether participating or refraining from the game. It's a fine White House tradition to host athletes. I hope the Biden administration can create a space for a dialogue between advocates and the athletes about the best ways to achieve the desired goal of all parties and concerned stakeholders. After hearing directly from the impacted community, I can imagine athletes joining me and others to call for the game to be relocated. Together we would make a compelling case in the interest of justice, fairness, and global peace. Kindness and decency trigger the same action. Athletes from other countries will likely join the call and we can successfully postpone the game to host it in another city.

However, if the athletes still believe going to China is best, I hope they will find other ways to protest. Any visibility given within China to these crimes against humanity will undermine China's hegemonic narrative of "security." Furthermore, I believe that any action the athletes take will only be the beginning, and that they will continue to speak out against the egregious abuses after returning to their respective countries. This kind of mass public accountability will work against the Orwellian restriction of images that leave Xinjiang and help bring the truth to the world.

By standing up for American values and ideals, I hope America and its finest athletes would choose to be a nation that believes in the power of "Good Trouble," as in the words of the late John Lewis, and demand the Chinese government to let the good Uyghur people live with dignity.