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China: Protect Uighur refugees from forcible return

During years of repression, many members of China's mainly Muslim Uighur minority have fled to neighbouring countries. Their lives are at risk, as China pressures for their forcible return.

Muhammed Tohti Metrozi fled the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of northwest China to seek refuge in Pakistan. A pro-independence activist and a member of the Uighur ethnic minority, he had spent two months in detention in China on suspicion of "separatist" activity. While in detention, he reported, he was beaten with wooden sticks.

Muhammed was accepted as a refugee by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR, and was awaiting resettlement to Sweden in July 2003 when he reportedly went to meet a Pakistani government official.

He has not been seen since.

Reportedly, Muhammed was forcibly returned to China, where he was detained. According to some reports, he was tried on charges relating to his application for refugee status and his work helping Uighur refugees in Pakistan.

Muhammad's case is typical of several Uighurs thought to have been forcibly returned to China from neighbouring countries in recent years.

The Chinese government appears to be using the international "war on terror" as a pretext to gain international support for its policies of repression of the mainly Muslim Uighur minority.

Any Uighur suspected of involvement in "separatist" activity and returned to China is at risk of serious human rights violation, including arbitrary detention, unfair trials, torture, and even execution.

The Chinese government uses "separatism, terrorism or religious extremism" to refer to a broad range of activities, which are often no more than peaceful opposition or dissent, or the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of religion.

You can help Uighur refugees and asylum-seekers by writing to the Chinese authorities using the letter below as an example.

Your Excellency,

I am concerned about reports that China has put pressure on its neighbouring countries to forcibly return Uighur asylum-seekers and refugees to China in violation of those states' obligations under international refugee and human rights law standards. Similarly, according to these reports China has been pressurizing other states to prevent Uighur diaspora organizations and individuals from engaging in peaceful and legitimate activities in line with their fundamental human rights.

I am urging you to recall that the granting of asylum is a peaceful and humanitarian act and to stop putting pressure on countries to forcibly return Uighur asylum seekers and refugees back to China, or to prevent them from engaging in peaceful and legitimate activities in countries of asylum.

In particular, I am concerned about Muhammed Tohti Metrozi who was forcibly returned to China from Pakistan in July 2003. At the time, he had been recognized as a refugee by the UNHCR in Pakistan, and was awaiting resettlement to Sweden. He was reportedly tried in Urumqi in April 2004. The charges against him reportedly related to the peaceful exercise of his fundamental human rights to freedom of expression and association. I am urging you to release him immediately and unconditionally, and allow him to leave the country should he so wish.

Yours sincerely,

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China
LI Zhaoxing Buzhang
Waijiaobu
2 Chaoyangmen Nandajie
Beijingshi 100701
People's Republic of China
Telegram: Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, China
E-mail: webmaster@mfa.gov.cn
Salutation: Your Excellency

Ambassador to Pakistan
Zhang Chunxiang
Diplomatic Enclave
Ramna 4
Islamabad
Pakistan
Tel: +92-51-2824786
Fax: +92-51-2821116
E-mail: chinaemb_pk@mfa.gov.cn
Salutation: Your Excellency

Map of Xinjiang & neighbouring countries

Muhammed Tohti Metrozi

For more information on the plight of Uighur asylum-seekers and refugees as well as the current human rights situation in the XUAR please see <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170212004>

Background

Serious and widespread human rights violations have intensified against the mainly Muslim Uighur community in the XUAR over recent years in the context of an ongoing political campaign against so-called "separatists, terrorists and

religious extremists" in the region. As a result, many Uighurs have fled the region and sought asylum abroad.

Amnesty International has recorded several cases of Uighur asylum-seekers and refugees who have been forcibly returned to China from neighbouring countries. In some cases there is evidence that the Chinese authorities have prompted or organised such returns. This practice seems to have increased since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, and China's use of the international "war on terror" as a pretext to gain international support for its policies of repression in the XUAR.

Any Uighur asylum-seeker or refugee suspected of involvement in "separatist, terrorist or illegal religious activities" is at risk of serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, unfair trials, torture and even execution, if forcibly returned to China.

There are also reports of the Chinese authorities pressuring other countries to prevent political activities by Uighur asylum-seekers and refugees as well as reports of families of those who have left China being monitored or harassed by the authorities in China.