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# Bringing the “Uyghur Crisis” to the Heart of the United States

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Probably and possibly the best international conference ever on the persecution of the Uyghurs by the CCP. This is what the event *Confronting Atrocities in China: The Global Response to the Uyghur Crisis*, held at the Elliott School of International Affairs of the George Washington University (GWU) in Washington, D.C., June 6-7, was; and for no less than five reasons.

First, the fact that it was organized and sponsored by the most important advocacy groups of the Uyghur diaspora in the West, i.e., the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), based in Munich, Germany, the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) and the Uyghur American Association (UAA), both based in Washington, D.C., as well as by the Central Asia Program at GWU, with the financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. non-profit organization funded primarily through the U.S. Congress.

Secondly, because of the number, the assortment, and the quality of the speakers.

Thirdly, the range of the subjects discussed, and the vastness of information and knowledge presented.

Fourthly, the timing, in the very midst of what is now commonly called the “Uyghur crisis” with all its aftermath of reasonable, if not ideal attention by the media and politicians, especially in the U.S. And this gets us to the final reason – the location.

On the other hand, the difficulty of a conference of this kind and its scope, at least for the chronicler, is that of arriving at a satisfactory point of synthesis in presenting all of the unfolded arguments and in fairly representing all of the speakers’ contributions. Cutting then through the sessions and speeches, to enucleate and highlight the backbone and rationale of the entire event, will do. In fact, that backbone is actually an articulated skeleton made of four supporting pillars: the evidence of the existence of the whole structure of the detention camps for Uyghurs and its enormity, against the reckless and – all things considered – ridiculous denial by the CCP; the genocidal nature of the CCPs crackdown on the Uyghurs; the silence of the grand majority of the Islamic world in the face of the tragic attempt to annihilate a Muslim population, even the positive support of the CCP’s policy in Xinjiang (which Uyghurs prefer to call East Turkistan) by some Islamic states; and the cold evaluation of what the Uyghur diaspora has accomplished so far in awakening international attention in the form of the question, “Where do we go from here?”

**Pillar 1: Evidence of the Xinjiang camps**

On the evidence of the existence of the massive transformation through education camps structure in Xinjiang, a significant contribution was given by Dr. Shawn Zhang, a Chinese graduate student of the University of British Columbia Law School *Juris Doctor* program, in Vancouver, Canada. He has scrupulously mapped the problem simply through Google Maps and other available technical data. His impressive work has been then corroborated by German journalist and sinologist Dr. Harald Maass, who has worked in Xinjiang for years, seeing the situation worsening rapidly, and by German scholar Dr. Adrian Zenz, of the European School of Culture and Technology in Korntal, Germany. Dr. Zenz is the author of the most accurate estimate of the number of Uyghurs detained in the camps, who still keeps on updating his highly praised researches. Their panel, *Survey of Evidence*, on June 6, has been moderated by Ms. Rushan Abbas, founder and executive director of Campaign for Uyghurs, based in Herndon, Virginia.

A second panel on the same day, *Academic Perspectives*, moderated by Ms. Nicole Morgret, UHRP's Project Coordinator, built on the same perspective but through a different approach, those of the scholars. It featured Dr. Sean Roberts, Director of the International Development Studies Program at GWU's Elliott School of International Affairs (engaging and timely were his remarks on the false myths and true realities of the "Uyghur terrorism" question); Dr. Donald Clarke, Professor of Law at GWU's Law School; Dr. Vanessa Frangville, Senior Lecturer and Chair Holder in Chinese Studies at the Université libre of Brussels, Belgium; and Dr. Timothy A. Grose, Assistant Professor of China Studies at the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Indiana.

But without detracting anything from the considerable expertise offered by these panelists, the participants to the June 7 panel *Witness Testimony* really reached the peak: moderated by Zubayra Shamseden, Chinese Outreach Coordinator at UHRP, one after the other, Mr. Dolkun Isa, president of WUC and vice president of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in Brussels, Belgium, as well as Mr. Ferkat Jawdat and Ms. Mihrigul Tursun, gave their astonishing and at times tragic recounts. Mr. Isa has been falsely accused of supporting terrorism until he was acquitted of all false charges, and young Jawdat and Tursun have gone through an ordeal of suffering that one does not wish even for one's worst enemies.

## **Pillar 2: Genocidal nature of the crackdown on Xinjiang**

The "G Word" was strongly pronounced at the conference during the *International & Legal Perspectives* panel of June 7, moderated by Mr. Nury Turkel, an attorney, Chair of the Board of UHRP. The delicate but decisive topic was addressed by Mr. Gianni Tognoni, Secretary General of the Permanent Peoples Tribunal, in Rome, Italy; Dr. Michael Polak, barrister at Church Court Chambers in London, England; and Mr. Kyle Matthews, Executive Director of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University, in Canada. They demonstrated that calling the repression of Uyghurs a "genocide" is not a daring exaggeration since genocide – as *Bitter Winter* has affirmed, too – can also be cultural, for example, when an entire people is subjugated for its language, customs, and religion. The point is all the more critical since the CCP-led regime in Beijing keeps on denying the repressive nature of its policy in Xinjiang. To call the CCP responsible for genocide would elevate the quality of the debate and the perceived evil nature of the crime committed.

At the conference, *Bitter Winter* has been quoted publicly and privately many times by different panelists for its service to the truth in documenting, often in unprecedented ways, the atrocities

by the Chinese regime. The fact that among the attendees at the conference was also Mr. David Kilgour, a Canadian national, a former Cabinet minister, and a famous human rights activist, who used enthusiastic words to describe our work, is encouraging and precious.

### **Pillar 3: Islamic silence**

A third relevant and delicate theme was raised many times during the conference, confronted directly during the panel *Media Approaches* on June 7, moderated by Mr. Alim Seytoff, Director of Radio Free Asia Uyghur Service. Two Turkish journalists, Mr. Mustafa Akyol, Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., and Ms. Merve Sebnem Oruç, political commentator and columnist on interstate relations, discussed in depth the puzzling attitude of the Islamic world toward the Uyghur crises, with the only exception of Turkey itself. There is a cultural connection between Turkey and the East Turkestan, and this explains why Ankara sided with the Uyghurs only after Mr. Akyol published a vibrant piece of denunciation in the prestigious *The New York Times* in January. However, again, it is not enough, said the panelists. Moreover, it is still staggering that so many Muslim countries even side with the CCP, justifying its repression of Xinjiang. For Muslim Uyghurs, this is incredible and torturing.

### **Pillar 4: What comes next?**

A sense of being at the top of the problem and yet having accomplished only part of what it has to be done aired continuously during the whole conference, and it was explicitly addressed in a few panels. First, the *Chinese Community Mobilization* panel on the 6<sup>th</sup>, moderated by Mr. Ilshat Hassan Kokbore, President of UAA. Mr. Wu'er Kaixi, formerly one of the most influential student leaders in what became to be known as the Tiananmen Student Movement, recalled his days as No.2 on China's list of the 21 most-wanted after the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4, 1989: his impassioned meeting with Chinese premier Li Peng before the crackdown was watched on television throughout China and the world. Mr. Darren Byler, lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington, in Seattle, WA., spoke of the necessity of mutual solidarity among the different persecuted groups, quoting explicitly the work done by *Bitter Winter*. And Rev. Bob Fu, one of the most famous Chinese Christians of the diaspora, president of ChinaAid, gave a powerful and touching address, first, as a Chinese Han, asking wholeheartedly the pardon of the Uyghurs persecuted by his fellow Han countrymen, secondly, calling for the unity among all different groups, as well as religions and Churches, distressed by persecution.

On the 7<sup>th</sup>, the same topic, with a different angle, was continued by the panel *Perspectives & Solutions from Civil Society*, moderated by Dr. Sophie Richardson, China Director for Human Rights Watch. Mr. Ulrich Delius, Director of the Society for Threatened Peoples in Göttingen, Germany; Ms. Lucia Parrucci, Advocacy & Training Coordinator at UNPO; Ms. Annie Boyajian, Director of Advocacy at Freedom House; Mr. Francisco Bencosme, Asia Pacific Advocacy Manager of Amnesty International; and Ms. Lea Perekrests, Deputy Director of Human Rights Without Frontier (HRWF), based in Brussels (the Founder and Director of HRWF, Mr. Willy Fautré, also serves as Associate Editor of *Bitter Winter*) illustrated how they handle daily advocacy work, primarily in Europe and North America.

Finally, all this was summed up in the concluding session on the afternoon of the 7<sup>th</sup>, entitled *Concrete Action Going Forward* and moderated by Ms. Luisa Greve, External Affairs Director at UHRP. Ms. Shahrezad Ghayrat, Mr. Peter Irwin, and Mr. Ryan Barry, respectively,

Project Assistant, Program Manager, and Project Coordinator at WUC, as well as Dr. Erkin Sidick, an engineer working at NASA with a thorough experience on the persecution of students in Xinjiang, tried to devise a strategy to keep on and improve everyone's help and assistance for the persecuted Uyghurs, answering both practical and theoretical questions from a very careful audience, in a very lively and interactive Q&A session which gave a great sense of practicality to the whole conference.

## **The Great Leap Forward**

Prior to the conference, an inaugural ceremony was held at the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, on the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup>. Witnessing the febrile work of the preparation gives a sense of truthfulness to an event like this. It was also moving to see Muslim Uyghurs fixing to the wall, in front of the East Turkistan flag, the U.S. flag, with reverence and awe, just before the national anthems of the two peoples were played.

Those who spoke at the ceremony were Mr. Isa; Mr. David Ranz, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State on behalf of the Honorable Alice G. Wells, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and

South Asian Affairs; Mr. Sam Brownback, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom; Congressman James P. McGovern (D-MA), Chairman of the National-Executive Commission on China (CECC); Congressman Bradley J. Sherman (D-CA), who, in August 2010, introduced legislation aimed at rescinding China's Most-Favored-Nation status and recently urged the U.S. administration to take a tougher line on China by imposing targeted sanctions on Chinese officials who are responsible for human rights abuses against the Uyghurs; Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy; Peter Chang, Ombudsman, Taiwan; Congressman Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), vice chairman of the CECC, the first in this two-day event to call the repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang a genocide. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), Co-chairman of CECC, addressed the gathered through a video message; Mr. Csaba Sógor, former Member of the European Parliament, Mr. Norman Baker, former UK Minister of State at the Home Office, Mr. Ralph Bunche, Secretary General of UNPO, and Mr. Paul Strauss (D-DC), the senior U.S. Shadow Senator, also spoke at the event, moderated by Mr. Omer Kanat, Director of UHRP.

*Bitter Winter* was present at the conference, yours truly speaking at the *Media Approach* panel.

Both the audience and speakers gained much from this significant event, and all are looking forward to further developments and implementations. Much has been done together, much more remains to be done. "Unity," "cooperation," and "network" were the solidifying words repeated at the conference. We at *Bitter Winter* strongly believe in them. To see that they start materializing in a conference of this scope is comforting and uplifting. Now, we all have to move a step beyond, to jump – if it doesn't sound offending to the Chinese who have suffered and continue to suffer – a great leap forward for the sake of all the persecuted.