

Release of Rebiya Kadeer: No end, but a beginning

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Section: Themes / Central Asia

Editing by "Thinking-East.Net"

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Uyghur political prisoner Rebiya Kadeer's release by Chinese authorities must bring about greater international scrutiny upon the People's Republic to save those terrorized in China's ongoing "war on terror," argues Kilic Bugra Kanat, an Uyghur student from the US.

Rebiya Kadeer, one of the most prominent Uyghur political prisoners in China, has finally been released from prison on medical parole and sent to the United States. Kadeer was arrested and imprisoned six years ago while on her way to meet with a US Congressional Staff delegation. She was accused of endangering the national security of China by providing "secret information" to foreigners and sentenced to 8 years prison. On Thursday, March 17, 2005, Chinese officials handed Kadeer over to US State Department officers. She was welcomed by hundreds of Uyghur expiates in Reagan National Airport, in Washington DC.

The release of Rebiya Kadeer is the result of much hard work and commitment to freedom by several human rights groups, including many Uyghur organizations, and diplomatic pressure the United States put upon Beijing. Since her arrest, Rebiya Kadeer had been on the agenda of human rights organizations. She has been awarded numerous prizes, including the Rafto Foundation 2004 Human Rights Award. Recently she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The US government also acted immediately after her arrest and the U.S. Congress passed resolutions demanding her immediate release.

Her abrupt release from prison has increased awareness of significant aspects of the litany of human rights violations now occurring within annexed East Turkestan and also raised several issues.

The terrorized in China's "war on terror"

First of all, as Rebiya Kadeer expressed in her statement at

the airport, there are still thousands of Uyghur political prisoners in Chinese prisons, trying to survive in ever harsher prison conditions while being largely ignored by the international community. These prisoners were arrested for simply expressing their political views. Not one of them ever received a fair trial and most of them ill-treated or even tortured by the Chinese police. The heart-breaking stories of Dilkesh Tiliwaldi, who was arrested because of talking to an American journalist, and Sherali's statement about the tortures that he had lived through when he was in prison is but two examples of the kind of severe human rights violations committed by the Chinese government. (Sherali was executed in China after being forcibly returned from Nepal even after he had been recognized as a refugee by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Nepal, and we have still no information about the fate of Dilkesh Tiliwaldi.)

Human rights organizations report that there are still Uyghur political prisoners in Chinese prisons, most of whom were arrested during the 1997 mass demonstrations in Ili. And since September 11, the Chinese government has started its own preemptive strike against its own "terrorist forces" within the People's Republic ("terrorist" being defined as anyone who essentially possesses different views and opinions than the those sanctioned by the government) and with its own methods, which included the use of unfair trials in unreasonable time periods, torture, disappearances and extrajudicial executions. Last week two human rights organizations, Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China accused China of conducting a "crushing campaign of religious repression" against Uyghurs. They also criticized China of using the post-11 September environment to make the outrageous claim

that individuals disseminating peaceful religious and cultural messages in the region are terrorists who have simply changed tactics.

Today, most Uyghur political prisoners are not as fortunate as Kadeer. They do not have any legal rights and nor any international prominence. Their only human contact is with their torturers and interrogators. In fact, although the international community should welcome the release of Rebiya Kadeer, her liberation should not be conceived as an end to the human rights violations still being committed by the Chinese government. In a statement made on the day of Kadeer's release, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Director Catherine Baber aptly stated that, "Rebiya Kadeer's release does not alter the laws and practices regularly used by the Chinese authorities to detain and imprison individuals who peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and other fundamental human rights." Indeed, if Kadeer's case is to be considered as a turning point, it must become just the start for increasing international pressure upon Beijing to improve its human rights record.

A light of hope

Secondly, for human rights activists, the release of Rebiya Kadeer represents a sign of success and the product of their dedication and perseverance. Human rights organizations and activists did the lion's share in ending Kadeer's imprisonment. Since her arrest, human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, worked intensely to influence Western governments to press for the release of Rebiya Kadeer. Uyghur organizations around the world, such as the Uyghur American Association, started numerous campaigns, organized demonstrations and brought their case onto the agenda of intergovernmental meetings. Indeed, these organizations' success demonstrates that their campaigns are not rubber stamps, that their voices and protests can now be heard much faster and farther. And most importantly it demonstrates that they can really make changes.

For the Uyghur people living in the region, suffering under a repressive government and unable to access an independent media, Kadeer's case inspired those still imprisoned, let them feel that they are not alone anymore in their cells. There is a light of hope

for justice that has started to rip up the darkness of their cells. Their cries do not only resonate in the walls of the prisons, and their dedication and faith for freedom will not disappoint them in the end.

What is to be done

The release of Rebiya Kadeer also demonstrates the extent of the "soft power" wielded by the United States and the other Western countries. The United States, by its support for Uyghur human rights activists and its pressure on the Chinese government for the release of Rebiya Kadeer, reminds everyone the true scope of its influence. Now it is time for the United States to confirm this policy of promoting human rights and democracy around the world by keeping up pressure on Beijing to enact systematic improvements in human rights conditions of Uyghurs and other minorities.

But there are problems.

It is an ongoing policy of China to release a few political prisoners prior to the visit of high ranking US officials for tactical gains. The US government should not let Kadeer's release to be a strategic gain for Beijing and it should not let this "hostage diplomacy" to continue to be a mainstream foreign policy making for China. Indeed, the US's announcement of refraining from proposing a motion of criticizing China at this year's session of the UN human rights commission should not become a common way of solving issues concerning prominent political prisoners.

Together with human rights organizations and the international public, the US government should pursue the freedom of all "nameless" as well as well-known Uyghur political prisoners, and push the Chinese government to change its repressive policies towards Uyghur people. While welcoming the Chinese decision to release Rebiya Kadeer, the international community must keep in mind that Rebiya Kadeer was arrested without committing any crimes and imprisoned without having a fair trial. For six years she was imprisoned for doing nothing against the law. Thus, her release should not give a credit to Beijing. Her release was not an act of benevolence by the Chinese government; it is not even a

delayed apologetic attempt to correct a colossal mistake. It is only one more tactical decision by the People's Republic.

In the future, the US government mustn't allow China to use similar high-profile cases to seduce appeasement out of the world regarding its violations of human rights. The US government also mustn't allow Kadeer's case become a platform from which the People's Republic can make unacceptable demands concerning the Uyghur people, such as listing some other Uyghur organizations as terrorist groups or the repatriation of the Uyghur prisoners in Guantanamo Bay.

Rebiya Kadeer is free now. As she herself emotionally said, she can now talk to anybody she wants, she can see anyone she wants, she can walk on the street with bigger steps. She can hug her relatives. She can kiss her children. The other Uyghur political prisoners, such as Tohti Muzat, and the thousands of nameless ones, are still far from being free. And for the rest of the Uyghur people in the region, the regime of the People's Republic of China is rapidly turning into a repressive cage. The release of Rebiya Kadeer should be a beginning to work more eagerly and enthusiastically for stopping human rights violations in China, and the unconditional release of all political prisoners.