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Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome. We're continuing our committee's study on the human rights situation of the Uighurs.

Today we have Dr. Darren Byler, a post-doctoral lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington, who has written extensively and done quite a bit of research on the Uighurs.

Dr. Byler, welcome to our committee. We will start with your statement for 10 minutes, and then we'll go to rounds of questions from the committee members.

You may proceed.

Dr. Darren Byler (Lecturer, University of Washington, As an Individual): Thank you so much.

I'll start by thanking the committee for holding this series of hearings on these important issues.

In my 10 minutes, I'll give you an overview of what's happening to the Uighurs, based on my research. I'll talk a bit about why it's happening, and I'll also give you some policy suggestions.

Based on the mounting evidence, it's clear that the Chinese state is engaging in the mass detention of Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities. This process resonates with the most horrific moments in modern history. In the past, such processes have resulted in generational trauma and social elimination. They have shattered families, destroyed native forms of knowledge, and at times resulted in mass death.

Since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Uighurs and Kazakhs have been “disappeared” into a widespread system of “education transformation centres” in northwest China, or what's otherwise known as Xinjiang. Nearly all Uighurs and Kazakhs in China have a family member who is interned in this re-education camp system. This human engineering project affects every aspect of their lives.

As the scholar Gene Bunin has noted recently, Uighurs now refer to themselves as a “people destroyed”. As I observed during a visit to the region in April of this year, the phrase “everyone is gone” or “disappeared” is something that Uighurs repeat on a regular basis. Many Uighur-owned businesses have closed across the country. Whole streets have been abandoned in Uighur towns and villages in their homeland.

The mass detention of Muslims was accelerated in 2017 when the party secretary of the region, Chen Quanguo, with the encouragement of the Xi Jinping administration, instituted a mass evaluation of Uighur and Kazakh societies. Chen asked security personnel to determine which Muslims were of military age, underemployed, had studied or taught unauthorized forms of Islam, travelled internationally, had passports or had international contacts. Those to whom several or more of these categories could be applied were determined, without due process, to be unsafe. State authorities determined that their world view needed to be “eradicated” from society.

As a result of this categorization, the police sent hundreds of thousands of these men and women into re-education camps and a larger system. Hundreds of thousands more were formally arrested and sentenced, using China's broadly defined anti-terrorism laws. In 2017, 21% of all who were arrested in the country as a whole came from the Uighur and Kazakh homelands in China.

Tens of thousands of children of those detained have been removed from their families and forced to become wards of the state. They are now being raised in state-run facilities that centre around Chinese language education and Han cultural values and practices. Reports indicate that the Uighur language is forbidden in these schools.

This process has also explicitly targeted Uighurs in positions of social and cultural influence. The Xi and Chen administration has arrested or disappeared hundreds of prominent Uighur public intellectuals. Several of these figures, even those who were previously regarded as loyal Communist Party members, have been sentenced to death for alleged extremist tendencies.

Conditions in the detention centres are often quite poor. Many reports have noted malnourishment and severe psychological distress among the detainees. In some cases, shoelaces and belts are confiscated due to the prevalence of self-harm and suicide. Those who do not participate in political re-education are subjected to beatings, isolation, and forms of religious and psychological violation. There have been numerous reports of deaths in the centres, particularly among the elderly and infirm, but also of younger people who were in good health prior to being taken.

All Muslims in the region now face the threat of being sent to re-education camps. It appears that in many cases, local officials have been given a mandate to detain a certain percentage of the population in their jurisdiction. All Muslims in the Uighur and Kazakh homelands in China are now, in effect, prohibited from carrying out Islamic practices in public or in private. They are also, in most cases, prohibited from travelling beyond the limits of their home county without permission.

Although the large "Friday" mosques remain open, the majority of mosques in the region have been destroyed. At checkpoints, Uighurs are forced to scan their IDs, and in some cases, their faces, in order to simply walk through neighbourhoods and enter the mosques that remain open. As a result, Uighurs and Kazakhs as a whole have largely stopped practising their faith.

Why is this happening now?

Since 2014, the Chinese state has engaged in what it describes as a people's war on terror. In the government's discourse, only people who look different from the Chinese majority, the Han population, and practise forms of Islam, can be described as terrorists. This means the state is, in fact, engaged in a war on public expressions of Islam among Turkic Muslims, and on Turkic Muslim culture.

There are two major reasons for this. First, since the 2000s, the state has accelerated Han settler migration to the Uighur and Kazakh homelands in China. The state did this in order to develop natural resource extraction, consolidate control over the border regions, and develop new markets. This led to violence and competition for jobs in the region, in turn prompting widespread protests. The resulting atmosphere of oppression, dispossession and injustice has produced a cascading spiral of conflict between Uighur civilians, the police, and Han civilians, both in the province and outside in other parts of the country.

These incidents, which were universally blamed on Uighurs in state discourse, were generally spontaneous, small in scale, and defensive responses to police brutality and state violence. They didn't resemble anything like an organized insurgency, although this is how the state portrayed them.

Second, in 2010, as part of a larger development initiative, the state sponsored the rollout of 3G networks across the region. This new Internet access in 2012, along with the social media app called WeChat, dramatically changed the way Uighurs understood their space and role in the world. Almost immediately, Uighurs purchased cheap smart phones and began to use the app as a way of connecting with each other and with Uighurs in the diaspora.

Since for several years the state had no way of controlling or regulating Uighur speech on the app—it didn't have the technology to censor it—much of the discussion online centred around religious practice. As a result, between 2012 and 2014, there was a widespread turn toward mainstream forms of Sunni Islam among Uighurs.

At the same time, Uighur political protests and some larger violent incidents directed toward Han civilians in Kunming, Beijing, and Urumqi, began to exhibit signs of religiously motivated violence.

Rather than assessing the small numbers of people who engaged in violence as quite different from simply practising forms of Islamic piety, the state authorities conflated these incidents and new expressions of Islamic faith as a sign of a rising "extremism" across the population as a whole.

They also began to use technological surveillance to detect past Uighur religious activity online. Through this process, what counted as extremism and terrorism began to encompass hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of the Uighur population.

These two factors taken together led the authorities to determine in 2017 that security was not enough to produce so-called lasting stability. Instead, large segments of the minority population needed to be re-educated and transformed.

To be clear, there has never been an existential threat to the nation from pious Muslims in China. According to the Chinese constitution, religious practice is a protected right. As with most colonial regimes, the Chinese authorities are primarily interested in the land and resources of those they are colonizing. Removing these Muslim populations from their homelands and placing them in the system is part of this process.

I'll move on to a few policy suggestions. There is now significant discussion among U.S. and European leaders regarding economic sanctions directed at key Chinese leaders and security companies that are involved in this process. There is also a discussion of new forms of assistance for Uighur and Kazakh asylum seekers.

I'd like to recommend that the subcommittee issue a formal statement demanding that Xi Jinping and Chen Quanguo immediately abolish the transformation through education detention system and release all Uighur and Kazakh detainees.

I also call on this subcommittee to introduce legislation that places economic sanctions on Chinese authorities and technology companies that benefit from this process.

Finally, it would be a really great idea if this subcommittee would introduce legislation joining Germany and Sweden in granting expedited asylum to Uighurs and Kazakhs from China and a blanket refusal to deport Uighurs and Kazakhs back to China.

I'll leave it at that, and I'm happy to take any questions you have.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

We will start our questioning with Mr. Sweet, for seven minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much, Professor, for your testimony. I sincerely hope that our final report will be an encouragement to our government to address at least some of those issues that you mentioned, particularly making sure that we do not allow any kind of extradition of Uighurs or Kazakhs from Canada.

From taking a look at the Tibetan situation and now the Uighur situation, one of the things that I've noticed over the years is the repression by the People's Republic of China, by the Communist Party. There never was any kind of strategy to dialogue with either of these ethnic communities with regard to their resources. They always do it by force. It is the same as what happened in the Tibetan situation, when they moved Han Chinese into Tibet to populate Tibet, intimidate Tibetans and diminish their culture.

This might be too big of a question for now, but in your opinion, is it the strategy of the People's Republic of China to always do things by force in order to send a clear message to the rest of their population that they'll take anything that they want?

● (1315)

Dr. Darren Byler: I think one of the things that they think about is that China has an immense population of 1.4 billion people. The Tibetan and Uighur homeland, Xinjiang, is seen as a space that could accommodate large populations of Han people from overcrowded areas in the east.

China is also interested, in the case of Xinjiang, in increasing access to central Asia by developing the new Silk Road—what they call the "one belt, one road development initiative"—building new markets and all of that. They're also interested in extracting the resources from the region. About 20% of the oil and around 20% of the natural gas in the country comes from this region.

However, in terms of dialogue and all of that, they do talk about how they're providing for Uighurs and that they give Uighurs help and assistance in going to school. They provide free schooling for them. They provide housing in some cases, as many Uighurs have been moved from their land into subsidized government housing. They see that as a net benefit for Uighurs. They see it as bringing them closer into the nation and also giving them these economic benefits. The process, I think, that they're trying to accomplish is an assimilation process, and also a process that will allow Han people and Han companies from other parts of China to have access to these resources.

I think you're right to note that it's done by force. There's not really any sort of dialogue. Uighurs don't have any choice but to accommodate these things. However, I think that from the state's perspective, they think that what they're doing is actually quite fair and quite just. They think that by moving into their lands, they're actually giving Uighurs and Tibetans opportunities to join the Han nation, to assimilate, to be pulled out of what they call their "backward" ways. Chinese people often refer to Tibetans and Uighurs as "backward" and those regions as "underdeveloped". They think that bringing development is doing good.

Mr. David Sweet: We have received an email from one of the Canadian Uighur communities with regard to one of the airports in China that had an express lane for those people who were coming in for organ transplants. That was part of their communicating to us that there's a large market for organ harvesting and that Uighurs have been subjected to organ harvesting.

Do you have any evidence with regard to that, whether empirical or anecdotal?

Dr. Darren Byler: I have some anecdotal evidence of that. I haven't seen any empirical evidence. It's something that's quite difficult to assess as an outside researcher. I've heard from nurses and others who are involved in the Chinese medical system in Xinjiang that they have performed these sorts of acts, removing organs as people are dying, basically. I've also met a surgeon who was involved in these things in the past and is now living in the U.K.

There is strong evidence that it's happening. We don't know the scale at which it's happening. One of the things that Uighurs are very concerned about now is that in 2017, as part of this re-education push, the state required all Uighurs to submit DNA samples at police stations, along with their blood types, finger prints, iris scans, face scans, voice signatures—all of this biometric data. They're very concerned that the DNA that's been collected will be used to match organs with people who need the organs.

There's a lot of evidence that this could be happening, but we don't have strong evidence to say that it has or is happening, or at what scale. We don't exactly know the extent of it.

Mr. David Sweet: I have two minutes left of my time, and I want to ask you one more question. You mentioned "religious and psychological violation". Could you explain what you meant by that?

Dr. Darren Byler: We have heard some reports that in the camps, people who do not acquiesce to the re-education curriculum or to the struggle sessions they're subjected to—where they have to stand in front of others and denounce their past crimes, such as studying the Quran, learning Arabic, travelling abroad, or whatever their supposed crime is—or who do not submit or perform those tasks well are often subject to punishment. It includes isolation, being placed in stress positions, beatings, or being forced to eat pork, which is a major religious violation for Uighurs.

There are other psychological violations, such as things that target their manhood or masculinity, or a denouncing of their parents. All of these sorts of things try to trigger certain responses in the detainee and break them in some way.

It's not unique to the Chinese case; there are other governments. The U.S. government has done similar things to detainees in other situations, but it's still quite horrific, especially because these people have not really committed any sort of crime and by any international standard should not be considered extremists or terrorists in any way.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Fragiskatos for seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Professor, are there voices within the Chinese Communist Party, either now or in the past, who've advocated for a different approach to be taken to this particular issue, other than the one that is presently being taken by the Chinese state? Are there voices of dissent quietly advocating behind the scenes?

Dr. Darren Byler: In the past, Uighurs have had their own political leaders working within the Chinese Communist Party. Some of those people did try, in some ways, to advocate for Uighur rights and greater autonomy. Uighurs themselves now live in what they call the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, so according to the constitution, they are granted some autonomy and some rights. In effect, however, I would say that since the 1990s to the present, that autonomy has not actually been present on the ground.

There have been also Chinese Communist leaders in the more recent past, such as Zhang Chunxian, the party secretary prior to the current party secretary. He was removed because he was seen as too lenient, but he wasn't actually that lenient. He participated in or advocated for “hard strike” campaigns. He's the one who began the “people's war on terror”. However, he permitted some Uighurs to obtain passports and travel abroad, to travel to Turkey.

I think because of that—this is my sense, at least—he was seen as too lenient and too open-minded towards Uighurs. He said that the reason he allowed them to get passports was that we shouldn't punish all Uighurs for the fault of a few. We should allow the good Uighurs to travel if they want to. They should be able to pursue careers and things like that.

The Chinese state has now taken a hard line against that sort of leniency. They have now moved from hard strike and security positioning to “transformation” positioning. They're trying to introduce what they call “permanent stability”, a kind of final solution to what they call the Uighur problem.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Just to follow up on that, you made an interesting point about Uighurs working within the state. Can you talk about efforts taken by the Chinese state in the past, and even currently? Do Uighurs serve as members of the Chinese Communist Party in terms of decision-making? Have any members participated in the cabinet?

I ask that because I've seen it other conflicts. For example, with respect to the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East, one of the classic ways to co-opt the rise of Kurdish nationalism was to integrate Kurds into the Ottoman state and then the Turkish state with respect to Turkey. The same happened in Iran, Iraq and Syria as well. Is there something similar to be said about the situation in China?

Dr. Darren Byler: In the past, this would have been a process that they tried to do. One of the Uighur officials that many Uighurs look up to, Seypidin Azizi, had quite a lot of power. He was the party secretary for the entire region. There have also been Mongol leaders in the past who have had significant power in the politburo.

At present, though, there are no Uighurs who are in those sort of levers of power and who have that kind of access. The most powerful Uighur today, I would say, is the governor of the region, but most Uighurs view him as someone who is simply doing the bidding of the party secretary, who has the real power in the province.

We've seen in the last two years many Uighurs of influence, many of whom are party members, being removed from those positions. We've seen purges of those leaders. The president of Xinjiang University, the largest university, was taken away and given a death sentence with a two-year reprieve. The former president of the medical university was also taken and given the same sentence.

What we're seeing is these cultural influencers—people in positions of power among the population more generally, the Uighur population—being taken out. Even though they are trying to work within the state system, now they're being removed.

● (1325)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm going to ask you one last question, if I could.

As far as the diaspora goes, where is the Uighur diaspora most active? I'm guessing, in terms of political activism, that it would be Europe and North America, but could you shed some light on that?

More importantly, to what extent have Chinese authorities aimed to crack down on that political activity, and how did they do it, if they do it?

Dr. Darren Byler: The largest population of Uighurs in diaspora are in Kazakhstan and in Turkey. Then there are significant populations in Germany and in the United States, mostly centred around Washington, D.C. The population in Kazakhstan, which is actually the largest population, is very tightly controlled by the Kazakh state, because Kazakhstan has a very close economic and political relationship with China. The Uighurs who live there are quite afraid that if they speak up too loudly, they could be deported or silenced in some way. They could be sent back to China, even if they have lived in and became legal residents of Kazakhstan.

In Turkey, there is some support from Erdogan and the Erdogan administration for Uighurs. In the past, there was more support. I feel that Uighurs are now being silenced to a greater extent, which, I think, has to do with Turkish politics more generally. Erdogan has been trying to manage the situation for the last couple of years. Some Uighurs are part of his movement, the Gülen Movement, which I think makes Erdogan see them less as an ally, perhaps. Also, he is very interested in maintaining economic relationships with China.

I think Germany and the U.S. have been willing to take stronger stands to some extent. Germany is now refusing to extradite Uighurs back to China, and the World Uighur Congress is based in Munich there, so we see them working quite vociferously to elevate what's happening to the Uighurs back in China.

In the U.S., there is some response and some help, but it's also still limited.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just to continue that line of questioning, maybe now we can segue into the harassment of Uighurs overseas. Do you have any initial comments with regard to what is happening to Uighurs overseas?

Dr. Darren Byler: Most of the harassment that Uighurs face overseas and in the diaspora is directed toward their family members back in China. Most Uighurs who are living abroad still have parents or close relatives back in China. Their online activity is being watched quite closely. Their family members will be contacted by the police if they are seen to be protesting or speaking up too loudly.

That has the effect of silencing Uighur voices in the diaspora. Their family members are in effect being held hostage and are being threatened with potential detention. Many people who are living abroad already have family members in detention in the camp system, but they might have one or two who aren't, so the threat remains that the rest could be taken.

That's the primary way that harassment happens. There are also efforts on the part of the Chinese state to convince Uighurs in the diaspora to collaborate with them and to monitor Uighurs abroad and then report on Uighur activities. We've seen this documented in numerous cases. That also has a chilling effect among the Uighurs in the diaspora because they feel they can't speak openly because they're still being watched by other Uighurs.

Those are the primary ways that harassment happens, as far as I've seen. Chinese agents might also be working and observing, but I don't have any details on that.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

Do you know what happens to Uighurs who are forcibly returned to China?

● (1330)

Dr. Darren Byler: I've heard in a few cases that people have been detained as they arrive in the airport in Shanghai or Beijing. Agents will escort them off the plane. They are often held in detention for a period of time in the locality where they arrived, the port of entry, and then police officers will arrive from Xinjiang and they will be turned over to them and taken in shackles to Xinjiang, where they'll be processed. It'll be determined in a detention centre whether or not they should be sent to the re-education camp system or if they are guilty of a more serious crime that could result in a prison sentence.

At this point, any Uighur or Kazakh who goes back to China can be subject to immediate arrest. I've heard of a few exceptions, but I've heard many more cases in which immediate arrest has been the result. Even people who had quite significant ties to government authorities in Xinjiang who had tried to ensure their safety when they returned have been arrested as they returned.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: How is China exerting pressure to have Uighurs deported back to China? Do you understand how that can work, when people are forcibly returned?

Dr. Darren Byler: They have extradition agreements in Kazakhstan, and I think the same is true in some countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. They rounded up Uighurs and sent them back. I don't know the inner workings of how that has gone on, especially in the Middle Eastern countries. I know that in Kazakhstan and other central Asian republics, there are formal agreements that are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that people signed onto in the early 2000s.

That's how it works there. In western countries, I don't know.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do you have any specific recommendations on how we should make recommendations or how we should be dealing with Uighurs in Canada and in other countries? Should that be articulated more strongly in some kind of recommendation, perhaps?

Dr. Darren Byler: One of the things that has happened very recently is that China has refused to renew Uighur or Kazakh passports for those who are living in the diaspora. People living abroad on a Chinese passport are being forced to go back to China to get a new passport. If they go to the Chinese embassy and try to get a new passport, they will simply take their passport and give them another document that will only allow them to travel back to China.

One of the things that European and North American governments could do is to support Uighurs and Kazakhs who have Chinese passports in political asylum processes. Nearly all Uighurs who are living abroad now who are on a Chinese passport feel it is a necessity now to get asylum outside China. They feel it's impossible to go back to China.

Those are the sorts of recommendations I think this committee could make.

The Chair: Moving to our second round, we'll go to Mr. Tabbara for five minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, professor, for being here today.

I'm just trying to get the feel of the central government and how China views the Uighurs. Does the state have any evidence of extremist acts or violence that Uighurs have committed? Where is the threat coming from, and how does China view it in their central government?

Dr. Darren Byler: In my opening statement, I told you a little bit about what happened in the 2010s when there was a turn to pious forms of Islam. The Chinese state viewed that turn towards more pious forms—and they're really just mainstream forms of Sunni Islam and Hanafi Islam—as the Talibanization of the Uighur population. They feared that the Uighurs were turning more and more towards Afghanistan and central Asia.

Then there were also a few violent incidents, one in Kunming where there was a knife attack that killed over 30 people. China refers to this as their 9/11. There were also some sorts of ISIS-style attacks using vehicles to run over populations of civilians in both Beijing and in Urumqi. People who were killed numbered in the tens, and in one case 30 or more. Also, the people who carried out those incidents were carrying black flags with Arabic inscriptions on them that seemed to indicate that they were doing some sort of Islamic act in carrying out those violent acts. China viewed those things as signs of terrorism arriving in the country, and they do meet the standard of what could be defined as terrorism.

The problem is really that they're conflating those who carried out those acts with the population as a whole, whereas most Uighurs have no desire—and had no desire—to carry out violent acts towards civilians, the police or the state. Instead, they just wanted to live their lives. They wanted to perform their faith. They wanted their children to have a better life. That was their primary concern. The state is not recognizing that.

● (1335)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You mentioned in your statement that China sees how the Uighurs are living their daily lives and practising their faith as a threat to the status quo. I think I heard you say in your testimony.

Dr. Darren Byler: Do you mean the status quo among Uighurs—

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Yes.

Dr. Darren Byler: —or that Uighurs were a threat to the Chinese status quo?

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Yes.

Dr. Darren Byler: No, I don't think the Uighurs have ever been an existential threat to China. I think what they do see, though, is that Uighur autonomy and Uighur society, as it was, was preventing open access to markets and to the natural resources of the region. That was part of the reason they wanted to re-engineer them and, through that process, remove them from their land to make it available for Han settlers and Han companies to exploit and to extract resources. That was how I understood what was happening.

China did see them to some extent as a security threat, the primary security threat that China has. My understanding, based on all the evidence I have seen, is that this was a gross exaggeration.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: This is a weak claim.

Also, in Xinjiang province, the population is roughly 22 million, if I am correct.

Dr. Darren Byler: Yes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Are there other minorities who are subject to the same type of treatment? Is it primarily Uighurs, or do you see this in other different minority groups as well?

Dr. Darren Byler: It's directed primarily towards Uighurs, but there are other minorities in the province. There are around 11 million Uighurs, around 1.5 to 2 million Kazakhs, and another one million Hui, who are Chinese Muslims who live in the province. Those three populations of Uighurs, Kazakhs and Hui are now subject to the potential detention, the Hui much less so because they're not seen as an existential threat in any sort of way. They speak Chinese and they're quite assimilated into the mainstream population in most cases.

Uighurs and Kazakhs are seen as a threat to some extent because they have territorial claims to the land, or at least they feel they do. They have been granted autonomy in the past, and they also speak a Turkic language as their first language, so they're seen as radically different.

They also appear phenotypically different in terms of their racial profile—in the Chinese discourse, at least—so they're seen as a distinct group that's different from the Han majority, whereas Hui can blend into the Han majority.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're out of time, so we'll move on to Mr. Anderson for five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for being with us today.

You made a strong statement at the beginning of your presentation when you said, “This process resonates with the most horrific moments in modern history.”

Are you comfortable with the level of evidence that you've acquired in order to make the claims that you've made, comfortable with how you cite them and back them up? I'm just wondering, because we had some questions the other day about whether these accounts are accurate or if we can verify them. I want to get your opinion on whether they can be verified. Are what we're hearing accurate accounts of what's taking place in this area?

● (1340)

Dr. Darren Byler: In terms of the scale on which it's happening, we can say with pretty good confidence that it's actually happening to that scale. When I was there visiting, it was apparent in the cities themselves that large segments of the population were missing. In talking to people, as I have, many of them confirm that they've been taken to what they call “the schools”, or they say they've “gone to study”and that sort of thing. In terms of scale, it's definitely happening.

In terms of what's happening in the camps, we don't have as much knowledge as we would like. We do have reports of people who have been in the camps and then released, who are very few to date. Most of those who have been released were Kazakhstani citizens who were taken by mistake and ended up in the camp for a number of months before being released and sent to Kazakhstan because the Kazakhstani government intervened on their behalf.

The reports we have are coming from them. We can see that the camps are there by using satellite imagery. We can see them being expanded over time. We have data, based on those people who left, of the crowding, the conditions in the camps and the starvation diet that people are on. We can't prove or say with certainty that they're trying to starve the population, but according to basic health standards, they're not feeding them enough calories to live comfortably. People are being weakened through the process. We've heard reports of experiments being done with various drugs, like tranquilizers and things like that, but we can't verify all of those things.

We wish we had more data, but it's something that China is not really willing to share with us.

Mr. David Anderson: Right. Exactly.

I just want your opinion on this repression that's taking place.

There's been a commitment by the government to sinicize all religion in China, basically. Do you see this spreading to some of the other faith communities? I think this is an amplification of what happened in Tibet. How do you see this playing out across the country, particularly when the government is now targeting Christian churches as well?

Dr. Darren Byler: There's definitely a targeting of what they call "foreign religions", which are religions that are not traditional to the Han majority. Christianity is being targeted to some extent, as is Islam. I think Islam is targeted to a much greater extent, though, because it's seen as a threatening faith. It's seen as an ideological disease. It's often framed as a disease that needs to be cured or eradicated. It's a tumour, a cancer in society. Islamophobia is widespread and rampant in the population as a whole and in the discourse the Chinese state is producing. It's to a much greater extent than anti-Christianity, but there is also repression of Christians. Most Christians are from the Han majority, so they're treated slightly differently than the Uighurs or Kazakhs.

Mr. David Anderson: Last week there were reports that they passed legislation or regulations to legalize camps. How does that change the situation? What was the attempt there? Was it just a public relations attempt within China? Who were they trying to convince that this is somehow a legitimate exercise?

Dr. Darren Byler: My sense is the legalization of the camps was a direct response to international pressure from the UN, from western governments, and from the international media discourse that's talking about what's happening in these camps. It's them doubling down, in some ways, on what they're doing, and saying, "No, this is what we're doing, and we're proud of it." It's a different strategy, they say, from doing counter-insurgency, but it's a better one. They're thinking it's something they could market to other countries, such as authoritarian states that want to control Muslims.

At the same time, it could also be—and this often happens in China—that on the face of it, they're doubling down, but in the end they might be deciding they've gone a little too far and they need to pull back.

It's too soon to say exactly what will happen, but these are the sorts of things that could be happening.

The Chair: We're moving to Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Byler, can you comment on the place of Uighurs within the Chinese national imagination, if I can put it that way; within Han nationalism, for example? Perhaps Uighurs have been perceived from the perspective of strong Han nationalists as constituting an inherent threat to state identity or unity. Is there any truth, any validity there?

Let me ask a quick side question with this. To what extent does this explain what appears to be happening now?

● (1345)

Dr. Darren Byler: Uighurs are one of 56 ethnic groups in China, according to the official framework. For a long period of time, Uighurs and ethnic minorities in general were permitted. They were celebrated as a form of a socialist multiculturalism, but really only certain permitted differences were allowed. Uighurs could perform their ethnic dances and they could dress in a particular way; that was fine. The ideology they practised, however, needed to be in line with the Communist ideology.

This began to change, I think, in the 1990s, when the central Asian republics came into being following the fall of the Soviet Union and Uighurs begin to talk again about having East Turkestan or Uighurstan, about having their own nation. Tibetans also came to the fore as wanting to have their own state.

China saw this development as an existential threat to the nation. They have a "one China" policy. Taiwan is also included in that policy as being among the threats to the nation. Breaking up the nation is seen as something that would be detrimental for the future.

In 2001, when the U.S. began the global war on terror following 9/11, China, instead of talking about Uighurs as separatists, began to talk about them as terrorists. That in turn amplified the threat of violence in the Chinese imaginary. Uighurs in general are seen as thieves, as violent, and Uighur men especially are seen as threatening. Addressing this is something that the Chinese nation as a whole and people in Chinese society have seen as important. They feel safer.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: There are many other ethnic groups, as you say. Is it the Uighur minority that stands out as a particular concern from the Chinese state's perspective?

Dr. Darren Byler: They're far and away the most threatening to the nation, from the Chinese state's perspective.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: In July 2017, Italian police detained for a short time the president of the World Uighur Congress, Dolkun Isa, on his way to address the Italian Senate. What was the context of that? Do you have knowledge of why he was detained by the Italians?

Dr. Darren Byler: I don't know all the specifics of the charges, but it's the sort of thing that the Chinese state has used against numbers of Uighurs in the diaspora. Rebiya Kadeer, who is based in Washington, D.C., has also been described as a terrorist, as an extremist—all these sorts of things—by the Chinese state. Dolkun Isa, I think, faced a similar charge.

I have not seen any evidence to point to him as being in any way connected with violent resistance. He's a politician.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I don't mean to interrupt, but the Italians must have had some reason to act.

Dr. Darren Byler: I think it had something to do with one of the leaders at Interpol being a Chinese national and his putting Dolkun Isa on the list. He was just detained very briefly and then was released, which seems to indicate that whatever charges they had could not be substantiated. He was released and is free to move about now.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move for the final question to Ms. Hardcastle for five minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

What are our next best steps now to engage China?

Dr. Darren Byler: To engage them on this issue, I think sanctions are something that could be put in play. Also, I think it would be wise to divest from technological companies that are working in this system.

One of the things that China is trying to do through this process is to develop a new form of counterterrorism, counter-insurgency, cybersecurity equipment that can be exported elsewhere. I've talked to a number of people who are working in the tech industry in China, and they say they're developing something that could be exported along the new "one belt, one road" initiative—the new Silk Road—because 60% of the world's Muslim population is living on that new development initiative, and authoritarian states on that development initiative will want to buy these new tools that they're developing to control the populations of Muslim societies.

I think that countering that in Canada by not being willing to buy into those products and those processes would be a really important thing to do. I think granting asylum is also a very important thing, something that you could do in a very tangible way to help the Uighurs in the diaspora.

● (1350)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do you see an opportunity for human rights with the upcoming universal periodic review? Is that something that has potential as well? Should we be leveraging this opportunity? Could you expand on whether you think that's the case?

Dr. Darren Byler: Yes, I definitely think that the UN could play a major role in reversing what's happening by exerting pressure on the Chinese state. Leveraging that would be a wonderful approach.

I don't know enough about the specifics of what would be available to you to speak with a lot of confidence about what you should do—next steps and all of that—but I think working with allies who are willing to fight what China is doing and supporting Uighurs in their struggle would be really good next steps.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank you, Dr. Byler, for your expert testimony today, and I'd like to remind the committee that despite the change in the calendar for Thursday, we are going to be sitting on Thursday. It will be an in camera meeting, which means that we won't be able to have our guests from the public at that meeting, but we'll be sitting at our usual time on Thursday.

In addition, I want to thank Naaman Sugrue, who has been our clerk for the last while. He's going to be moving on to other things.

I want to welcome Erica Pereira, who is going to be taking over as the clerk, at least temporarily. She is currently the clerk of the foreign affairs committee, so members of that committee would probably be familiar with her. Welcome, Erica, as our clerk.

With that, I adjourn the meeting.

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