The Uyghur Dream

Speech by Rebiya Kadeer
President of World Uyghur Congress (WUC)

Good afternoon. I am honored to have the opportunity to speak here today. I want to thank all of the journalists, advocates, government officials, and especially Mr. Rinaldi and Mr. Busdachin, who have exuded remarkable dedication towards the advancement of international minority rights, including the promotion of Uyghurs’ human rights. Without your efforts, your unflinching commitment, and unfortunately for many, your sacrifices, Uyghur voices would linger unheard. I cannot even begin to express my appreciation and deepest empathy for your arduous work.

I have been fighting for the Uyghur people, especially Uyghur women and children, for my entire life. As an Uyghur woman that grew up in the countryside of East Turkestan, during the tumultuous era when the Chinese government usurped our land, I noticed the grave inequalities that ensued following the establishment of the “People’s” Republic of China. Uyghurs, myself included, were systematically discriminated against, harassed, and economically, religiously, politically and culturally marginalized. I witnessed thousands of Chinese PLA soldiers invade Uyghur homes, round up Uyghur intellectuals, seize Uyghurs’ properties, and throw Uyghurs in prison under the auspices of Mao’s Red Revolution. My youth was short-lived; I knew that the only way to bring justice and peace to the Uyghurs was to grow up quickly and help free my people from oppression.

I recognized, to echo the wise words of a fellow humanitarian, the late and great Mother Theresa, “Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We only have today.” In light of this realization, I worked tirelessly to better my own situation, so that one day I would have the social, political and economic means necessary to guide my people to freedom and peace. I was able to overcome miserable odds to become China’s wealthiest women and the 7th richest person in the whole of China, and used this as a means to give back to the community through philanthropy and service, which I perceived to be the first, necessary step in restoring peace and freedom to East Turkestan; I needed to empower the Uyghur people who had been, for decades, vigorously suppressed.

After gaining prominence and fame in the community, I was welcomed by the Chinese government, and, as many of you know, even appointed a delegate to the Chinese People’s
Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China. My first attempts to voice the concerns of the Uyghur people proved unsuccessful; my voice, the voice of the Uyghur people, was completely ignored. I felt utterly betrayed, stabbed in the back by the Chinese leadership who claimed to be compatriots, comrades and even friends.

After decades of fighting, contrary to the overwhelming dissatisfaction, distrust in fact, I felt towards the Chinese government and its leaders, a glimmer of hope still survived somewhere in the depths of my heart. I would not allow myself to write off these people without giving them another chance. As the famous Uyghur poet, Abdurehim Ötkür, so eloquently said “The caravan never stops even [if] our horses become thin.” Equipped with the zeal enshrined in that poem, I once again appealed to the Chinese leadership to improve conditions in East Turkestan; I often pondered the nature of the Chinese leadership, “they look like people, they sound like people, why don’t they feel like people?”

It is no surprise that I was arrested in August of 1999 on my way to meet a US congressional delegate. Despite the fictitious narrative furnished by the Chinese government, which alleged my involvement in spying and treason, I was locked up because I had committed the unspeakable, shameful, heinous crime of … standing up for the Uyghur people. I voiced the profuse grievances and dissatisfactions of everyday Uyghur people, even at the sacrifice of my own family, who have been beaten, detained, and even tortured, due to my advocacy activities. I am numb to the pain forced on to me by the Chinese government. Leading up to August of 1999, just before my 6-year-imprisonment began, I feared most not my own death, but the death of Uyghur posterity. My attempts to work within the Chinese system to solve the countless problems and injustices facing the Uyghur people were to no avail.

Now, more than a decade later, I fear for my people more than ever before. This conference endeavors to answer the one fundamental question that has remained unanswered for far too long: “Is the Chinese leadership ready for dialogue?” Ostensibly focused on the Uyghur people and their perpetual suffering, this conference sheds light on a much more fundamental, broader problem for China, and the Chinese leadership, most appropriately expressed in a question: Is the Chinese leadership ready to face truth?

China is among the worst human rights violators in the world. The PRC leads the world in censorship of the press, execution, human trafficking, torture, enforced disappearances and religious repression. China maintains the largest number of political prisoners in the world, reaching 1,308 cases, many of whom are innocent Uyghur prisoners of conscience. Emmanouil Athanasiou, of the international committee for the Liu Xiaobo, stole the words right out of my mouth when he said: "Whatever China says, today it’s the only country in the world having a Nobel Peace Prize laureate behind bars. And this is an unacceptable situation. Legally, politically, and morally."

Indeed, there needs to be more people like Mr. Athanasiou, Nobel Prize Laureates, and petitioners outraged over the PRC. The PRC maintains enormous international clout, not only as an unbelievably wealthy world power, but also as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and a recently elected member of the UN’s Human Rights Council. In my opinion, China’s election to the UNHRC diminishes credibility from the
very organ tasked to protect human rights around the world.

The PRC’s influence on the international stage is increasing by the hour, and the international community is standing by, idle, allowing Xi’s influence to soar to new heights. The current victims are the Uyghurs, and our Tibetan, Mongol, and Han brothers and sisters. However, if the Chinese government doesn’t comprehensively reform, and it becomes even more powerful, you, the citizens of the western world, could be the next victims.

When Xi Jinping took office on November 15th, 2012, I was hopeful for a new tomorrow for the Uyghurs and China as a whole. In his first public address as the General Secretary of the Central Committee, the President, of the PRC, promised that he would fulfill the party’s responsibility to the people. President Xi admitted to the daunting task in front of him, reifying his commitment to addressing the peoples’ grievances.

Despite the lip service, the empty words, he paid to the international community, I was still hopeful. On the eve of his ascent to presidency, I wrote an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal reaffirming my high hopes in the new Chinese leadership. Before writing the piece, I contemplated the profound fragility of the current regime. I thought to myself: “It is only because the CCP is so deathly afraid of losing power that they use brute force to silence dissent.” In 1989, it was the same story.

In the article, I strongly recommended that President Xi takes this invaluable opportunity to embrace real reform on the mainland, thus securing a sustainable global power. “Become a real people’s president, not for my sake, not for your sake, but for the sake of China and the entire world” I said to myself.

Then, in an instant, the hope I had invested in President Xi, all of the hope my heart could take, vanished with the flip of a page. On December 10, 2012, the Chinese government executed three innocent Uyghurs. While I can’t be sure, I suspect that the executions were resultant of my appeal to China to talk, set aside our differences, and find a peaceful resolve to the problems plaguing East Turkestan and the Uyghur people.

From that point on, the Uyghur situation has gotten strikingly worse. As of just two days ago, which marked the new administration’s 13th month in power, all of Xi’s promises have yet to be delivered. With respect to human rights violations, the PRC received a long list of age-old recommendations from the international community. Among these recommendations were for the PRC “To adopt additional measures to allow ethnic minorities to fully exercise their human rights, and to ensure the active participation of ethnic minorities in political and economic decisions.”

Under president Hu’s administration, at least Uyghurs who were detained received a sham trial. Now, under President Xi, the Chinese authorities have seemingly replaced any sort of legal process, even bogus trials, with an outright, on-the-spot, shoot-and-kill policy towards Uyghur dissent. In one instance, authorities killed Uyghurs, confiscated their bodies in the desert, and then fabricated a reason later. When summoned for reasons and evidence by victims’ loved ones, the
Chinese authorities actively ignored them. In the media, the Chinese authorities cite the three evils; terrorism, extremism, and splittism, which give the government the excuse to further crackdown on the Uyghur people.

Since April alone, 31 bloody incidents have beset East Turkestan, resulting in the deaths of 300 Uyghurs by Chinese security forces. In addition, the upsurge in extrajudicial killings of Uyghurs, influx of special security forces and widespread, heavy-handed repression has turned East Turkestan into a war zone, like in July 5th of 2009, when the Chinese government sent thousands of PLA troops to shoot into throngs of peaceful Uyghur protestors. After this year’s June clashes in the town of Lukqun, Turpan, President Xi personally ordered a crackdown on protestors that left 27 dead. More recently, since the October 28th Tiananmen car crash, the Chinese government has stepped up searches, surveillance and inspections of Uyghurs, arbitrary detentions, seizure of property, and overall demonization of Uyghurs all over the country. Of course, China has enjoyed impunity for this crackdown, like all other crackdowns, because the Chinese leadership has claimed it was necessary to fight terrorism.

The government’s malicious repression has become physically, mentally and emotionally unbearable to the vast majority of Uyghurs. How would you feel if your government was bent on eliminating your language, history, culture and identity? How would anyone feel if their cries for help, equality, justice and respect for basic human dignity were actively ignored?

As history will tell us, the ensuing governmental repression of the Uyghur people creates a vicious cycle. Contrary to the Chinese government’s propaganda, stability of China’s entire country is compromised by the failed ethnic policies in East Turkestan. Uyghurs’ resistance towards China is inextricably linked to continued repression. However, the Chinese government likes to stir unrest and resistance because it is that very resistance that creates modern-day tension between the Han and Uyghurs. By turning Uyghurs and Han against each other, the Chinese government has been able to maintain its authoritarian rule in East Turkestan. Once the Chinese government loses the ability to “divide and rule,” and can no longer use terrorism as the pretext to further repress the Uyghur people, the regime will fall and make way for a democratic transition. The Chinese leadership knows that.

So, what happened to greater government accountability? What happened to the “Chinese Dream” that President Xi so avidly supported? Are Uyghurs not entitled to this dream?

I encourage the international community to vigorously see to it that the Uyghurs’ myriad grievances are heard, and that the Chinese leadership meets with Uyghur leadership to discuss the future of the Uyghur people. The Chinese government has already committed crimes against humanity, unspeakable atrocities. However, it is not too late for the Chinese government to lend an ear to the
people, and ultimately improve. The people must dictate what is best for them, and the people, Uyghurs included, have spoken.