

**China's Changing Strategic Concerns:  
The Impact on Human Rights in Xinjiang**

**Wednesday, November 16, from 10:00 - 11:30 PM**

**Room 480 of the Ford House Office Building**

**Statement of Daniel Southerland**

"The [RFA] programs speak to my heart... The world must hear what is going on here."—RFA Uyghur service listener.

The Chinese government has for many years tightly controlled information reaching the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. But the government's controls over the media and freedom of expression in Xinjiang appear to have grown even stricter since the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001.

The Chinese government currently controls the media in Xinjiang even more tightly than in other parts of China, except perhaps for Tibet. As a result, broadcasting to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has constituted one of the most challenging tasks undertaken by Radio Free Asia (RFA).

RFA broadcasts in 12 languages and dialects to listeners in Asia who primarily have access only to state-run media. RFA's purpose is to deliver accurate news, information, and commentary, and to provide a forum for a variety of voices from within Asian countries that do not tolerate free media. RFA, by broadcasting objective news, seeks to promote freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any medium regardless of frontiers. This principle is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When it comes to Uyghur language broadcasting, RFA is the only broadcaster that attempts to provide accurate and objective news. Saudi Arabia does some broadcasting in the Uyghur language, but only on religious matters. Taiwan stopped broadcasting in Uyghur several years ago. Central Asian broadcasts in Uyghur are edited so as to avoid offending the Chinese government.

The Chinese government itself broadcasts in Uyghur but censors the information that is of the greatest relevance to the Uyghur people. Foreign correspondents rarely travel to Xinjiang. When they do go, it is mostly on guided tours. RFA covers stories no one else covers. And the Chinese government is doing things in Xinjiang that it no longer does in many other parts of China. Executions of political prisoners are common. Officials don't just ban books in Xinjiang. They burn them. They force Uyghurs to work on roads and construction projects without pay. School-age children are forced to pick cotton. They restrict religious education, even in the home. They rewrite textbooks so that Uyghurs cannot recognize their own history. Perhaps most significant, the government is now imposing the latest of many educational "reforms" that will largely replace the use of the Uyghur language with the Chinese language. This started at the university level is now being implemented at lower levels of the educational system.

RFA has reported extensively on the forced labor and language issues in recent months. Over the last year, RFA has also covered such taboo subjects as environmental pollution in Uyghur villages, land disputes involving the forced displacement of Uyghur villagers, and restrictions on religious sermons, religious attire, and mosque-building.

In such a repressive environment, Uyghur writers are particularly vulnerable. They can easily be accused of engaging in “separatist thought.” A writer promoting non-violent dissent can be accused of advocating terrorism. For instance, in mid-2005, RFA reported that the Chinese authorities had arrested Nurmuhemmet Yasin, the author of a fictional first-person narrative of a young pigeon – the son of a pigeon king who is trapped and caged by humans when he ventures far from home. In the end, the pigeon commits suicide by swallowing a poisonous strawberry rather than sacrifice his freedom.

The authorities apparently read the story, titled “Wild Pigeon,” as an indictment of China’s heavy-handed rule in Xinjiang. They gave Yasin a 10-year jail term for inciting Uyghur separatism. RFA later learned that the chief editor of the *Kashgar Literature Journal*, which published the fable, was given a three-year prison sentence. The fate of these two men might have gone unreported had RFA not learned about the prison sentences from sources inside Xinjiang.

No wonder, then, that the Chinese government heavily jams RFA broadcasts to Xinjiang. Jamming consists of heavy noise, loud music and co-channelled Chinese programs. China typically jams any new frequency that RFA selects within 30 to 40 minutes of the first broadcast. Every month, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) files a complaint against Chinese jamming of U.S.-supported broadcasts with the International Telecommunications Union. China consistently denies that it is jamming.

Three years ago, the Chinese government-run Xinjiang Radio and Television station revealed that the government had invested 300 million yuan (nearly \$40 million) in a new project designed to more heavily jam international broadcasts. The targets were obviously RFA Uyghur and RFA and Voice of America Mandarin broadcasts. At the same time, the government began building up its own Uyghur broadcasting capability.

In late July 2004, the Chinese government began trying to disrupt RFA’s Mandarin, Tibetan, and Uyghur call-in shows. Chinese operators told callers that the regular access number to RFA was dead. Meanwhile, persons apparently working for the government bombarded RFA day after day with hundreds of automated phone calls in an apparent attempt to block out legitimate regular callers. Callers complained about busy signals eight out of 10 times when seeking 800-number access. Fortunately, dedicated RFA callers were able to overcome these problems. And callers continue to give RFA tips that once checked out lead to important stories.

One such tip came late last year from a farmer in Xinjiang who had been trying together with other farmers to get a state-run TV and radio station to run a story on a disease that was killing livestock in the Ili prefecture.

“We went to the local media to ask them to inform our herdsman about the disease, but all of them said that without approval from a supervisor, they couldn’t report it. Finally we sent someone to Ili City, to the

Uyghur radio station, and their answer was the same – but they told us to inform Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur service. So we called you.”

RFA could obviously not use this story based on a phone call from an anonymous farmer, but eventually we got confirmation from an official in the regional animal husbandry bureau. The disease turned out to be hoof-and-mouth disease, a highly contagious virus affecting cows and sheep.

The Chinese government heavily blocks RFA Websites directed at China in Mandarin, Cantonese, Tibetan, and Uyghur. But we know that our news does get through via proxy servers and “human proxies” who e-mail our reports or post them on different Web sites.

The Uyghur Web site has now become the only Web site that is updated continuously in all three scripts used by the Uyghurs: Arabic, Cyrillic, and Latin. All three are immediately available at the click of a button. An innovative feature, launched on August 5, 2005, allows the reader to switch instantly from one script to another. In addition to providing accurate and timely news reports, the site also functions as a collective memory for the Uyghurs’ besieged culture. It carries regular features on Uyghur history and cultural and artistic life, and on the works of Uyghur scholars and scientists. RFA recently added a message board. The Uyghur community around the world uses it to post poems, short stories, personal thoughts, and announcements of events.

The RFA Uyghur Web site received an Edward R. Murrow award last year for its innovation, functionality, interactivity, and design.

An RFA story earlier this year showed that news sent via the Internet can reach Xinjiang in creative ways. On March 17, Uyghur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer arrived in Washington following her release from prison in China. Kadeer had spent more than five years in prison after protesting China’s mistreatment of the Uyghurs. After Kadeer reached Reagan National Airport, her husband, Sidik Rouzi, held her in a tight embrace. An RFA story and a photo of this embrace went out via the Internet to Xinjiang, where the Internet police blocked both story and photo. But before the police could do their work, someone managed to cut and paste, remove the banned RFA address, and move the story and photo along. When Kadeer called her children in China, they were able to tell her that they had seen the photo of their father and mother embracing each other after five years apart.

But the challenge of getting such images and information into Xinjiang remains a daunting one. Based on studies done for RFA’s research department, the atmosphere in the XUAR is clearly the most repressive of that of any of the regions in China. One study concludes that the PRC authorities have “used the ‘global war on terror’ to justify harsh measures in the XUAR designed to stamp out political and social dissent, with little distinction between acts of violence and acts of passive resistance.”

In contrast with other parts of China, where people now feel free in private to discuss personal matters or even political issues when they do not directly challenge the Chinese Communist Party, many Uyghurs dare not discuss sensitive issues, even with friends or family members.

Although Internet usage is spreading gradually in the XUAR, particularly the use of Internet chat rooms, accessing the Web sites of international broadcasters remains an activity too risky for most Uyghurs to try.

But for many Uyghurs, RFA broadcasts remain a “lifeline” in a hostile PRC media environment. International broadcasts are the only means for many Uyghurs to get reliable news of the outside world as well as news about developments inside the XUAR.

"RFA broadcasts, like an educator, have brightened our hearts," one listener commented recently. "They have opened our eyes. China always wants to keep the Uyghurs ignorant of the world. But now we understand democracy, human rights, and freedom. RFA broadcasting means more than food, drink, and air to us, because it gives us hope and inspiration. We hope RFA increases broadcasting time in the Uyghur language."