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UNESCO Accused of Complicity in China's Treatment of Uyghur Heritage

By Asim Kashgarian, VOA, 2023.2.16

A report released by Washington-based Uyghur Human Rights Project accuses UNESCO of sanitizing the persecution of Uyghurs and destruction of their cultural heritage in China.

UNESCO, which stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "continues to acknowledge China as a protector of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz heritage in the Uyghur region," says the report co-authored by Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa Elkun.

In doing so, they write, the agency violates its own standards by failing to acknowledge Beijing's actions toward Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in China, which include "destroying built heritage and desacralizing religious traditions, and by criminalizing

grassroots cultural practices, while using their staged representations to promote China's chosen political narratives."

The rights organization's report accuses China of "strategic cultural cleansing," defined as the targeting of specific individuals and groups based on their cultural, ethnic or religious identity, and the act of intentionally and systematically destroying the cultural heritage of specific people.

Beijing has repeatedly denied the allegations and said the measures taken in the region are for countering extremism, terrorism and separatism.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not respond to VOA's questions about China's treatment of Uyghur cultural heritage in Xinjiang.



China has stood by its response in any discussion about Xinjiang, home to a majority of Uyghurs.

«We have made clear our position on Xinjiang-related issues on multiple occasions,» said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin in response to a question at a news conference this week. «The so-called «violation» or «repression» of human rights is the lie of the century propagated by anti-China forces and has long been debunked by facts.»

Wang added, «We once again urge parties concerned to look at Xinjiang's strong socioeconomic development in an objective light, stop using Xinjiang-related issues for political manipulation and stop meddling in China's internal affairs.»

The Uyghur Human Rights Project report examines five aspects of Uyghur heritage, including music, oral history and storytelling, which have been recognized by UNESCO. It details how China has used those cultural practices to promote revisionist history and exploited them for economic profit and government control.

According to the report, the Chinese government has destroyed large numbers of mosques, shrines, graveyards and historic books and restricted the use of Uyghur and other indigenous Turkic languages. Additionally, hundreds, possibly thousands, of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals and cultural leaders have been imprisoned.

«As acknowledged by the International Criminal Court, acts of dispossession and destruction of cultural heritage are often the precursor to acts of genocide,» said co-author

Harris, professor of Uyghur culture at the University of London, in a statement released with the report.

«Attacks on cultural heritage, from sacred architecture to community practices and customs, are inseparable from direct physical attacks on human beings. They are a form of cultural warfare aimed at the elimination of a people and their identity.»

According to a UNESCO spokesperson, when UNESCO receives a report from civil society, the information is shared with the concerned member states to elicit a response.

«We have just received this report and we are currently reviewing it, as we do for all reports sent by civil society and NGOs,» a UNESCO spokesperson told VOA in an email.

«The practice and procedure is that when UNESCO receives precise and credible information about a specific element inscribed on a UNESCO list, this information is shared with the concerned Member States, so as to bring both the information shared by civil society and the Member State's response – if any – to the attention of the appropriate Committee (in this case, the World Heritage Committee and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee).»

The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has acknowledged possible crimes against humanity in the region. A growing number of governments have expressed alarm about the situation, with the U.S. calling it genocide and crimes against humanity.

The report said that since as early as 2014, Uyghur and Turkic people in the Uyghur region have suffered from securitization, mass



incarceration and attacks on their cultural identity. Over a million people are estimated to have been detained in political education camps, prisons and detention centers where they are subjected to torture, rape, cultural indoctrination and forced labor.

China's management of Uyghur cultural heritage is aimed at increasing government control over the population, primarily through the use of Uyghur cultural heritage as a propaganda tool and in tourism, according to the report.

The promotion of Uyghur cultural gatherings and music has served to reinforce the designation of Uyghurs as dancing and singing «ethnic minorities» and «normalize PRC control of their ancestral lands,» the report said.

«Culture bearers are dispossessed and imprisoned while their history is rewritten and the economic benefits of their heritage flow back to central China,» Elkun said in the statement accompanying the report.

Xinjiang Governor Cancels EU Visit Amid Uyghur Abuse Blowback

By Stuart Lau, Politico , 2023.2.13

The governor of the Xinjiang region in China has canceled his controversial trip to Paris and Brussels, three people with knowledge of his plan told POLITICO.

The cancelation of Erkin Tuniyaz's tour followed widespread concerns from lawmakers and activists that Europe would be rolling out the red carpet for the man in charge of the Chinese region where extreme measures against the Uyghur Muslim community amounted to what the U.N. calls potential crimes against humanity.

News of the trip being called off was relayed to people invited to his reception parties planned by Chinese diplomats in France and Belgium. «Due to scheduling reasons ... [the event] is postponed,» according to an email sent to the EU guests in Brussels, the text of which was seen by POLITICO.

The one sent to invitees in Paris cited «an

important domestic agenda.» Those sharing the information with POLITICO did so on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment on the Xinjiang governor's trip publicly.

An emailed inquiry from POLITICO to the Chinese embassy in London, where Tuniyaz was supposed to begin his tour on Monday, was not answered. It remains unclear whether he will still go to London.

POLITICO reported on his planned trip to Brussels last week following a report by the Guardian on his London visit. It later emerged that he was also scheduled to go to Paris.

Critics questioned the British Foreign Office and the EU foreign policy arm for an initial plan to invite Tuniyaz for meetings during his trip. Some threatened legal action against him while he's on European soil. The EU later defended its decision, saying they turned



down Beijing's requests to meet more senior EU officials.

The Chinese foreign ministry didn't confirm Tuniyaz's initial trip plan.

On the other hand, it announced that the Chinese foreign policy chief, Wang Yi, will be visiting Russia and four EU countries: France, Germany, Italy and Hungary. He's also expected to speak at the Munich Security Conference. This will be Wang's first trip to

Europe since his promotion from foreign minister to the Communist Party Politburo late last year.

In the meantime the EU is expected to relaunch the human rights dialogue with China later this month, the first time since Beijing imposed sanctions on European diplomats, lawmakers and scholars in 2020, according to an EU official on foreign policy.

The US-China Balloon Crisis: A Uyghur View

By Kok Bayraq, Bitter Winter, 2023.2.17

Writing in Bitter Winter last year, I prophesied—without a crystal ball—that something similar would happen. And worse incidents in the future, too.

Now that two weeks have passed and the US-China balloon incident is no longer headline

news, it may be time for some reflections on what exactly happened.

Last year, when Chinese rocket booster debris fell back to Earth for the third time, I prophesied the following: "The debris across Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean



is a harbinger of catastrophes yet to occur during China's rocket-like ascent to power."

I also forecasted: "With the virus coming out of China, we all wear masks, and with more rocket debris caused by China in the coming years, we will all be wearing iron hats."

Even though I didn't have a crystal ball, last week, my prophecy (partially) came true when a Chinese spy balloon traveled across US airspace, from Alaska to Montana, and all the way to South Carolina.

The Pentagon did not dare shoot down the balloon over land due to the threat of debris harming citizens on the ground—remember what I said about iron hats?

Even though the Pentagon was able to drop the balloon in the ocean and avoid human injury, we can still worry. What if the spy balloon had been able to send stolen information to China in real time? In this case, it can be said that China is laying the groundwork for supremacy at some point in a

future war. In other words, today's claim that "we handled the spy balloon without damage" may be wrong. Perhaps the basis for more damage has been laid.

The purpose of modern wars is not to annihilate but rather to scare countries. When the other side admits that they are afraid, the aggressor has achieved its goal and may stop fighting.

Now, many officials, from US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg, are complaining about the known Chinese threat from the balloon. "The balloon... shows that the PRC (People's Republic of China) has become more oppressive at home and more aggressive abroad," Sherman said in a briefing to senators about the balloon.

Perhaps China won this balloon war.

The speed of military development in China, where its citizens could not be fully elevated from economic poverty, and did not transition



to democracy, is not a natural development. The existence of an unnatural superpower is an indicator of future tragedy for humanity!

There is a saying among Uyghurs: “Don’t trust a prophecy, and don’t live without a prophecy.”

Political and military leaders should pay attention to prophecies, especially those made by the oppressed. Therefore, I repeat: China has already exceeded the speed limit on its way to becoming a superpower. Carrying out the Uyghur Genocide to secure the One Belt One Road initiative: causing rocket debris to fall three times in two years because of poorly qualified “experts”; substandard security at Wuhan Virology Lab that was suspected of causing COVID-19, are but some of China’s violations on this journey. Supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, helping Burma’s army justify the Rohingya genocide, and supporting in the past other dictators in Libya and Serbia are among the other links in the chain of violations that China has committed. Gathering dictatorial regimes and poor countries against the free world is the fast track that China has chosen and insisted upon for decades.

If China completes its power mission safely, the second step will be implemented even faster, and nuclear bombs may rain down on us instead of rocket debris and spy balloons.

Four years ago, Pakistan’s former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, said, “I don’t know about the Uyghur issue,” and international activists protested his statement. However, I did not blame him, and I said that this was a positive statement for Uyghurs. Why? Because it was shocking and would be remembered for years, given that it was not what China expected. I stated in Bitter Winter that Imran

Khan might even have said, “What China is doing to Uyghurs is the same as what [the] Prophet Muhammad did to his Ummah (the community of all Muslims).”

It was a kind of prophecy too, and it totally came true. On April 2, 2022, Imran Khan praised China, claiming that Beijing had lifted 700 million people out of poverty and also stated that China “followed the teachings of the Prophet [Muhammad].”

The praise, for Muslims, was a bigger insult than painting a picture of the Prophet, something that Islam forbids and others did. The Pakistani leader was applauding the murderers and those responsible of crimes against humanity.

Therefore, I believe that my prophecy of all of us being forced to wear iron helmets, which has now partially been fulfilled, will come fully true in the near future unless the world takes immediate action.

Like all countries, China has the right to be a superpower, but it should only strive for this result by following the rules.

Why do we worry about the speed of a driver rushing home on our roads, and we do not worry about superpower candidates exceeding the appropriate speed in all arenas, including aviation and space?

We can easily envision the damage if we compare the two situations. The world needs to write China a speeding ticket now.

The ticket should firstly state that China must stop the Uyghur Genocide and release more than three million Uyghurs who have been held in concentration camps for five years. Secondly, the source of the COVID-19 virus should be revealed, followed by compensation



for victims and penalties for the guilty. Third, there must be an end to China's support for Putin and an apology for the declaration and activation of "unlimited cooperation" with Russia.

These are only the most prominent examples of China's growing damage to the world. No education on, warnings about, or even criticism

of China would work without addressing these three issues. We will soon no longer have balloons over our heads; if nuclear bombs fly, one fifth and perhaps the entire population of the world will be annihilated.

What we saw with the earthquake in Turkey and Syria today, we will see in the free world with the coming China-quake.

China Detains Ethnic Kazakh Activist in Xinjiang, Scholar Says

By BNN Bloomberg, 2023.2.15

Authorities in Xinjiang have detained an outspoken ethnic minority activist, scholar Rune Steenberg said, adding to persistent concerns over human-rights abuses in the far western Chinese region.

Zhanargül Zhumatay, an ethnic Kazakh musician who advocated for the rights of herders, was taken by state security police from her sister's house in the outskirts of Xinjiang's capital Urumqi on Friday, according to Steenberg, a postdoctoral researcher and Xinjiang expert affiliated with Palacky University Olomouc in the Czech Republic.

Steenberg had been in almost daily contact with Zhumatay since the beginning of this year. After failing to reach Zhumatay in recent days, he called her mother's phone and finally reached her siblings, who confirmed the details of their sister's detention.

Zhumatay faced "discrimination and constant security checks," since recently spending more than two years in a camp

in Xinjiang, Steenberg told Bloomberg News through a messaging app. "It was her expressed wish to exit to Kazakhstan."

Her latest detention was also reported earlier by Radio Free Asia. The Xinjiang regional government's press office did not answer calls seeking comment. When asked, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters Monday at a regular press briefing in Beijing that he was not aware of the case. "We hope all parties will look at Xinjiang's strong development in an objective light," he said.

Why China and US Disagree on Forced Labor in Xinjiang: QuickTake

The US has accused China of committing genocide in Xinjiang, with a 2019 UN assessment saying an estimated 1 million people had "reportedly been sent to internment facilities under the guise of 'counterterrorism and de-extremism' policies since 2016."



A UN slavery expert said last year he found claims of forced labor in Xinjiang among Uyghur, Kazakh and other ethnic minorities in sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing to be “reasonable.”

China has repeatedly rejected the allegations, saying it has provided development and educational opportunities to an impoverished region. The government also says it's fighting separatism and religious extremism mainly among ethnic groups comprised primarily of Muslims, mainly Uyghur but also Kazakhs.

Why China and US Disagree on Forced Labor in Xinjiang: QuickTake

The Xinjiang Victims Database, which was founded by scholar and advocate Gene Bunin, describes Zhumatay as an artist and musician who also holds certification as an editor for Kazakhstan television.

She studied and worked in Kazakhstan for around a decade, returning to China in 2008 where she became an advocate for herders' rights, it said. She was detained for two years, including a period of “re-education” according to the database. China says the collection of victim accounts is fabricated.

“Zhanargül had been aware and scared of the possibility that she may be arrested more than a month already,” Steenberg added.



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