

**Testimony before the
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission**

Access to Information and Media Control in the People's Republic of China

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

Restrictions on information

The Chinese government has heavily restricted information about ethnic unrest occurring in both Tibet and Xinjiang over the past year. It is also likely to maintain extremely tight media control in the coming weeks leading up to and following the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing. Reacting to a major uprising in Tibet in early March, the government imposed an information blackout on Tibet that remains in force today, more than three months later. In Xinjiang, the government security forces have reacted with overwhelming force against all but the mildest forms of dissent. The government has taken a few selected foreign reporters on guided tours of Tibet and Xinjiang. But reporters trying to enter Tibet are likely to be stopped at police roadblocks. Reporters who strike out on their own in Xinjiang are frequently tailed by state security police. In both of these vast regions, the domestic state-run Chinese media adhere strictly to what Chinese officials call the “main melody” (*Zhu Xuanlu*) line laid down by the Communist Party’s propaganda department.

Methods of censorship

The Chinese government has imposed more direct and heavy-handed censorship on Tibet and Xinjiang than on most other parts of China. And its jamming of international broadcasts, including both Radio Free Asia and the Voice of America, is intense. Jamming is particularly strong in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, and in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Listeners are aware that they can face penalties, such as jail or fines, if they are caught listening to RFA broadcasts. And RFA has documented a few instances in which Tibetan and Uyghur listeners were jailed and tortured. Journalists working for the domestic media in both regions are well aware that they face lines that they cannot cross. And under the more sophisticated censorship now in place in China, those lines are kept deliberately vague. This gives the Party and government great flexibility in maintaining control. Self-censorship by the domestic media is now a deeply ingrained part of how the system works. As a result, some major stories simply go unreported by the media inside China. Recent examples have included peaceful demonstrations, the strict control of religious observance in both regions, a crisis among Uyghur youths involving high rates of drug usage and HIV infections, forced or unpaid labor still used by Chinese authorities in parts of Xinjiang, and the transfer of young

women belonging to the Muslim minority to coastal Chinese provinces for factory labor. Environmental pollution is also a major problem that goes largely unreported in both regions.

Over the long term, in both Tibet and Xinjiang, the biggest issues are likely to involve increasing numbers of Han Chinese migrant workers in both regions and restrictions on religion and education. In Xinjiang, a government-driven “bilingual” education policy has been gradually eliminating the use of the Uyghur language from universities down to the kindergarten level. In the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), teaching occurs in Chinese in secondary schools and most university departments. Religion and language are the core components of Tibetan and Uyghur national identity, but reporting on them is restricted.

Last July, the *Sunday Times* of London described RFA as “about the only source of regular news” on Xinjiang. InterMedia Survey Institute, an independent contractor for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) which oversees both RFA and VOA, concluded from research done from late 2006 to early 2008 that many Uyghurs are so fearful of punishment that they are unwilling to admit that they listen to international broadcasters, including RFA. But the research shows that nonetheless, RFA does have listeners, particularly in the rural areas of the XUAR.

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

The Web has been gaining popularity among Tibetan and Uyghur students and intellectuals. But the Chinese government carefully monitors Web sites and message boards. A Uyghur Web editor in exile who tried last year to post on a Web site available in Xinjiang a mention of Rebiya Kadeer, the exiled president of the World Uyghur Congress, observed that his posting was taken down within minutes. Chinese authorities also recently closed a Beijing-based Web site aimed at promoting understanding between Han Chinese and ethnic Uyghurs following allegations that the site was linked to foreign “extremists.” But an examination of the content of the Web site, called Uyghur Online, before its closure revealed it could easily be described as moderate rather than extremist. The site’s owner had apparently done nothing illegal under Chinese law but had posted discussions that touched on sensitive issues.

Both Tibetans and Uyghurs have discovered innovative ways of republishing RFA audio and text by simply dropping the RFA logo and a few problematic words while saving the essence of the reports. A few social sites in Tibet and Xinjiang have become adept at sharing the information. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, word of mouth also has a huge amplification effect. In line with traditions of both cultures, respected persons listen to RFA and VOA, digest the news, and tell others what they have heard. A 2007 InterMedia Survey Institute survey of more than 1,900 refugees found that 86 percent named word-of-mouth sources as their top source of news.

Looking to the future

With VOA and RFA heavily jammed, the BBG several years ago recognized the need to find new ways in addition to regular radio broadcasts to reach target audiences in China. In addition

to using email and proxy methods, the BBG's experts have been experimenting with, among other things, SMS to send short messages with proxy information, a peer-to-peer system to distribute content, and Instant Messaging (IM) exchanges, which are less subject to filtering than is email or text messaging on cell phones.

This is an ongoing battle, because the Chinese authorities continually attempt to upgrade their Web monitoring and censorship tools. But we have succeeded in disseminating news in text, in audio, in video format and in conversations among bloggers. We also continuously send email updates to subscribers who reproduce, share, and comment on the news.

The SMS initiative is at an early and experimental stage, and huge challenges remain. One of those is to make certain that we do not compromise the safety of users who could be subject to Chinese government surveillance, given China's tight state control over telecommunications.

Chinese government approach to ethnic unrest

As Human Rights Watch (HRW) and others have documented for several years now, China has sought to use the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent "war on terror" as a pretext for targeting Uyghurs who speak out against Chinese repression. The government asserts that it faces an Islamic-inspired separatist movement with links to international terrorist groups. According to HRW's research, an official manual regulating religion in Xinjiang allows the authorities to deny religious freedom under virtually any pretext, such as using religion "to carry out other activities that are harmful to the good order of society."

Apparently to justify strict security measures, including arbitrary arrests—as well as to deflect attention from any form of unrest, no matter how peaceful—the Chinese government has repeatedly warned that terrorists might attempt to sabotage the upcoming Olympic Games. In January, state media reported that the Chinese police attacked an alleged terrorist gang in Urumqi, killed two terrorists, and arrested 15 others. The government said the group was plotting an attack on the Olympics but provided few details to back up that allegation. In March, state media reported an alleged failed attempt to crash a Chinese passenger jet, but again details were sketchy.

Also in March, the Chinese government, using its official Xinhua news agency Web site, blamed a radical Islamic group called Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami for instigating "illegal" demonstrations in March this year in Hotan, a city in the southern part of Xinjiang. Hizb ut-Tahrir advocates a worldwide Islamic state but also claims to shun violence. The Xinhua Web site allegations came after RFA broke the story of a peaceful demonstration by an estimated 600 Uyghur women on March 23. The women were demanding that the authorities lift a ban on headscarves, stop torturing Uyghurs held in prisons, and release political prisoners. The demonstration followed tensions in Hotan that arose after a respected and wealthy Uyghur jade trader and philanthropist was arrested. He had been aiding the families of political prisoners before his arrest. The trader, 38, died in police custody. The police said that he had suffered a heart attack, but the demonstrators believed that he had died under police torture. An accurate account of these events might never have reached the public inside China or in the outside world had RFA not broken the story.

In Tibet, the Chinese authorities have labeled the India-based Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) as a terrorist group and seem to be moving toward using the terrorist label, as in Xinjiang, to justify the continuing widespread police crackdown that followed this spring's protests.

Deflecting attention from the causes of ethnic unrest

China's state-controlled media have focused on the alleged role of the Dalai Lama in instigating demonstrations led by Buddhist monks that began in Lhasa on March 10 and the violence that followed on March 14. According to official Chinese accounts, Tibetans killed 22 persons in Lhasa, all but one of them Han Chinese.

Tibetan casualties that resulted from Chinese police actions have been almost totally ignored, although they are likely to have been many times higher than Chinese losses. The domestic media, following official guidance, have simplified the story so that it has become "the rioting in Lhasa," whereas most of the demonstrations that occurred in March and April and have continued sporadically until today have been peaceful. And many of those events have taken place in Tibetan-populated areas far from Lhasa. But the state media have taken no account of the widespread nature of the demonstrations and protests. Instead, they have helped to stoke nationalistic fervor by portraying Western coverage of the events as "anti-Chinese."

This has served to divert attention from the main causes of the unrest and plays naturally into a Chinese tendency to recall humiliation suffered at the hands of European colonial powers from the late 19th well into the 20th century. As David Shambaugh of George Washington University wrote recently, Chinese textbooks play this up and keep it alive. Americans had a chance to witness this virulent form of nationalism when it spilled over onto American university campuses this spring. Angry over the repeated disruptions of Olympic torch relays and criticism of Chinese actions in Tibet by Tibetans in exile, Chinese students launched counter-demonstrations.

The recent uprising in Tibet has been the largest to occur in nearly 50 years. But the average Chinese newspaper reader or viewer of television would have no idea of this. Everything is subsumed under the headings of "the rioting," or "beating, smashing, looting, and burning" or "the March 14 incident" (3.14 *Shijian*). The media fails to report that the Lhasa protests began with peaceful demonstrations by Buddhist monks on March 10. Violence erupted on March 14 after the police began arresting and beating the monks.

Thanks to funding from the Congress, RFA and VOA have been able to report fully and objectively about developments in Tibet and Xinjiang. Tibetan listeners who call in to our Tibetan call-in shows often say that RFA has been a lifeline for them. But we face immense challenges in getting at the truth and then transmitting it effectively despite the jamming.

Experience shows that international broadcasting is most effective when it is accurate, balanced, and fair, untainted by any hidden agenda, and in line with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 states that everyone has the freedom to hold opinions without

interference and to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Unfortunately, China heavily jams RFA and VOA broadcasts and blocks our Web sites. Every month, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) files a “harmful interference report” regarding the jamming on behalf of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). China has consistently responded that it has not “willfully caused harmful interference.” Chinese officials suggest that the problem is caused by overly congested broadcast bands.

Perhaps one indication of RFA and VOA’s effectiveness has been recent attacks by Party-run media against our coverage of the recent uprising in Tibet. In early April, a publication of the official China Radio International said VOA was secretly transmitting coded instructions from the Dalai Lama to create disturbances inside Tibet. VOA was accused, for example, of using the word “skirt” as a code word for the Snow Lion flag, which expresses Tibetan nationalistic aspirations and appeared widely during the recent demonstrations in Tibet. VOA checked and could not find the word “skirt” in its scripts. In late May, the official *China Daily* claimed that RFA had become “a mouthpiece for the Dalai Clique,” “stirring up” Tibetans, and spreading plans for an uprising. The newspaper gave no credible evidence or context for the allegations or direct quotes from actual RFA broadcasts.

These charges are disturbing because they fit a pattern of blaming “foreign hostile forces” for inciting unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. If Party leaders and the state media persist in accusing the Dalai Lama, foreign forces, and “terrorists” for the unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, it’s hard to imagine anyone in the leadership trying to reform the policies that are mainly responsible for the unrest.

Those policies include attempts to control the religious leadership in both regions, restrictions on the use of the Tibetan and Uyghur languages, and state support for an influx of Han Chinese migrant workers. Other issues include a “settlement of nomads” policy in Tibet, land seizures for mining and other purposes, joblessness, an unequal distribution of wealth, and political, social, and economic discrimination. It appears that the recent crackdown on dissent or simply suspected dissent, “patriotic education” campaigns, and the torture of political prisoners in Tibet and Xinjiang are creating increased resentment. Finally, the overarching issue has long been a severe lack of freedom of expression in both regions.

Recommendations:

- *Support for legal and journalistic training for Tibetans and Uyghurs.* Courageous Chinese lawyers and journalists have set a good example of what can be accomplished within existing Chinese laws. Although some of those lawyers and journalists have been beaten by thugs, harassed, and jailed, some have also achieved small victories in protecting the less privileged in Chinese society, including workers and farmers. But the number of Tibetan and Uyghur lawyers who can act as rights lawyers is relatively small. And awareness of Chinese law in Tibet and Xinjiang is relatively low. China has failed to implement autonomy laws that now theoretically protect the Tibetans’ and Uyghurs’ languages, cultures, and religions.

- *Backing for fellowships and scholarships supporting people-to-people exchanges among Chinese, Tibetan, and Uyghur scholars.* This could help to clear up the misunderstandings on all sides that are now all too common. A Harvard Law School program that facilitates exchanges between Chinese and Tibetan participants has had productive meetings over the past six years, according to all accounts.
- *U.S. government study of Chinese nationalism.* Popular nationalism in China has become a powerful force. Due partly to one-sided Chinese media accounts of the recent uprising in Tibet, large numbers of Chinese supported the current crackdown in Tibet and turned angrily against “foreign interference.” Similarly, Chinese media coverage has fed a distorted view of unrest in Xinjiang. The U.S. government needs to carry out a careful study of Chinese nationalism both to formulate its own policies and to facilitate a rational dialogue with Chinese officials concerning the issues.