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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[10 May 2013]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

The People's Republic of China's harassment of Uyghur scholar a setback for freedom of speech

Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) is deeply concerned for the well-being of eminent Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti amid reports that he is being continually harassed by the authorities of the People's Republic of China (PRC). With previous harassment in mind, the Chinese authorities have begun to step up their efforts in recent months, resulting in a serious deterioration of his right to freedom of thought and conscience, and freedom of expression, all of which is emblematic of the recurrent situation being faced by Uyghurs in the PRC.

Context of Harassment

Ilham Tohti, professor at the Central Nationalities University who runs a popular Uyghur-focused, Chinese-language website (uyghurbiz.net), is a well respected and outspoken critic of the PRC's policies towards the Uyghurs. He has also called for actual implementation of regional autonomy laws in Xinjiang and the Chinese Constitution. His peaceful activism on this issue has resulted in his class on 'Immigration, Discrimination, and Development in Xinjiang' being cancelled by the Chinese authorities.

In August 2012, he was interrogated for 10 hours by Chinese authorities, warning him not to speak to the foreign media or discuss religion online, after his website reported that authorities had sent armed forces to mosques in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) to monitor Muslims during Ramadan. The repression of Ramadan was one of the worst in recent years.

Later in December 2012, he was harassed again, receiving a notice from Beijing authorities ahead of the 18th National Congress, where the PRC's leadership change took place amid widespread crackdowns, informing him that he would have to leave the city for its duration so that he would not "stir up trouble". While he was in Atush, the XUAR, he was made to stay in his home under police surveillance and that anyone who wished to see him was made to first meet with the authorities for questioning.

Professor Tohti has also been reporting on the situation of passport denials of Uyghurs, including the case of Atikem Rozi, who began tweeting on the popular Sina Weibo microblogging in December, vowing to fight for her civil rights after having been denied a passport three times in the past two years. According to twitter reports by uyghurbiz.net, she was detained for 6 hours on 5 February 2013 and was left frightened and not willing to talk of her experiences.

His son has also been denied access to primary education without being provided any reason, which was thought to be as a result of his work.

Recent Harassment of Ilham Tohti

According to reliable media reports, on 2 February 2013 professor Tohti was detained again along with his daughter at a Beijing airport, from where he was planning to leave so as to speak at the Indiana University in the United States of America (USA). His daughter was eventually allowed to travel to the USA, whereas professor Tohti was not permitted to travel.

Professor Tohti however remained in custody for 8 hours, following which he was taken to his home, where he was placed under 24-hour watch by the police who questioned those

who spoke to him in person or on the phone. The Beijing Public Security Bureau warned him again not to speak to the media. Subsequently to this, Professor Tohti was reportedly suffering from heart problems and being denied access to health care.

Rather than being detained by local security personnel, he was detained by Xinjiang security personnel, representing the extra-territoriality of his detention. Treatment of Uyghurs under Zhang Chunxian's predecessor as Xinjiang Regional Communist Party Chief, Wang Lequan, was marked by some of the most severe forms of repression, presiding over the 1997 Ghulja Massacre and the reportedly thousands of Uyghurs who have been forcibly disappeared since the unrest in Urumqi, the XUAR, in 5 July 2009. This type of hard-line approach by Wang towards the XUAR and the Uyghurs seems to be being emulated by Zhang based on this evidence.

Achieving the heights of being a scholar in the PRC is a rarity for Uyghurs amidst widespread persecution against this particular ethnic group. This therefore underscores the significance of the harassment being levelled against professor Tohti on the wider Uyghur community. Due to his elevated status as a scholar and a prominent Uyghur, he holds a rare position to speak out about the widespread human rights violations perpetrated against Uyghurs, wielding an unusually large amount of influence due to his high profile position. As with the case of Chen Guangcheng and Ai Weiwei, his persistent harassment is therefore a demonstration that no-one is safe to freely express ones opinions, be they in the public domain or otherwise.

Silencing an individual with the stature of professor Tohti can have significant far-reaching consequences on the wider community of the individual affected. The harassment of professor Tohti must cease in order to preserve both the de jure and de facto elements of suppression of freedom of speech and freedom of thought and conscience.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the PRC to:

- cease its harassment of Ilham Tohti and other human rights defenders in the PRC;
- engage in good faith the the relevant Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council;
- extend an open invitation to all UN Special Procedures;
- bring its laws into line with accepted international standards;
- ratify and meaningfully implement the ICCPR which will provide the right for individuals to freely express their views and discontent with governmental policies.