

Activists applaud Uighur named to religious freedom agency

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has appointed prominent Uighur American attorney and activist Nury Turkel to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent religious freedom watchdog agency funded by Congress.

Turkel's appointment has been celebrated widely by Uighur rights activists, who say the move is a clear signal to the Chinese government that the U.S. government will not tolerate human rights violations against Uighurs in its Xinjiang region.

"Nury's work as a commissioner will be a symbol of Uighur Americans' whole-hearted embrace of democratic values and religious freedom for all," said Omer Kanat, executive director of the Uyghur Human Rights Project. "Nury has been an outstanding voice calling for global action to end the mass atrocities committed against Uighurs in our homeland, East Turkistan."

East Turkistan is the name many Uighurs use to refer to Xinjiang. Uyghur is an alternate spelling of Uighur.

Chairs the Uyghur Human Rights Project

The first U.S.-educated Uighur lawyer, Turkel co-founded the Uyghur Human Rights Project and serves as the group's board chair. He was a founding member of the World Uyghur Congress and previously served as president of the Uyghur American Association, where he led a campaign for

the release of Uighur prisoner of conscience Rebiya Kadeer in 2005.

Uighurs are the ethnically Turkic and mostly Muslim minority concentrated in China's northwest, where more than a million members of the minority have been confined in detention camps.

Since 2018, Turkel has testified before Congress, detailing human rights activists and scholars' accusations that the Chinese government's anti-Uighur campaigns include forced labor and mass internment.

Turkel, who was appointed to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on May 22, replaces former Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee, the commission's first Tibetan Buddhist chief.

"Mr. Turkel brings significant experience as a lawyer and human rights advocate making him a great asset to the commission's work," said Chair Tony Perkins. "He will especially bring insight and knowledge to the plight of Uighur Muslims in China and elsewhere."

The bipartisan government advisory body's nine commissioners, appointed by the U.S. president and leaders of both parties in the Senate and House, are tasked with monitoring religious freedom abroad and making policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress.

"The Uighur community in diaspora is very excited and supportive of Nury Turkel's appointment," Campaign for Uyghurs director Rushan Abbas said.

'Great encouragement for the Uyghur community'

Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, said the announcement gave Uighurs around the world a sense of hope. He compared it to the high-profile appointment of Uighur academic Elnigar

Iltebir as the National Security Council's China director last year.

"Now the appointment of Nury Turkel to another top position in the U.S. government to work on public diplomacy is of great encouragement for the Uyghur community," he said.

Turkel's appointment comes nearly two weeks after the Senate's passage of the bipartisan Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, which could bring sanctions against Chinese officials involved in the mass detention of Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in the country's Xinjiang region.

"These two major decisions mark a milestone in Uighur advocacy in the United States, as well as in the rest of the world," Isa said.

USCIRF's 2020 report on international religious freedom, which was translated into languages including Uighur, urged the U.S. to enact targeted sanctions on Chinese government agencies and officials responsible for abuses against Uighurs.

"The time is now for serious multilateral government and global policy actions to end 'systematic, ongoing, and egregious' religious freedom and human rights violations in China, including in Tibet and Xinjiang," former Commissioner Dorjee wrote in the report.