

BELGIUM/ CHINA: Belgian embassy in China puts a Uighur family in the hands of Chinese cops

– By Vanessa Frangville, Rune Steenberg –

Foreign Policy (14.06.2019) – <https://bit.ly/31rRmzc> – Approximately [1.5 million](#) people, mostly members of the Muslim Uighur ethnic minority, have been held in detention camps in China's western region of Xinjiang since 2017. The continuing crackdown on Uighur culture, religion, and political expression has resulted in a state of terror throughout the region—and in the destruction of numerous families, with parents, grandparents, and children often separated.

The failure of Muslim countries to speak up for their co-religionists, thanks to economic ties to China, has been much commented on. But while Western countries have been more outspoken on the plight of the Uighur people, they have often been hesitant to act when push comes to shove—even in countries that pride themselves on their advocacy of human rights, such as Belgium.

A tragic recent case highlights this. Ablimit Tursun, a Uighur from Urumqi, Xinjiang, holding Chinese citizenship, was on a business trip to Turkey in 2017 when he was informed that his brother had been detained. His family in Urumqi warned him not to come back, for fear a similar fate could await him. Foreign travel is often used by the Chinese government as an excuse to send people to the camps, as is having relatives overseas.

Tursun fled to Belgium, where he was granted asylum in 2018 and now works full time in a major Belgian company. He immediately began the process of applying for a Belgian family

reunification visa for his wife and four children. The visa application included a letter describing the family's situation as critical, stressing the risk such an application put them in and the need for discretion.

Despite repeated requests by the family to simplify the visa proceedings in order to reduce this risk, the embassy insisted on them making two trips to Beijing. By itself, this put the family in danger: Uighurs traveling outside of Xinjiang are inherently seen as suspicious, monitored by police, and often detained at airports or stations.

On May 26, Tursun's wife, Wureyetiguli Abula, and their children (who are 5, 10, 12, and 17) secretly flew from Urumqi to Beijing for the second time to complete the visa application and hand in the last documents to the Belgian Embassy. They arrived on a late-night flight to avoid the airport police and checked into a hotel. Since Uighurs are routinely refused service from hotels, and their visits are often reported to the police, the hotel was pre-booked by a friend. Still, less than an hour after their arrival, after they were forced to show ID to register there, the Beijing police knocked at their door and interrogated them. Police officers came again the next evening, intimidating them and encouraging them to return to Urumqi.

Abula feared that if they were returned to Urumqi, they would be blocked from leaving the region again and possibly sent to the camps. Her fear turned into panic when Belgian consular officials informed her the visa processing could take up to three months and advised that she wait in her home in Xinjiang. In fact, the visas were issued a mere two days later, but by then the damage was already done. The family refused to leave the embassy facilities until the visa application was processed.

A long discussion ensued, and security staff ushered the family out into the embassy's yard, where they lingered. At 2

a.m., the embassy called the Chinese police to the embassy facilities in order to remove the family. This is an extraordinary measure, only allowed in the most exceptional of circumstances.

As they refused to return to Urumqi voluntarily, they were put under house arrest in the hotel for a day. The next day, the Xinjiang police forcefully entered their room and dragged them into a car. As of June 12, Tursun has not been able to contact his wife and four children for 11 days and has no idea of their whereabouts or health. Friends informed him that the local police had interrogated all his relatives in Turpan and Urumqi, had searched his home, and had taken away the family's electronic devices. Those relatives may, in turn, be at risk of being sent to the camps.

Abula and her children's experience was typical of the oppression, discrimination, and absence of freedom experienced by many ordinary Uighurs in China. Abula was not able to travel freely to Beijing, she could not herself buy a ticket for travel out of Xinjiang, and she could not book a hotel room. The mere presence of a middle-aged woman and her children drew the attention of several police officers.

But there are also serious concerns raised by the behavior of the Belgian Embassy, which showed reckless carelessness and a lack of responsibility. The Belgian Embassy was repeatedly informed of the danger it would pose to Abula and her children to have to travel to Beijing several times at different occasions, yet still they insisted. Not only was a request for refuge at the embassy refused, but embassy staff also voluntarily called the police in the middle of the night—effectively sealing the fate of a vulnerable family.