

# Call to action: Time to increase pressure to save Uyghurs

By Paul Proski

Bitter Winter (08.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2X6h0LU> – Repeating the message “Never Again,” broad coalition rallies to stop cultural genocide in China, call for specific US government action.

## Remembering the Baren Massacre

Saturday, April 6, was a beautiful and sunny spring day in Washington, DC. As thousands of tourists crowded the parks of the nation’s capital to get a last glimpse of the famous cherry blossoms, about a thousand people gathered in a central Washington square to address a more urgent problem.

The day before, April 5, was the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baren Massacre. On that day in 1990, ethnic Uyghur Muslims in the [township](#) of Baren, near Kashgar in China’s [Xinjiang](#) region, protested forced abortions that were ordered to fulfill China’s One-Child Policy. In response, China deployed Peoples Liberation Army ([PLA](#)) units to impose order, and over the next days thousands of protestors were killed.

To commemorate those lives lost, and to call for action against the continuing repression and abuse of Uyghur Muslims in China, organizers staged the “Rally Supporting the Uyghur [Human Rights](#) Policy Act & UIGHUR Act.” With one voice, speakers declared that the time for talk had passed, and that action was now needed. They called these two pieces of legislation vital to putting pressure on China to change its inhumane policy, and demanded the US Congress pass the

legislation.

## **Demanding Legislation**

The [\*Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act\*](#) seeks to document abuses of [Uyghurs](#) and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, provide protection to US citizens and permanent residents against Chinese pressure and retaliation, and apply all available tools of the Congress, the Treasury, the Department of Commerce, and the State Department – including [Global Magnitsky Act sanctions](#) and prohibition of sales of US goods and services to any Chinese entity engaged in the surveillance or internment of ethnic minorities and religious believers – to bring about policy change in China. The *Uighur Intervention and Global Humanitarian Unified Response Act* (UIGHUR Act) directs the Secretary of State to prioritize advocacy on behalf of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang in relations with other states; restricts US government procurement from any entity that participates in repression in Xinjiang; imposes restrictions on US exports to the region; and takes steps to protect journalists and non-governmental organizations.

The scene this Saturday was striking: in Freedom Plaza on Pennsylvania Avenue, perfectly positioned between the White House two blocks to the west, and the Trump International Hotel two blocks to the east, people from all over the world were gathered. Hundreds of attendees waved the blue flags of East Turkestan (the name Uyghurs prefer for Xinjiang) together with the red, white, and blue of the US and Canadian flags. People traveled from Montreal and Toronto in Canada, from Germany and elsewhere in Europe, and from many US states including New York, Colorado, and Minnesota. Many Uyghur families were present, but many non-Uyghurs came in solidarity, including Muslims from many ethnic backgrounds, Christians and Buddhists from China, and [human rights](#) activists from America.

# Uyghur Leaders Speak Out

The rally was organized by the [World Uyghur Congress](#) (WUC), together with the Burma Taskforce. Omer Kanat of the WUC opened the rally and served as Master of Ceremonies throughout. The program began with the singing of the US national anthem by a young Uyghur boy dressed in traditional ethnic clothes, and then the playing of the East Turkestan national anthem. This dual focus on the plight of Uyghurs, but also on the values that America represents and the duty of America to defend the Uyghurs, continued throughout the day.

Mr. Kanat opened the program by thanking all the diverse participants for coming out on a beautiful spring day to take a stand for justice. He described the treatment of Uyghurs in China as a “great world crime,” “cultural destruction,” and “genocide.” He emphasized the broad nature of the coalition assembled, and related that diversity to the values that America stands for.

Mr. Kanat also introduced another theme that would run through the event, that of “Never Again!”, [a classical topic of the Uyghur public rhetoric](#). He said that the civilized world had said Never Again! after the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s, but that we found ourselves today in a situation we haven't seen since the 1930s. If we are serious about the Never Again! pledge, we must take action now.

Never Again! was repeated by many speakers. Dolkun Isa, President of the WUC based in Munich, declared that Congressional legislation was required to make Never Again! real. Ilshat Hassan, President of the Uyghur Americans Association cited Raphael Lemkin (1900–1959), the Polish Jew who escaped the Holocaust and led the drafting of the international convention against genocide. He said we are now seeing in China exactly what Lemkin had warned against. Nury Turkel, Chairman of the Uyghur Human Rights Project, cited

Ambassador Michael Kozak of the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor as saying that the situation in China "has not been seen since the 1930s." Holocaust survivor Sami Steigmann of the Holocaust and Human Rights Education Center made the same connection, saying the Holocaust happened because no one stood up to stop it, and now governments across the world must rise up in the face of a new genocide. Dr. Yang Jianli, President of the Citizen Power Initiatives for China, remarked wryly that Uyghurs were suffering under "Fascism with Chinese Characteristics" and that we must keep our Never Again! vow to save them. Kristina Olney of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation used the Never Again! phrase in reference to the crimes both of Nazi Germany and to those of Communism around the world.

Dolkun Isa, President of the WUC, introduced another common theme, that the time for words has passed, and now it is time for action. He called it a critical time for China and for the world. But he also said that there is reason for hope, because pressure from abroad is finally building. He cited the fact that China was forced to admit to the mass detention of Uyghurs at a UN Human Rights Review in August 2018. The European Parliament passed a resolution condemning the [transformation through education camps](#) in China in October 2018. Canada followed suit shortly afterward, and Turkey "broke its silence" in 2019. He cited a bipartisan list of high-ranking US officials that have raised alarm about the situation, including Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, and Senator Marco Rubio. But he stressed that we must move beyond words to actions. The US and the EU must work together to put pressure on China. Congress must pass the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and the UIGHUR Act, and the administration must impose sanctions on officials under the Global Magnitsky Act. Only then can we make Never Again! real.

## Focus on Action

The focus on action was reinforced by many speakers. In addition to repeated calls for passage of the Congressional legislation and for implementation of Magnitsky sanctions, many speakers called for official prohibition of sales of goods and services to any entity with ties to the repression machine in China; the sanctioning of any American company that sells electronic or other products that can be used by China to monitor the population; and the banning of the import of any goods made in the Chinese prison labor system. In addition, several speakers called for a consumer boycott of all products from China.

Letters from multiple elected officials were read from the podium calling for tougher action against China. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) pledged to “work with you to end this horrific abuse” and called for everyone to speak with one voice. Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) called the treatment of Uyghurs a “crime against humanity” and called for Magnitsky sanctions. Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-NY) and Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) also delivered letters of support and called for Congressional action. Katrina Lantos Swett, the President of the Lantos Foundations for Human Rights and Justice named after the great Congressional voice for human rights, Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA, 1928–2008), also sent a letter observing that the whole region of Xinjiang had “turned into a prison.”

## Christian Solidarity with the Uyghurs

Together with this bipartisan group of lawmakers and Congressional interests, a broad range of advocates and groups came together to advocate for action to defend Uyghurs. Over [300 imams signed a petition](#) calling for boycotts of Chinese goods and action by the US government, and Muslims

from many different ethnic groups traveled from nearby states to be at the rally. Burma advocate Imam Malik Mujahid helped to organize the event, and led chants of "USA, USA" to help drive home the point that defending Uyghurs (and Burmese) are key American values. Bhuchung Tsering, Vice President of the International Campaign for Tibet stressed the long and close history between the Tibetan and Uyghur nations, and declared his solidarity with the Uyghurs' suffering, and representatives of the Mongolian nation were present to deliver similar sentiments. Dominic Nardi of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom stressed his role as delivering the bipartisan, institutional concern of the United States government on the issue of the Uyghurs, and called for immediate action. Kristina Olney of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation spoke of the plight of the Uyghurs as part of the ongoing tragedy of Communism, and that anti-Communists around the world are standing with oppressed believers in China and calling for action. Chinese Christians attended as well, to lend their voices in defense of persecuted believers of all faiths. Tracy Jiao of [The Church of Almighty God](#) condemned the Chinese government's attempts to "Sinicize" all religions – Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Daoist, and others – and pledged her whole church in solidarity with Uyghurs against Chinese "cultural genocide."

When asked why her Christian brothers and sisters had come out to rally for the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, one member of The Church of Almighty God, Kunrui Li, responded, "Huge numbers of Uyghurs have been detained in concentration camps. They are tortured and abused, even persecuted to death. This is a gross violation of human rights. Although we have different beliefs, we are all suffering the cruel persecution of the Chinese government. We feel that we have the responsibility to stand up and defend human rights. Since the establishment of our church in 1991, Christians from The Church of Almighty God have been suffering persecution. Many have been tortured, put under heavy psychological pressure,

and sentenced to prison. Some of our brothers and sisters are being held in Xinjiang's concentration camps next to Uyghurs. Today we participate in this rally to express our solidarity and support to them."

This spirit of solidarity was abundant at the rally in Washington. The mood was serious, because millions are suffering persecution. But it was also hopeful, as so many people from diverse backgrounds were coming together to call for action, and so many officials in Europe and the United States are finally listening. With cries of Never Again! and pledges of action, participants left energized to take the fight to the world and to China.

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