

CHINA: XINJIANG AUTHORITIES SENTENCE UYGHUR SCHOLAR TO 10 YEARS IN PRISON

RFA (09.08.2017) –

<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-08092017151559.html> –

Authorities in northwest China's Xinjiang region have sentenced a prominent Uyghur theological scholar sponsored by the country's state-sanctioned Islamic Association to 10 years in prison following his return from Egypt, according to local sources.

A faculty member at Xinjiang Islamic University in the regional capital Urumqi told RFA's Uyghur Service that Hebibulla Tohti was convicted in May under charges that were not immediately clear, nearly a year after he voluntarily relocated to Xinjiang from Cairo to registered himself with the government.

Thousands of Uyghurs, many of whom are students studying at Cairo's prestigious Al-Azhar Islamic University, have returned to Xinjiang from Egypt after Chinese police detained many of their relatives and threatened them with 'severe punishment' if they did not return.

Many have since been detained, forced to undergo political reeducation, and jailed by authorities in Xinjiang, where Uyghurs regularly complain of pervasive ethnic discrimination, religious repression, and cultural suppression under Chinese rule in the region. Tohti, who is from Kashgar (in Chinese, Kashi) city, in Xinjiang's Kashgar prefecture, had graduated with an undergraduate degree from Xinjiang Islamic University and was one of three students sent by China's Islamic Association to Al-Azhar, where he pursued a doctorate degree in theology.

Upon completion of his studies in September 2015, he received official praise from the association for defending his dissertation and obtaining his degree.

Tohti relocated to Urumqi in July last year, as ordered by Chinese authorities, but was immediately detained and interrogated upon his return for committing three 'illegal activities' while studying at Al-Azhar, the faculty member said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The three activities consisted of teaching religion to Uyghur students in Egypt without permission from the Chinese authorities, attending a major religious conference in Saudi Arabia in 2015 without permission from the Chinese authorities, and emphasizing the distinct achievements of the Uyghur culture in his dissertation paper, he said.

Additionally, Tohti, who is fluent in Uyghur, Mandarin Chinese, English and Arabic had failed to write or speak out positively about Chinese policies in the Uyghur region.

Second detention

According to the faculty member, Tohti was released in January this year, at which point the director of Xinjiang Islamic University offered him a teaching position. Tohti had accepted, but was detained again in March, he said.

"I know that he was detained by state security police, which

is why we have been unable to hire him," the faculty member said.

He couldn't pass a security check, so the relevant police department warned our administration not to hire him.

Tohti was sentenced to 10 years in prison for 'illegal religious activity' in May, he said, though there has been no official announcement of his conviction or what charges he had faced. The faculty member referred further questions to Xinjiang Islamic University administrators Ali Rahman, Elijan Inayet and Ma Yanling, though RFA was unable to reach them by phone.

A police officer named Abduweli at the Bahuliang Police Station in Urumqi was initially unsure of Tohti's identity when contacted by RFA, noting that authorities had "detained many from that [Xinjiang Islamic University] school district."

When informed of the scholar's background at Al-Azhar, however, he was able to confirm his arrest.

'Our police chief was directly involved in detaining that man, so you should call him,' he said. Calls to the police chief rang unanswered, while sources at the Urumqi Judicial Department declined to provide details about Tohti's case.

Observers say that Tohti was likely targeted by authorities as being 'double-faced,' according to Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo's recent campaign to punish influential Uyghurs who appear loyal to China's ruling Communist Party, but secretly promote the interests of their ethnic group.

China's Communist Party blames some Uyghurs for a string of violent attacks and clashes in China in recent years, but critics say the government has exaggerated the threat from the ethnic group, and that repressive domestic policies are responsible for violence that has left hundreds dead since

2009.

China regularly conducts “strike hard” campaigns in Xinjiang, including police raids on Uyghur households, restrictions on Islamic practices, and curbs on the culture and language of the Uyghur people, including videos and other material.

Reported and translated by Shohret Hoshur for RFA's Uyghur Service. Written in English by Joshua Lipes.