

## **Police crackdown on Chinese Uyghurs in Egypt and 'repatriation' on Beijing's 'request'**

### ***Human Rights Without Frontiers denounces the forceful 'repatriation' by Egypt of Uyghur religious students back to China***

HRWF (18.08.2017) - In early July, Egyptian police rounded up, detained and deported at least 200 Uyghurs, mainly religious students, in Cairo, arresting some in restaurants or at their homes and seizing others at airports as they tried to flee the country.

On 7<sup>th</sup> July, Radio Free Asia reported:

Students who have evaded detention are hiding in malls, in mosques, and in nearby fields, one Uyghur mother said, adding that she is now on the run with two young students given to her by their mother for protection.

"When we were leaving, I spotted some people watching the area where we were staying. They were in a black, ugly-looking car with tinted windows, and after we left they detained the Uyghur students who were living at our house."

"They were all Uyghurs, and I'm sure they were sent by the Chinese government," she added.

One Uyghur student now in hiding said that his brother, a PhD student at Al-Azhar, had also been detained.

"I am now on the run with his wife and three children," he said. "My brother called me from the detention center and said that he saw about 200 Uyghur students being held there."

"It has been several days now that we have been running on empty stomachs," another student said.

"We have valid visas and passports, but we can't go to the airports, and we can't go to the markets for food or get gas for our cars. The Egyptian people have been told that we're criminals, and they inform the police if they see us."

Another student said that a friend in detention had told him that police were forcing them to sign documents stating they had participated in Uyghur separatist organizations based outside of China.

"Some did not sign the document, because older students warned them not to," he said.

"Police took fingerprints of all their fingers."

Also speaking to RFA, an Uzbek national living in Egypt said that he and his family were dining at one of Cairo's Uyghur restaurants when police suddenly arrived.

"There were 10 to 20 Uyghurs there, chefs and so on, and the police took all of them away."

"There were Kyrgyz and Uzbek people at the restaurant, too, but they weren't touched at all. Police asked everyone's ethnicity and took away all the people who said they were Uyghur."

Reached for comment, a staff member at the Egyptian embassy in Washington D.C. said only that she had heard media reports of the detentions. "Since I am not authorized to speak on this matter, I cannot say anything more about it," she added.

Calls to the embassy's press office rang unanswered on Friday.

Rebiya Kadeer, president of the Munich-based exile World Uyghur Congress, meanwhile called on the international community to prevent the forced return of Uyghurs from Egypt to China, adding, "We have been following this issue closely for the past two or three months."

"I ask all Uyghur organizations to do their best to help the Uyghurs detained in Egypt."

International law requires that people living in foreign countries not be returned to situations in which they are likely to face persecution, Sophie Richardson—China director for Human Rights Watch—said in an interview.

"It's extremely concerning if the Egyptian government is somehow being complicit in a legally baseless Chinese effort to force people back to China," Richardson said.

As a signatory to the United Nations' Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and according to international law, Egypt cannot deport the students to China because of the threats they face at home.

In a letter, a group of Uyghur students living in Cairo appealed to Dr. Ahmed El-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, to intervene to block further deportations to China.

"Our only sin is that we want to learn and study religion," said the letter, a copy of which was obtained by the Arabic-language news outlet HuffPost Arabi.

"Egypt, where Al-Azhar is built, [should be] a safe haven for those who want to learn," the letter said.

In a July 7 statement issued after a meeting the day before with a Xinjiang delegation arranged by China's ambassador to Egypt, Al-Azhar said that no Uyghur students had been arrested "inside Al-Azhar campus or from any buildings associated with Al-Azhar."

"The institution is following up with authorities in the wake of reports on social media," Al-Azhar said.

### ***Chinese authorities also detain Uyghur Muslims coming back from overseas pilgrimages***

In July, Chinese authorities in the northwestern region of Xinjiang held hundreds of ethnic minority Uyghur Muslims after they returned from overseas pilgrimage. They are charging them with illegal pilgrimage, and for taking part in illegal religious activities.

Article 21 of the "26 Forms of Illegal Religious Activity" leaked to Radio Free Asia in February 2017 forbids anyone from traveling overseas on pilgrimage, including the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, with companies not endorsed by China's religious affairs authorities.

In March, a rights lawyer went to lodge appeal proceedings, and came across a detention center—the Changji Detention Center—where there were 200-300 Uyghurs who were being held after coming back from pilgrimage in the Middle East. They were all being held for investigation and screening.

According to Dilxat Raxit, spokesman for the exile World Uyghur Congress group, Uyghurs who have studied in the Middle East are also being detained on their return. Some of them are also facing charges of religious extremism or terrorism.

None of those held for religious activities will likely be able to find employment once they have a criminal record.