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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

December 10, 2020

His Excellency Cui Tiankai
Ambassador of the People's Republic of China
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America
3505 International Place NW
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Ambassador Cui:

On International Human Rights Day, we write to request that the Chinese government release women political prisoners being unjustly detained in the People's Republic of China. Given China's important international leadership and influence, releasing these women could drive greater respect for human rights across the world.

We call for releasing these individuals on the merits of their cases, but today, we also urge you to act quickly on health and humanitarian grounds. The rapid spread of COVID-19 is a threat to all people and nations, but prison populations are at a heightened risk due to the inability to practice social distancing, poor sanitation, and lack of adequate medical care. In March 2020, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, called upon governments to release "political prisoners and others detained simply for expressing critical or dissenting views" in order to slow the spread of the virus and protect the health of both detainees and the broader population. We encourage the Chinese government, during this global crisis, to immediately release these individuals.

While we are greatly concerned about all individuals detained for acts of peaceful expression, we draw your attention to three women political prisoners in particular, who remain in detention:

In December 2017, **Rahile Dawut**, a Xinjiang University professor who researched and documented traditional Uyghur culture, disappeared. She is believed to be detained in a mass internment camp, and the date of her release remains unknown. The following year, in August, editor and award-winning Uyghur-language poet, **Chimengul Awut**, was detained in an internment camp in Xinjiang region, allegedly for her work editing a Uyghur-language novel. Their detention is part of a broader government campaign to suppress ethnic minority communities and political dissent, including through the detention of more than one million Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities who have been subjected to forced labor, torture, and abuse. These women should never have been detained for peacefully exercising their freedom of expression and we urge government officials to release them.

In 2015, provincial authorities in Sichuan detained at least eight people for their involvement in organizing observances of the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday, including **Bonkho Kyi**, who was sentenced to seven years for her participation in planning the celebrations and advocacy for the

cultural and religious rights of Tibetans in China. While little remains known about her whereabouts, she is believed to be held in Mianyang prison. Five United Nations Special Rapporteurs have jointly expressed serious concern over Kyi's arrest and detention as well as the lack of judicial process in her sentencing. She should never have been detained for peacefully expressing her views and celebrating her ethnic identity and heritage, and we call for her immediate release.

These women have been wrongly detained simply for exercising their fundamental rights, and justice demands they be released. Moreover, as China knows well, in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting the health and safety of all people is critical. Countries around the world have released prisoners, understanding that these pressing times require urgent humanitarian relief. We urge the Chinese government do the same and release Rahile Dawut, Chimengul Awut, and Bonkho Kyi, and all other prisoners of conscience unjustly detained.

Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
Ranking Member



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator