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China's National People's Congress ratified a treaty with Turkey at the weekend allowing for the forcible deportation of ethnic Uyghurs fleeing persecution by authorities in Xinjiang, with opposition lawmakers in Turkey vowing to block ratification in their own parliament.

Beijing has described the treaty signed in 2017 as a measure to defeat Islamic terrorism in northwestern China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where more than a million Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minority groups accused of religious extremism are believed to have been held in a vast network of internment camps since April of that year.

Turkey, is home to more than 50,000 of the world's nearly 12 million Uyghurs, who historically have viewed a fellow Turkic nation as a refuge and advocate for their religious and cultural rights.

Speaking in interviews with RFA's Uyghur Service, Turkish lawmakers pledged to block Turkey's ratification of the agreement with China, citing fears that Uyghurs sent back to China by force would face political persecution and human rights abuses for peacefully stating their views.

Clauses defining criminal offenses in the treaty with China are ambiguous and unclear, said Yurter Ozcan, a representative in the United States of the Turkish opposition Republican People's Party, saying his party "respects freedom of expression."

“Small-scale dissent—for example, criticisms of China’s state system—are classified by China as crimes, and this agreement unfortunately could lead to the repatriation of Uyghurs who oppose [China’s policies] and have commented on the oppression faced by Uyghurs in East Turkestan,” Ozcan said, referring to Xinjiang by the name preferred by many Uyghurs for their historic homeland.

“This is a great injustice, and we will work hard in the Republican People’s Party to block this agreement from being ratified by the National Assembly,” he said.

'Not right to remain silent'

With China having ratified the extradition treaty, the agreement will now likely be brought forward for approval by Turkey’s parliament, said Fahrettin Yokush—a member of parliament for Turkey’s opposition Iyi, or “Good,” Party.

“It is not right to remain silent on the issue of East Turkestan,” Yokush told RFA, conceding there is now a risk that Turkey may approve the agreement, putting all Uyghurs seeking refuge in Turkey in danger.

“China is a country where our brothers and sisters who suffered various difficulties to come to Turkey have been trampled on,” Yokush said. “And China has signed this agreement with Turkey so that they can demand the return of our Uyghur brothers and sisters who came here.”

“Let’s not lose hope,” he said.

Iyi party leader Meral Aksener has dedicated herself to “the cause of Turkic identity, the cause of Islam, and especially the cause of East Turkestan,” Yokush said, adding that the party now has 36 members in the National Assembly, all of them working together to reject the agreement with China.

“The Republic of Turkey should never approve this ‘Criminal Mutual Transfer Agreement’ with China,” agreed Selcuk Ozdag, vice president of Turkey’s opposition Future Party, calling the protection of Uyghurs seeking asylum in Turkey “a duty.”

In remarks directly addressing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ozdag appealed to the Turkish president to end consideration of the extradition agreement with China “as soon as possible.”

“Neither your heart nor your conscience should allow this,” he said.

A stronger relationship

Analysts have noted that the relationship between Turkey and China is increasingly growing stronger, however, with Turkey’s President Erdogan recently pledging security cooperation with Beijing and saying that residents of the XUAR live happy and prosperous lives under Beijing’s rule, according to reports in Chinese state media.

The Turkish government had long refused to deport Uyghurs back to China, but that changed in June last year—two months after the extradition treaty was submitted to the parliament—when Turkey sent several Uyghurs home via Tajikistan, including a woman named Zinnetgul Tursun along with her two toddler daughters.


A month later, Tursun’s sister, who lives in exile in Saudia Arabia, learned from her mother in the XUAR that Tursun had “disappeared” and that her family had no information about what had happened to her, and was warned by her mother to end all further communication.


In a statement on Tuesday, the Germany-based World Uyghur Congress called on Turkey to “abide by international law and the principle of non-refoulement and refrain from signing the extradition treaty with the government of China.”


“If adopted by Turkey, the extradition treaty is likely to become another instrument of persecution for China, aiding the Chinese government in its coordinated efforts to forcibly return Uyghurs living abroad,” the WUC said.


Reported by Nuriman Abdulreshid for RFA’s Uyghur Service. Translated by Mamatjan Juma. Written in English by Richard Finney.


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CHP Representation to the United States
The Willard Office Building
[1455 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW](#)
Suite 400 - Fourth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

Tel: [+ 1 202-349-1465](tel:+12023491465)

Fax: [+ 1 202-652-2309](tel:+12026522309)

E-mail: yurter@chp-usa.org

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