

Royal Netherlands Historical Society

To President Xi Jinping
The State Council General Office
2 Fuyoujie
Xichengqu
Beijingshi 100017
People's Republic of China
Via email: english@mail.gov.cn

Amsterdam, The Netherlands,
1 March 2024

RE: Release Renowned Uyghur Scholar Rahile Dawut

Your Excellency,

I write again on behalf of Scholars at Risk to express grave concern regarding Professor Rahile Dawut, a world-renowned scholar of Uyghur studies, who has been wrongfully sentenced to life in prison in China and whose whereabouts are unknown.

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of more than 600 universities and colleges in over 40 countries dedicated to protecting the human rights of scholars around the world, and to raising awareness, understanding of, and respect for the principles of academic freedom and its constituent freedoms of expression, opinion, thought, association, and travel.

Rahile Dawut is a professor at Xinjiang University in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and is internationally recognized as an expert in Uyghur folklore and traditions, having received awards and grants from China's Ministry of Culture. More specifically, Professor Dawut is the founder of the Minorities Folklore Research Center at Xinjiang University, the first-ever Uyghur folklore center. She has written articles that are featured in international journals and books, including her studies on Islamic sacred sites in Central Asia, and presented her work at conferences around the world.

SAR understands that, in December 2017, Professor Dawut told a relative of her plans to travel from Urumqi to Beijing; however, her family and friends lost contact with her. Professor Dawut's family and friends announced her disappearance in August 2018. On June 30, 2021, authorities from Xinjiang University revealed to Radio Free Asia that Professor Dawut had been sentenced and imprisoned. SAR understands that, in September 2023, almost five years after her disappearance, a member of the Chinese government confirmed that Professor Dawut had been sentenced to life in prison and deprivation of political rights for reportedly "endangering state security."

Professor Dawut's whereabouts and details of her well-being remain unknown. Professor Dawut's family and human rights groups suspect that she is among a growing number of Uyghurs who have been taken into custody by authorities and are being held at so-called "re-education camps," in prisons, or at other detention facilities. Reports indicate that detainees are subjected to physical and psychological abuse, including beatings, solitary confinement, and sexual harassment.

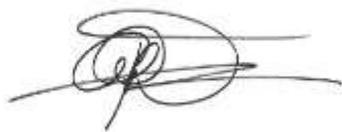
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We welcome any additional information that may clarify our understanding of these events. Absent this, the facts appear to indicate that Professor Dawut has been detained and sentenced in connection with her peaceful exercise of the right to academic freedom – conduct that is expressly protected under international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which China is a signatory. The nature of her disappearance and detention, lack of information about her whereabouts, and reports of torture in “re-education camps” raise grave concerns about whether Professor Dawut has been afforded due process, and about her treatment and well-being. A life sentence for what we can only assume – absent clear public evidence from the state – to be nonviolent expressive conduct is clearly excessive and contrary to international standards. Professor Dawut’s situation, moreover, gives rise to serious concern about the ability of intellectuals in China generally to conduct scholarship safely and freely.

We therefore respectfully urge you to secure Professor Dawut’s immediate and unconditional release and, pending this, to publicly disclose the circumstances of her detention and sentencing, ensure her access to family and legal counsel, and guarantee that her case is addressed in a manner consistent with internationally recognized standards of due process, fair trial, and detention, in accordance with China’s obligations under international law.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter and look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



Antia Wiersma
Executive Director

CC:

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520 USA
Email: secretary@state.gov

Ambassador Nicholas Burns
U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China
U.S. Embassy Beijing
55 Anjialou Rd, Chaoyang District
Beijing, China, 100600
Email: BeijingWebmaster@state.gov
BeijingACS@state.gov

The Honorable Xie Feng
Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China to the
United States
Email: chinaembpress_us@mfa.gov.cn

The Honorable António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations
Email: sgcentral@un.org
antonio.guterres@un.org

The Honorable Volker Türk
High Commissioner for Human Rights
Email: ohchr-InfoDesk@un.org
ohchr-civilsociety@un.org