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**BRIEF ON HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATIONS OF THE UYGHURS: THE CASE OF
HUSEYIN CELIL AND DOMESTIC SURVEILLANCE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE STANDING
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

HOUSE OF COMMONS | JULY 30, 2020

I. Introduction

The National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) is an independent, nonpartisan, and non-profit organization that protects Canadian human rights and civil liberties, challenges discrimination and Islamophobia, builds mutual understanding, and advocates for the public concerns of Canadian Muslims. The NCCM has a long-standing and robust public record of participating in major public inquiries (including the Maher Arar Public Inquiry), intervening in landmark cases before the Supreme Court of Canada (such as *Bombardier Aerospace Training Center*, 2015 SCC 39), and providing advice to security agencies on engaging communities and promoting public safety.

Our focus of this brief is to shed light for the Committee in its study on two long-standing campaigns that NCCM has advocated on. Firstly, we would like to urge the Committee to recommend the appointment of a Special Envoy to ensure the release of a Canadian citizen, Huseyin Celil, who is currently imprisoned in China. Secondly, we bring to this Committee's attention the fact that Chinese agents are apparently attempting to intimidate Canadian Uyghur activists on domestic soil. We urge this committee to adopt a recommendation advising Public Safety Canada to provide clarity as to how Canadian Muslims are being protected from undue foreign surveillance. We draw specific attention to the apparent surveillance by Chinese agents at Canadian Muslim conferences and events attended by members of Canada's Uyghur Muslim population.

II. Appoint a Special Envoy to Secure Release of Huseyin Celil

Mr. Celil is a Canadian citizen, and was first detained in Uzbekistan on March 26, 2006, only to be later deported and imprisoned in China in June of 2006. Mr. Celil's sister has stated that her brother is currently being held in a prison for political prisoners after being sentenced for 15 years. China does not recognize his Canadian citizenship.

Celil is a known and vocal human rights advocate in defence of the Uighur minority in the Xinjiang region of northwest China. According to Amnesty International Canada, the Uyghur people have been subject to numerous and well-documented human rights violations at the hands of the Chinese government.

NCCM advocated on the need for the release and repatriation of Mr. Celil as early as 2006, when after a cancelled meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao at the APEC summit, Prime Minister Harper made a point of referring to Mr. Celil:

"When a Canadian citizen is taken from a third country and imprisoned in China, this is a serious concern to this country...

I think Canadians want us to promote our trade relations worldwide. We do that, but I don't think that Canadians want us to sell out our values, our beliefs in democracy freedom and human rights. They don't want us to sell that out the almighty dollar".¹

¹ Brian Lache, "Harper promises he won't 'sell out' on rights", *Globe and Mail* (Nov 16, 2006), online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/harper-promises-he-wont-sell-out-on-rights/article971520/>

Mr. Celil was convicted on vague terrorism charges in a trial that Canada denounced. He was sentenced to life in a Chinese prison, where he has been languishing for nearly 13 years without access to a lawyer. China has refused to acknowledge his Canadian citizenship or grant him access to consular services since his arrest.

Since then, the family of Mr. Celil has expressed their fear that the Government of Canada has given up in attempting to repatriate Mr. Celil.

Several Canadians and permanent residents remain detained or imprisoned unjustly abroad, including Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia (2012 – present), Michael Kovrig, and Michael Spavor in China, among others.

At NCCM, we receive calls from people detained by dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. It is very disheartening for the families of those being held abroad to wait day after day for any sign that their loved one will finally be returned. They turn to the government for answers and support – and the support of government matters. We saw that quite recently in NCCM's recent advocacy around Mr. Yasser Albaz, who was detained in Egypt, and was recently released after the Government of Canada intervened.

We believe that the appointment of a Special Envoy, in the same vein of the recent appointment of a Special Envoy on the situation of Rohingya Muslims, to ensure the repatriation of Mr. Celil, is appropriate in this context. Therefore, we urge this

committee to recommend that the Prime Minister appoint a Special Envoy, who will be tasked, in part, with brokering the release and repatriation of Mr. Celil.

III. The Surveillance of Canadian Muslim Uyghurs

We are not the first to observe that members of the Uyghur community in Canada have “publicly raised allegations of harassment and intimidation by Chinese authorities”.² These allegations were also detailed in report by the Canadian Coalition for Human Rights in China that was publicly released in May 2020.³ A report by Amnesty International further drew attention to the continued surveillance of Canadian Muslim Uyghurs by Chinese authorities and agents.⁴

Specifically, we draw attention to the fact that in or around December 2019, we have reason to believe that Chinese agents surveilled the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) Conference in Toronto. Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) is an annual Islamic conference typically held during the winter holiday season in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The first conference was held in 2001, and has since become one of North America's largest Islamic conferences, alongside the ISNA convention in the United States. The conference has grown from 3,500 attendees in its first year to over 20,000 in

² Global Affairs Canada for SDIR, “Human Rights Situations of the Uyghurs”, online: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/431/SDIR/Brief/BR10833086/br-external/DepartmentOfForeignAffairsTradeAndDevelopment-e.pdf>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Amnesty International, “Nowhere Feels Safe”, February 20, 2020, online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2020/02/china-uyghurs-abroad-living-in-fear/>

2011, making it the largest Islamic conference in Canada.⁵ Indeed, MPs who are serving on this current committee attended this conference in 2019.

In December 2019, Uyghur Muslim groups attended the conference to raise awareness about the situation in China and Xinjiang. Complaints were made to NCCM by those activists. According to the activists, they were tailed, photographed, and surveilled throughout the event by individuals who appeared to be Chinese operatives and who refused to identify themselves or to delete the photographs when requested. Those activists made specific reference to concern around the photographs. China's sophisticated face-recognition technology makes photographs, and the ability to link Uyghur family members in China to Canadian citizens, extremely concerning.⁶

It is hard to express how these seeming attempts at intimidation send chills through Canadians who peacefully assemble and attend conventions. RIS serves, for thousands of Canadian Muslims, as a place to peacefully gather, meet friends and family, listen to scholars, and learn about pressing issues. To suddenly have that conference come under watch by the Chinese government poses serious concerns around safety for our community.

While we respect that issues of foreign surveillance must be dealt with in ways that are inherently classified and highly confidential, we would like to see a report from

⁵ "Canadian Islamic Convention Attracts Record Breaking Attendance", Dec 27, 2011, online: <http://iqra.ca/2011/canadian-islamic-convention-attracts-record-breaking-attendance/>

⁶ Emily Feng, "How China Is Using Facial Recognition Technology", *NPR*, December 16, 2019, online: <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/16/788597818/how-china-is-using-facial-recognition-technology>

Public Safety Canada that deals with concerns raised by organizations like Amnesty Canada International about domestic surveillance of Canadian Muslim organizations by the Chinese government. We believe that this is critical and a pressing concern. All Canadians deserve to feel safe.