

The Tallahassee Uighur Settlement Project

Thursday, August 13, 2009

The Uighurs are an ethnic group of about twenty million persons in Xinjiang Province in the extreme west of China. The fact that they are Muslims and have aspirations to independence from China have led to their being treated in a very hostile manner by the Chinese government.

Substantial numbers have fled from China as a result of persecution. Twenty-two men who had been in a refugee camp in Afghanistan when the allied invasion commenced in the fall of 2001 were picked up and taken to Guantánamo.

Under international law the United States cannot repatriate persons to countries which it is believed will torture them. Five of the twenty-two were subsequently released and sent to Albania after several years of incarceration.

In late August 2007 there was a hearing before Judge Urbina on the habeas corpus cases of the seventeen Uighurs remaining at Guantánamo. The judge indicated that he believed he had the power to release the Uyghurs into the United States as a part of his habeas jurisdiction.

At that point realizing that the Uighurs might be released into the States, an APB went out on the GTMO habeas lawyers list serve asking for communities that could settle some of the men.

Tallahassee it was a natural fit. The community had experience in settling refugees in the past. I had been deeply involved as a GTMO habeas lawyer, knew the general story of the Uighurs and had a sense of the people to contact to put together a plan.

I called Brant Copeland, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church. He had convened an interdenominational forum in the days after 9/11, and it was clear that he was the kind of person who would be invaluable in putting together a plan. He spoke of the value of multiple clergy involvement to set the proper social context. I suggested that he do that in writing. As the co-chair of Tallahassee Clergy, a large group of the more progressive religious leaders, he said he could email them. We drafted up a statement in which they would express welcome to the Uyghurs pledge to urge their congregations to do the same. In a few days he had six to eight signatures.

I then turned to Salah Bakhshwin, a Saudi national who had lived in Tallahassee for twenty-five years, and who had been my Arabic translator with my first GTMO client. He has a concern for human rights generally and had become passionate about justice for those at GTMO. The Islamic Center of Tallahassee, the larger of the two mosques in the city, was the logical spiritual home for Uighurs, and it was clear that Salah was the way into that community. As a member of the Shura Council, the seven-person governing board of the Islamic Center, he reached out to the Council and broached the idea.

In the meantime, Brant wrote a sermon telling the story of the Uyghurs urging his own congregation support the project. He also followed up his email to the clergy with calls to a number of recipients who had not responded to the initial email. He ended up with nineteen signatures. Both the sermon and the clergy statement proved important in the process. I continued to write a first draft of what was to become the Uighur Settlement Plan.

Salah was enthusiastic but it was important to get broader support from the Islamic Center. I was invited to meet with the Shura Council. I took with me the clergy statement and the sermon

which Brant was delivering as I met with them. The response of the Shura Council was very positive. It is important to note that the sermon and clergy statement were very valuable in the exchange at this meeting.

During the meeting, several members told of slights and injustices that they and others in the congregation had suffered solely because of their Islamic faith. Some of the injustices were very substantial. It was a good lesson to me to be reminded of the isolation and ostracism that Muslims often face in the States. The fact that the larger religious community was on board so enthusiastically sent a message that for once they were not alone.

The Islamic Center made a great contribution. They found housing near the Center. They promised specific appropriate jobs and pledged money. All these were integral parts of what became the Uighur Settlement Plan. The plan was reviewed by Reverend John Lown who had three years of full-time refugee settlement experience and agreed to sit on the Steering Committee.

All three documents were transmitted to the lawyers for the Uighurs. They liked the sermon so much that they had it translated into Uighur to be distributed to their clients and others. They were very surprised and impressed at the outpouring of support by the clergy. They liked the plan and stressed how detailed and nuanced it was.

Frankly, it seemed that they were amazed that a “little old Southern city” could respond in this way on very short notice. I attribute this to a couple of things, bearing in mind that I hold all the lawyers for the Uighurs in extremely high regard. First, people in big cities probably do not have a full appreciation for the way in which little cities can be mobilized. Long time residents tend to know exactly which people to contact to make things happen. Second, there is probably a

general lack of appreciation by those not living in the South that there are communities in the South that are progressive and not xenophobic.

In preparation for the momentous hearing of October 7, the lawyers for the Uighurs decided to present the settlement plans to the court. The Lutheran refugee agency for the greater Washington, D.C. area was to take fourteen and Tallahassee three. The plans of both groups were proffered to Judge Urbina and became part of the record.

While Judge Urbina in a stunningly courageous order ruled that the Uighurs could be settled in the U.S., that order was stayed and is currently on appeal.