



## PRESS RELEASE

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### THE RAFTO PRIZE 2004

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*The Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize for 2004 is awarded to Rebiya Kadeer, from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), People's Republic of China. Kadeer is a prisoner of conscience and a prominent symbol of the Uighurs' struggle for basic human rights.*

#### **Serious violations of human rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region**

The Uighurs count eight million people and constitute half of the population in Xinjiang. They are a Turkic speaking people and primarily Muslim. Although Xinjiang was given the status of autonomous region in 1955, millions of Chinese immigrants have been sent to the region and the Chinese have taken progressively more control politically and economically. Based on a variety of sources, the Rafto Foundation has documented widespread violations of Uighurs' civil, political, economic, social, religious and cultural rights.

Thousands of Uighurs are imprisoned, and Xinjiang is the only region in China where it is publicly known that political prisoners have been executed in modern times. So far this year, 50 Uighurs have been sentenced to death (source: Reuters, 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2004). Several human rights organizations criticize China for using the war against terror following the attacks on 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, as a pretext for repressing Uighurs, including those who through peaceful means are fighting for their rights. In its latest report from the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2004, Amnesty International claims that "With today's level of repression, the space for independent expression of Uighur cultural or religious identity is narrowing dangerously".

#### **China must give the Uighurs cultural and religious freedom**

China is a country with several geographically concentrated ethnic and linguistic groups. When ethnic and religious groups are discriminated against and repressed, they often respond by mobilizing along ethnic and religious lines of demarcation. This contributes to a polarization of societies and nations, creates fertile ground for hatred, and threatens peace and development. This is the case in Xinjiang today, where some Uighurs and militant groups are waging a violent struggle for independence.

**Through this award, the Rafto Foundation directs a strong appeal to the Chinese government to respect and protect the civil, economic and cultural rights of the Uighurs as well as other minorities in China.**

**Rebiya Kadeer**

Rebiya Kadeer (58) has distinguished herself in the struggle for the rights of the Uighurs and against social and economic marginalization. She has made significant contributions to securing women's rights and in 1997 she founded the "Thousand Mothers Movement" to promote job training and employment for Uighur women. Kadeer also established evening schools for Uighurs who did not have the opportunity to go to ordinary school. "It is our moral obligation to help the ones in need, and we must leave no one behind", is her humanistic message.

Kadeer is described as a charismatic entrepreneur and successful business woman. In the 1990s she emerged as a symbol for how minorities could succeed in China. In recognition of her significant contribution to women's rights, Kadeer was appointed to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the Xinjiang Regional People's Congress. She was also a delegate to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

Her relationship to the Chinese government worsened progressively following the emigration of her husband, Sidik Rouzi, to the U.S.A. in 1996. Rouzi, a former political prisoner, has been an outspoken critic of Chinese rule in Xinjiang. Amongst other activities, he has testified in the United States Congress. The government confiscated Rebiya Kadeer's passport and harassment by police was accompanied by further restrictions on her movements up until her arrest in August 1999. Rebiya Kadeer has paid a high price for criticizing China's longstanding repression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. In March 2000 she was sentenced to eight years imprisonment following a secret trial where neither Kadeer nor her lawyer had the opportunity to argue her case. Her sentence was later reduced by one year and Kadeer is expected to be paroled on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2006.

**The Rafto Foundation is worried about Kadeer's health and asks for her immediate and unconditional release.**

Bergen, 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2004

The board of The Thorolf Rafto Foundation for Human Rights.

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**Background information:**

Pictures of Rebiya Kadeer, streaming video and links for downloading in broadcast quality:

<http://nmm.no/vod/rafto/press>

Press information in pdf-format and further information about the Rafto Foundation:

<http://www.rafto.no>