

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 17, 2020

The Honorable Ken Cuccinelli
Acting Director
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
20 Massachusetts Ave NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Acting Director Cuccinelli,

As the Chair and Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation, we write to you today to express our concern regarding the significant number of Uyghur asylum seekers residing in the United States, many of whom have waited years for asylum interviews through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), to protect this vulnerable group from persecution by the Chinese government.

There are currently between 350 and 400 cases of Uyghurs applying for asylum through USCIS—some of which date back to 2014. Many wish to send their children to school or to serve in the military and are unable to regain a sense of normalcy after fleeing persecution in China. Others suffer from psychological trauma given their inability to speak to family members abroad and their separation from family living in Turkey and elsewhere.

Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China (XUAR) and have fled China for many years in response to growing ethnic and religious persecution. Starting in 2016, the Chinese government intensified widespread and systematic policies to repress Uyghurs on the basis of their religious and ethnic identity. Human rights abuses include enforced disappearances, destruction of cultural sites, forced labor, disproportionate rates of prison incarceration, and coercive birth control policies.

Between 1 and 1.8 million Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples have been detained in internment camps and subjected to a program of political indoctrination. Leaked government documents have shown that one of the primary reasons for detention in these camps has been travel overseas or maintaining connections abroad. Given these circumstances, all Uyghurs residing abroad without documentation remain particularly vulnerable and at risk of return to China. It is now a certainty that upon return, Uyghurs would be immediately detained and subject to widespread rights abuses.

These risks are compounded by the fact that the Chinese government has been reluctant to renew passports to Uyghurs abroad to force them back to China. The inability to obtain passports and other documentation add to the difficulties faced by Uyghurs, leading to possible statelessness if no government steps in to fill the gap.

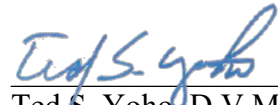
Although we recognize that thousands face similar barriers and long wait times with USCIS, the Uyghur population is uniquely vulnerable. Uyghurs are also unable to obtain necessary documents from the Chinese government given the hostility coming from Beijing towards Uyghurs both inside and outside the country.

We are appreciative of the unprecedented steps taken in response to escalating abuses, including signing the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, the imposition of Global Magnitsky sanctions against Chinese companies complicit in human rights abuses, and recent actions by U.S. Customs and Border Protection in response to Chinese goods manufactured with forced labor.

While we applaud these positive steps, we respectfully ask for further action to support the Uyghur community and call USCIS to take steps to expedite the adjudication of asylum claims of Uyghurs residing in the United States to protect this group from threats and persecution abroad and ensure that they are granted access to public services.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to receiving your response on this matter.

Sincerely,



Ted S. Yoho, D.V.M.
Member of Congress



Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress



U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services

October 5, 2020

The Honorable Ted S. Yoho
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Yoho:

Thank you for your September 17, 2020 letter regarding Uyghurs who have asylum applications pending with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

We are working hard to adjudicate asylum applications as expeditiously as possible, taking into account that our Asylum Division staff are devoted to working on all asylum-related caseloads, including conducting protection screening for persons apprehended at or near the border and subject to expedited removal. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic caused the closure of asylum offices for several weeks and, while those offices have since reopened with innovative technological processes in place to allow operations to resume while keeping staff and the public safe, these health and safety measures have decreased the interviewing capacity of asylum offices.

Requests for expedited processing on asylum applications should be submitted in writing to the asylum office with jurisdiction over the application. The USCIS Service and Office Locator page on uscis.gov has contact information for all asylum offices.

Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. Representative Bera, who cosigned your letter, will receive a separate, identical response. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative Affairs at (202) 272-1940.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph Edlow". The signature is stylized and written over the printed name and title.

Joseph Edlow
Deputy Director for Policy