

Uighurs

Profile

Speaking a southeastern Turkic language related to Uzbek, the small Uighur minority are concentrated in the southern part of the country near the city of Osh, with a sizeable population also in the capital of Bishkek. The largest concentration of Uighurs can be found in China (Xinjiang). Uighurs are mainly Sunni Muslims.

Historical context

Kyrgyzstan's Uighur minority are the remnants of the vast Uighur Empire which towards the 8th Century stretched from the Caspian Sea to Manchuria. Eventually to be overrun by the tribes that became the Kyrgyz, most Uighurs migrated into what is now China, though some remained and occupied the western Tarim Basin of the Ferghana Valley.

Their small size and relative insignificant role or influence in power struggles have meant that the Uighurs have not played a prominent role in the struggles of the 20th and 21st centuries. During the Soviet era, many Uighur were assimilated into the Russian-speaking society, with the result that a majority of Uighur today speak Russian or even Uzbek rather than Uighur, though this may change towards Kyrgyz in the years to come.

This long-standing situation has in recent years been changed by the arrival of Uighurs fleeing Chinese repression in Xinjiang. Initially, the Kyrgyz government discouraged this movement though did not attempt to suppress it harshly, permitting the operation of Uighur organisations sympathetic or even directly linked in their sympathies with the Uighurs of Xinjiang. Two such organisations - the Uighur Freedom Organization and the Kyrgyzstan Uyghur Unity (Ittipak) Association – have been warned by government authorities not to indulge in activities relating to the Uighur diaspora in Xinjiang and with the Tibet Liberation Movement because of Chinese official sensitivities.

Current issues

International organisations continued to express concerns in 2005 and 2006 that Uighurs from China remained at risk of deportation or extradition.

There have been claims of abusive and antagonistic statements – some coming from government officials – describing Uighurs as terrorists and fundamentalists ('Wahhabis'), and perhaps contributing to what is perceived in employment and negative societal attitudes and media coverage of the Uighur minority. While Akayev was still President, the Kyrgyzstan Uyghur Unity (Ittipak) Association had been prevented from holding festivities in December 2004.