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THE EPOCH TIMES

# CHINA INSIDER

CAROLYNKASTER/POOL/GETTY IMAGES



## DOJ'S 'CHINA INITIATIVE' UNDER SCRUTINY

WHILE CRITICS WANTS TO ABOLISH THE PROGRAM TARGETING CHINESE ESPIONAGE, OTHERS SAY IT'S NECESSARY BUT NEEDS REFORM

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## HUMAN RIGHTS

# ‘My Heart Aches Watching This’: Athletes Speak Out on Human Rights as Beijing Olympics Come to an End

EVA FU

Had it been up to him, Latvia's luge coach Martins Rubenis would never have made the trip to the Beijing Winter Olympic Games. Indeed, he didn't know if he would even be allowed into China until the very last moment.

A two-time Olympic bronze medalist, Rubenis was already known to the Chinese Embassy in Latvia after more than 15 years of advocacy for China's human rights.

In 2006, he staged a hunger strike in front of the site, the same year he won bronze for his country at the Torino Olympics. He was protesting the Chinese regime's state-sanctioned organ harvesting, which targets imprisoned adherents of Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa), a spiritual practice Rubenis shares, which has been persecuted in China for decades.

"It was not an easy feeling getting on the flight to China and knowing that people like me practicing Falun Dafa are held in detention centers, tortured, and killed just for following principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance," he told The Epoch Times on Feb. 18 upon returning

home from China.

Rubenis didn't wait long after his team finished competing in the Games to open up.

Standing steps away from Chinese police officers on Feb. 7, he called the Beijing Games "a huge political theater," telling Latvian media that it would have been a completely different feeling if the Olympics had taken place anywhere else in the world.

"This is a huge 'spectacle,' and for me, as an Olympian, my heart aches watching this," he said, delving into his views about the regime's "inhumane" organ harvesting and the "oppression of its good, kind-hearted people."

It was a daring move on Rubenis's part, knowing the regime's retaliatory tendency. Within a day, the president of the Latvian Olympic Committee was invited to the Chinese Embassy in Riga—for the second time since Rubenis's 2006 hunger strike—"to be 'educated' on how to silence the team members for 'wrong thinking,'" he told The Epoch Times.

Luckily for Rubenis, the committee stood up for him, arguing that team members have a right to be vocal on matters that are important to them. Rubenis believes their support helped ensure his coming home smoothly.

He had taken the risk, he said, because he saw it as his "obligation."

"At that moment, I was not afraid at all," he said regarding talking to the Latvian broadcasters.

"I knew that whatever happens to me in China might help their voices to be heard, and this brutal persecution to end soon," he said, referring to imprisoned Falun Gong adherents, some of whom were jailed in prison camps just miles away from Olympic venues, according to the Falun Dafa Information Center.

"It's really important for people from free countries and people who understand what's really going on in China to speak out," he said in a separate interview with NTD on Feb. 18. "Be it outside China or inside China, the fact doesn't change."



Olympic medalist Martins Rubenis holds up the Human Rights Torch at the official opening of the Global Human Rights Torch Relay in Athens, Greece, on the evening of Aug. 9, 2007.

**It was not an easy feeling getting on the flight to China and knowing that people like me practicing Falun Dafa are held in detention centers, tortured, and killed just for following principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.**

Martins Rubenis, coach, Latvian luge team

### 'Do My Job' and 'Never Go Back'

But others who hold critical views about the regime have chosen to take extra caution and kept their mouths shut while within the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—a perhaps unsurprising move given the regime's highly restrictive laws policing speech both online and offline, and with Beijing not-so-subtly hinting about ejecting athletes from the Games for speaking out on human rights.

German luge gold medalist Natalie Geisenberger, who was sharply critical of China prior to the Games, said she would make comments only after leaving the country.

"You have to be careful when you say what and where you say it," she told reporters three days before leaving Beijing.

Until the last minute, Geisenberger, who took her third luge gold medal at the Beijing

Olympics, had been debating whether to skip the Games over the regime's human rights record and the poor treatment athletes received when training there in the fall.

The 34-year-old made up her mind to participate only on Jan. 17, two weeks before the event opened.

Her boycott alone "wouldn't change anything," she told German broadcaster ZDF after flying back, recounting her sense of powerlessness.

She resolved that she would "go there for two weeks, do my job, go home, and never go back to China," she said.

Swedish speed skater Nils van der Poel, who won two gold medals in Beijing, also had some blistering parting words for the host nation.

The decision to award Beijing the Games was "terrible," he told Swedish newspaper

Sportbladet.

The Olympic Village "was very nice, the Chinese people I met were absolutely amazing," he said, before drawing a parallel to 1930s Germany. "The Olympics is a lot, it's a fantastic sporting event where you unite the world and nations meet. But so did Hitler before invading Poland, and so did Russia before invading Ukraine.

"I think it is extremely irresponsible to give it to a country that violates human rights as blatantly as the Chinese regime is doing."

Rubenis grew up in the Soviet Union, "where every step, every move, and every person you meet" were carefully choreographed to spread "how communism is great" to foreign visitors.

He watched the Olympic opening ceremony inside the isolated Olympic Village or, in his words, a "civilized detention cen-

**I think it is extremely irresponsible to give it to a country that violates human rights as blatantly as the Chinese regime is doing.**

Nils van der Poel, speed skater, Sweden

ter" surrounded by security cameras, just to see "what our Chinese Communist Party was trying to show with this event."

"It was empty," he said. "It was kind of a show, but a show without meaning.

"Even the Olympic torch flame was so small that you could barely see it, same as the size of the Olympic spirit dying out there."

Having collaboration of any kind with the CCP, he said, means "supporting the evil and, at the same time, having blood on the hands."

"Keep away from that sinking ship. Because when it sinks, everybody who has connection with that will be drawn down," he said.

"Stay away from the CCP, and it will die on its own."

David Zhang contributed to this report.



Bronze medalist Martins Rubenis of Latvia celebrates during a 2006 Winter Olympics medal ceremony in Turin, Italy, on Feb. 13, 2006.

## ORGAN HARVESTING

# A 'Perfect Crime' Leaving No Survivors: Investigators Detail China's Grisly Organ Harvesting Industry

EVA FU

They were in robust health when they were put on the operating table for doctors to carve out their organs. Many of them were still breathing. When the job was done, the bodies were tossed into the incinerator and burned, leaving no trace behind.

The spine-chilling scene is a lived reality for prisoners of conscience in China under the regime's state-sanctioned forced organ harvesting, recounted by two investigators at a Feb. 17 virtual webinar hosted by Washington-based think tank Hudson Institute.

"There was no charge, no hearing, no appeal," said David Kilgour, Canada's former secretary of state for Asia-Pacific, who, together with Canadian human rights lawyer David Matas, spent years investigating the issue.

"A policeman just simply said: 'You're going to this work camp over here.' ... You waited, working 16 hours a day," he said. "Then one day somebody would come in, seize them, give them a little potassium, and then their organs would be taken out and their bodies would be burned."

"That's how the rule of law works in China in terms of getting organs." It's a "perfect crime, because there actually aren't any survivors" of the operation, added moderator Nina Shea, a human rights lawyer and former commissioner of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.



Falun Gong practitioners take part in a parade marking the 22nd year of the persecution of Falun Gong in China, in Brooklyn, N.Y., on July 18, 2021.

The billion-dollar organ harvesting industry, which boomed at the same time the regime escalated a brutal eradication campaign targeting the spiritual group Falun Gong in the early 2000s, has for decades been covered up in China.

Even in the West, officials and medical bodies have been reluctant to confront the issue until 2019, when an independent people's tribunal in London concluded "beyond a reasonable doubt" that organ harvesting sourcing from Falun Gong inmates has taken place for years "on a significant scale."

Annie (an alias), a former worker at a Chinese hospital in northeastern China, was the first to shed light on the horrific abuse in 2006. In testimonies to The Epoch Times later corroborated by others, she revealed how her ex-husband, a military surgeon at the same hospital, forcibly removed corneas from Falun Gong practitioners.

Her account was what brought the two Davids together to investigate the issue. They later released a report titled "Bloody Harvest," where they examined hundreds of hospitals in China, drawing

from media reports, medical journals, and archives. Their findings were that the Chinese regime had been using Falun Gong adherents as a living organ bank while significantly undercounting the number of transplants done each year.

Annie's husband performed over 2,000 cornea removal operations over a two-year period beginning in 2001, she later told the two in an interview. He was so tormented by his conscience that he began having nightmares, arousing Annie's suspicion.

The two split after Annie decided she couldn't accept his complicity in the act. Both of them escaped overseas after receiving threats on their lives.

"This is a national crime," she said in a statement to The Epoch Times in April 2006.

Annie's ex-husband felt a deep sense of remorse when he cut open a patient's clothes and saw a small box fall out, according to Annie, who read the account in a journal her ex-husband kept. The small box contained a round Falun Gong pin along with a note written on paper.

"Happy birthday, Mom," it read. Despite the defection of Annie and several others, the organ harvesting machinery has continued to operate, attracting transplant tourists from around the world who are lured by promises from Chinese hospitals of speedy organ matches and surgeries.

"Everywhere else, there's a shortage of organs, and organs are allocated depending on priorities, but in China, the whole

system was run as if there was an inexhaustible supply of organs," said Matas. "All they had to do was show up and pay the money."

"The whole system is compartmentalized, and everybody would pretend to be willfully blind to the other components of the system," he said.

Kilgour recalled speaking to a patient from Asia who was presented with four matching kidneys in succession over a few months. The first three kidneys were rejected by his body, and the fourth one was a success. The doctor, who wore a military uniform, presented the first matching kidney shortly after their first meeting.

"They take all the organs, they don't just take one kidney," said Kilgour. "So four people died so that this man could get a good kidney. Isn't that incredible?"

Two dozen counties in Virginia have recently passed resolutions to condemn China's organ harvesting and urge their residents against taking part in organ tourism in the country. The Texas state Senate has passed similar resolutions.

Some U.S. officials are seeking action in Congress to bring the perpetrators to account.

The two investigators agreed that international bodies need to do more on the issue. Kilgour said he was embarrassed that Canada hasn't passed any legislation on organ harvesting.

"There's a few, but not enough," said Matas, urging countries to cut off collaboration of any kind with the Chinese transplant system.



A re-enactment of organ harvesting in China on Falun Gong practitioners, during a rally in Ottawa, Canada, 2008.



(L-R) David Kilgour, David Matas, and Ethan Gutmann, authors of "Bloody Harvest/The Slaughter: An Update," in this file photo.



Whistleblower Annie at a press conference in Washington, D.C., on April 20, 2006. It was her first public testimony about large scale organ harvesting atrocities in China.

**Everywhere else, there's a shortage of organs, and organs are allocated depending on priorities, but in China, the whole system was run as if there was an inexhaustible supply of organ.**

David Matas, Canadian human rights lawyer

## SECURITY

# Chinese Agribusiness Poised to Open Factory in North Dakota Draws Scrutiny Over CCP Ties, Security Risks

J.M. PHELPS

A China-based bio-fermentation company coming to the United States is being touted as a win for the local economy, but there's growing concern over its national security implications and potential ties to forced labor.

The Epoch Times spoke to Ross Kennedy, founder of Fortis Analysis, about his research concerning China-based company Fufeng Group, which is poised to set up shop in the Midwestern United States. Fufeng is a manufacturer of bio-fermented, corn-derived products, which are used in end products ranging from animal feed to pharmaceuticals. A Hong Kong-listed company, the group has multiple subsidiaries around the world, but most of its production facilities are in northeast China.

In early November 2021, it was announced that Fufeng Group was in negotiations to bring its agribusiness company to Grand Forks, North Dakota. The new plant, which would use a manufacturing process revolving around the fermentation of cornstarch, is expected to consume about 25 million bushels of corn per year. The cost of construction is estimated to be about \$350 million.

Framed as a "historic" investment and game-changer for area farmers, the prospective project has been described as "the largest single private capital investment in the region's history," according to Keith Lund of the Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corporation. On Jan. 12, city officials tentatively approved significant tax breaks for Fufeng Group, the Grand Forks Herald reported.

This Chinese company may be coming into Grand Forks under the guise of setting up a food nutrient and additive manufacturing facility, but could be setting up the ability to passively and actively monitor one of the nation's most valuable assets.

Ross Kennedy, founder, Fortis Analysis

The future plant will be a "wet corn milling" facility and is expected to be fully operational by 2024 or 2025, local media outlets reported. The company will produce corn gluten meal, corn gluten feed, lysine, and threonine for predominant use in animal feed products.

The Grand Forks City Council is due to vote at a Feb. 22 meeting on whether to approve the deal, where it's widely expected to greenlight the project. A meeting on March 7 would finalize the agreement, bringing the project into the next phase of obtaining permits and construction.

While local economic experts are optimistic, others are concerned about the effects the facility could have on the environment. Some observers and residents have voiced concern about the human rights and security implications of dealing with a Chinese company amid rising Western scrutiny over the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) abuses, including its forced labor of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China.

In a Jan. 31 letter to the editor of the Grand Forks Herald, Diana Hoverson said



A Chinese worker sweeps the grounds at a chemical factory in Yichang, Hubei Province, China, on Aug. 30, 2016.

it "sounds like North Dakota is ready to deal with the devil!" To that end, Kennedy said he has many of the same concerns. The initial goal of his research into Fufeng was to simply look for possible ties to Uyghur forced labor, but his discoveries quickly escalated, which raised what he described as a "frightening issue of national security."

## Ties to the CCP

Li Xuechun has been the top executive at Fufeng Group since November 2016, fulfilling the roles of the company's principal founder, executive director, and chairman. He's also the controlling shareholder of the company.

Li once served as a member of the People's Congress of Shandong Province, China. The People's Congress is a rubber-stamp legislature of the CCP. Kennedy said Li served in this position for five years.

In 2003, Li was honored for "outstanding achievement" by Shandong provincial authorities, which Kennedy said reveals that "he embodies the synthesis of economic and political goals of the Shandong region and the CCP."

The founder's links to the CCP merit scrutiny, according to Kennedy, given that the firm is set to establish its first base in the United States.

In response to a question from The Epoch Times regarding Li's ties to the CCP, Brandon Bochenski, mayor of Grand Forks, said the project has been approached with "a high level of due diligence."

"We have been in contact with our Governor, ND [North Dakota] state agencies, U.S. Senators, and U.S. House Representative regarding the project," Bochenski said in an emailed statement.

"We see economic benefits of a new wet-corn milling facility in the region. We are doing as much due diligence as possible and look to the appropriate federal agencies for national security insights and direction."

## National Security Threat?

National security is a key concern for Kennedy, who said the regime has become "very involved in major infrastructure projects" around the world in recent years, noting that some of their chosen locations

have been "regions of strategic and national security importance."

The fact that the agreed location is only 13 miles from North Dakota's Grand Forks Air Force Base (AFB) is one concern.

"The property in question is 370 acres and has a direct line of sight" to the airbase, Kennedy said.

Starting in 2023, Grand Forks AFB will undergo construction and renovations to enable the base to become a future leader of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations. ISR operations often involve various clandestine activities, such as drone or satellite surveillance, to monitor global threats.

With a goal to complete the Fufeng facility by mid-2024, Kennedy believes that Grand Forks, North Dakota, was likely the Chinese regime's target all along.

"This Chinese company may be coming into Grand Forks under the guise of setting up a food nutrient and additive manufacturing facility, but could be setting up the ability to passively and actively monitor one of the nation's most valuable assets," he said.

STR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

"It's the modus operandi of how the Chinese regime works; taking advantage of nearly any opportunity to infiltrate society and steal intellectual property and more."

Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) recently expressed similar concerns.

"The critical missions our military executes at Grand Forks Air Force Base must be protected," Cramer said in a statement to the Grand Forks Herald. "The jobs and economic benefits for Grand Forks and North Dakota farmers must be balanced with the long-term concerns of China infiltrating our food supply chains."

For Cramer, the Fufeng Group project "requires due diligence," because "China is not a reliable partner."

Kennedy agrees with that assessment. "With all things considered, the local government and Grand Forks Air Force Base cannot afford to assume the best" about China, he said.

Bochenski said he has taken some precautions concerning the facility's proximity to the airbase. He said the city has "been in contact with the Wing Commander of the 319th Reconnaissance Wing, who has assured us the company will be vetted at a higher level within the Air Force and appropriate national security departments."

The U.S. Air Force didn't return an inquiry from The Epoch Times.

## Forced Labor Concerns

Fufeng Group has denied that it or any of its subsidiaries has used Uyghur forced labor and has produced a June 2021 third party audit of its only plant in Xinjiang—the Xinjiang Fufeng Biotechnologies facility—which didn't identify any use of forced labor.

The issue of Uyghur forced labor has drawn rising scrutiny in recent years amid mounting research showing its use in various industries in Xinjiang, from cotton to materials for solar panels. The Chinese communist regime has detained more than 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the region, subjecting them to forced labor, political indoctrination, torture, and other forms of abuse, in a campaign labeled as a genocide by the U.S. government and multiple Western parliaments.

In 2021, the United States became the first country to ban all imports from Xinjiang over forced labor concerns. Bochenski welcomed the measure and pointed to the third party Sedex Members Ethical Trade Report (SMETA) conducted on Fufeng's Xinjiang plant as evidence of its compliance.

Yet Kennedy, who reviewed the 80-page report, isn't entirely convinced by the audit findings, which he described as "whistle clean."

Having done business in China for almost two decades and being familiar with the conditions of many of its factories, particularly those involved in making chemicals and biological products, Kennedy said he doesn't rule out a biased report, one that would assure Western stakeholders in the Grand Forks facility that there were no ties to forced labor or otherwise poor working conditions.

The primary reason for his concern is the location of the Xinjiang factory. Slightly west of the Urumqi Export Processing Zone, he said Xinjiang Fufeng Biotechnologies is located about 1.5 miles from a known Uyghur forced labor and detention facility—the Toutunhe Facility #2.

Kennedy also reviewed the company's employment and financial records. SMETA reported that there were "708 permanent employees in the factory" at the time of the audit.

"Having had an opportunity to take into account the number of laborers and the cost of labor, the numbers simply don't pencil out," he said.

Kennedy also pointed to a photo provided by SMETA on page 77 of the report that he found odd for a modern facility.

"In a package room photo, there are a bunch of 25-kilogram bags on the floor, [and] someone can be seen filling them and sealing them by hand—not by automation," he said.

This kind of labor-intensive work would warrant the need for the large number of laborers and this further heightens his concern about "shady labor practices," he said. Fufeng USA didn't return a request for comment.

J.M. Phelps is a writer and researcher of both Islamist and Chinese threats.



Villas of real estate property "Viva Villa" developed by Ping An Real Estate are seen under construction in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, on June 20, 2019.

## OPINION

## China to Boost Real Estate

Woes deepen for property developers and local government budgets

FAN YU

As China's real estate sector woes deepen, hitting developers and local budgets, policy support from Beijing is on its way.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has mobilized its so-called national asset managers to support its tottering real estate developers and avert a full-on property market collapse.

The asset management companies, which include China Huarong Asset Management, China Cinda Asset Management, China Great Wall Asset Management, and China Orient Asset Management, were originally set up in the 1990s after the Asian financial crisis in order to buy bad loans from Chinese commercial banks' balance sheets.

More recently, Bloomberg reported that these asset managers were told by the CCP to actively participate in the restructuring of real estate developers that need funding and to acquire loans and projects from developers to free up cash and avoid further defaults.

Huarong had been mired in its own crisis until recently. After years of making questionable acquisitions, Huarong's former Chairman Lai Xiaomin was executed in January 2021 for various malfeasance, including bribery.

What's interesting is that while regulators have urged the managers to engage developers on an arms-length basis and to comply with financial risk management, apparently making a "profit" on the real estate deals is of secondary concern, according to the report.

Separately, China's Caillian news agency revealed in February that many central state-owned enterprises (SOE) are scouring for deals, from negotiating real estate project acquisitions to mergers and acquisitions with developers. Thus far, the SOEs have been averse to taking on too much risk—not many deals have been announced—but a call from CCP headquarters could speed up the process.

This development suggests that Beijing has been less than impressed with the liquidity management efforts by real estate developers such as Shimao, Evergrande, Sunac, and Country Garden. Developers have been unable to sell properties quickly enough to free up cash to continue funding new projects.

Initial data from January shows that the sales of new homes were anywhere from 10 percent to 80 percent lower than the same month in 2021 for more than a dozen Chinese developers, which were hit by both lower contracts and lower contracted prices.

That puts a tough strain on cash flow, which is required to begin and continue existing projects.

Developers have also been facing a credit crunch. Property develop-

ers raised 70 percent less in bond financing in January compared to January 2021. The offshore dollar-denominated debt market, catering to foreign investors, has been frozen since a slew of defaults in 2021 and downgrades by international credit rating firms.

While Beijing regulators have slowly loosened restrictions on leverage for property developers, the engagement by bad debt managers and other SOEs suggests that the industry is in an even weaker position than originally thought.

Aside from developers and home buyers, local governments have been collateral damage to China's real estate market issues.

We've previously said land sales and land use leases to real estate firms make up a large portion of local government revenues. And initial readings from 2022 could spell trouble for government coffers. Local and regional governments, like property developers, are also hugely indebted and have high debt service costs.

A potential reprieve on the horizon is property taxes, which China has been piloting across several cities. But is it enough? If the newly released plans of Shanghai's property tax regime are anything to go by, the answer is that it's unlikely.

While Beijing regulators have slowly loosened restrictions on leverage for property developers, the engagement by bad debt managers and other SOEs suggests that the industry is in even weaker position than originally thought.

Taxes are only levied on properties bought in 2011 or later. For homes purchased after 2011, there's a 60 square meter (645 square foot) exemption per capita. Then there's another 30 percent cut on the remaining taxable area. The truly taxable real estate area is then taxed at a 0.6 percent rate on the price paid per square foot.

Perhaps that's a large sum for a city as densely populated as Shanghai, but it's hardly a windfall for most municipalities.

Will these efforts be enough to calm the market jitters, or are they merely reordering chairs on the Titanic? Time will tell.

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

Fan Yu is an expert in finance and economics and has contributed analyses on China's economy since 2015.



An F-35 Global Hawk lands at Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota on May 26, 2011.



Workers walk by the perimeter fence of what is officially known as a vocational skills education center in Dabancheng, Xinjiang, China, on Sept. 4, 2018.

# THE EPOCH TIMES

Epoch Times reporter Charlotte Cuthbertson interviews Yuma County Sheriff Leon Wilmot in the desert by the U.S.-Mexico border.



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