

Xinjiang and China's Treatment of Ethnic Minorities

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Overview

Over the past decade, the plight of East Turkic minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), formerly known as East Turkestan, has become closely intertwined with the People's Republic of China's (PRC) overall record on human rights. Since 2014, these ethnic minorities, and particularly Uyghurs, have been targeted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for their beliefs and cultural practices and forced into reeducation and labor camps where millions have been subjected to brainwashing, torture, rape, forced injections sterilization, and even death.

The cultural genocide perpetuated by the Chinese state has mobilized much of the international community and soured many perceptions of the PRC as a result. Despite some positive action taken by the United States and others, the system of reeducation, forced labor and oppression seems to be worsening for Uyghurs at home and abroad. More must be done by the international community to hold China accountable for its blatant violations of human rights.

Background on XUAR/East Turkestan

Located in the far northwest region of China, Xinjiang is a region rich in minerals, produces over 80% of China's cotton, and has the largest coal and natural gas reserves in China, as well as a fifth of its oil reserves.¹ The region is also essential in supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to implement Chinese-financed infrastructure development projects globally in order to induce the economic reliance of developing nations on the PRC, in neighboring Central and South Asia.

During the region's lengthy history, its land has almost always been under the control or influence of Chinese, Mongol, or Russian powers with the exception of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. Following the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the PRC established control over East Turkestan and formally recognized the XUAR in 1955. While Uyghurs, who are predominantly Muslim, have historically constituted a majority of the population in Xinjiang, they now amount to 45% of the region's population of 24 million, or 10.5 million people, due to government-funded incentives for Han Chinese, the largest ethnic group in China, to migrate to the XUAR.²

Policies instituted by the CCP over the XUAR—including the massive state-sponsored migration of Han Chinese, promotion of a unified 'Chinese' cultural identity, and punishment of expressions of Uyghur identity—have long stoked tensions between the residents of Xinjiang,

¹ Congressional Research Service. *Uyghurs in China* (IF10281; October 5, 2020), prepared by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.

² Congressional Research Service. *Uyghurs in China* (IF10281; October 5, 2020), prepared by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.

state police, and Han Chinese. These actions follow a new national policy known as “Sinicization,” whereby XUAR authorities institute measures to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society at the expense of their beliefs, language, and appearance.

Unrest stemming from the CCP’s campaign of Sinicization, often labeled by international observers as cultural genocide, have led to riots and terrorist attacks over the past two decades, most notably in 2014 when an attack in Urumqi killed 31 people. That year marked a turning point for Chinese authorities as they used the attacks as justification for implementing a wide-ranging and brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing targeted towards non-Han Chinese populations.

“Vocational Education and Training Centers”

As part of the “people’s war on terror” policy beginning in 2014, the Chinese government constructed a vast network of internment camps throughout the XUAR for the purpose of forcibly indoctrinating Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and other Muslims into an atheistic, Mandarin-speaking, Han Chinese way of life. While early figures approximated that close to one million were imprisoned in camps in Xinjiang, the CCP’s own estimations show these concentration camps have processed on average 1.29 million people per year between 2014 and 2019, meaning that the number of people imprisoned could be millions higher than previously thought.³

Conditions inside these camps are substandard at best, and inhumane at worst. All are forced to live in tight communal quarters while authorities are instructed to treat inmates as if they are in a high security prison as revealed in multiple leaked internal CCP documents.⁴ Further, many inmates are subjected to horrible human rights abuses at the hands of state officials and camp guards. Eyewitness accounts detail regularized instances of gang rape, physical and psychological torture, forced injections and sterilizations, and sleep deprivation.⁵

Despite international condemnation, China is not slowing down the construction or administration of its concentration camps. As of September 2020, 380 of these facilities were identified in China by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 40%—or 100 facilities—more than previously estimated. 61 of the camps were expanded over the past year and an additional 14 camps are still under construction.⁶

An even greater amount of people in Xinjiang have been forcibly relocated and compelled to work as part of a network of forced labor camps in Xinjiang. In a white paper released by the

³ Davidson, Helen. “Clues to Scale of Xinjiang Labour Operation Emerge as China Defends Camps.” *The Guardian*, 18 Sept. 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/clues-to-scale-of-xinjiang-labour-operation-emerge-as-china-defends-camps.

⁴ “Data Leak Reveals How China ‘Brainwashes’ Uighurs in Prison Camps.” *BBC News*, 24 Nov. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50511063.

⁵ Rahim, Zamira. “Muslim Prisoners in China’s Xinjiang Concentration Camps Subjected to Gang Rape and Medical Experiments, Former Detainee Says.” *The Independent*, 22 Oct. 2019, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-xinjiang-uighur-muslim-detention-camps-xi-jinping-persecution-a9165896.html.

⁶ Buckley, Chris, and Austin Ramzy. “Night Images Reveal Many New Detention Sites in China’s Xinjiang Region.” *The New York Times*, 24 Sept. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/world/asia/china-muslims-xinjiang-detention.html.

CCP, authorities estimated that the annual “relocation of surplus rural labor” was more than 2.76 million people, 60% of whom were located in southern Xinjiang.⁷ Often a good number of the newly hired pool is comprised of persons recently released from Xinjiang concentration camps.

Forced labor facilities in Xinjiang manufacture a wide array of products for export including masks and personal protective equipment (PPE), clothing and apparel, and technology components. Disturbingly, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has also monitored and seized multiple imports of human hair totaling over 13 tons from Xinjiang that was traced back to the Uyghur population.⁸ Products manufactured in Xinjiang from slave labor have found their way into nearly every major supply chain in the world coming from China and a report by ASPI identified nearly 120 Chinese and foreign companies that benefit from the use of slave labor in Xinjiang.⁹

Global Surveillance of Uyghurs

China often defends its record on the treatment of Uyghurs as a domestic issue that other nations should not meddle in and has repeatedly sought to contextualize the Uyghur problem as one that does not extend outside the borders of the XUAR. However, the CCP has contradicted itself on this point repeatedly by using its international clout and network of embassies and consulates to track down, harass, and spy on Uyghurs living in other countries.¹⁰ One of the methods used commonly by CCP authorities to force Uyghurs back to China is to invalidate the Chinese passports of Uyghurs ahead of its expiration and insist that they return to renew it in person. Upon arrival, most of those Uyghurs are immediately detained by state security forces and rerouted to the camps.¹¹

International Response

U.S. Response

The United States has implemented a number of harsh penalties on China’s government and businesses in response to its treatment of ethnic minorities in the XUAR. In 2019, CBP blocked the import of apparel, hair products, cotton, and computer parts produced in Xinjiang under Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930.¹² The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (passed unanimously by the House and pending consideration in the Senate) would go further in creating a presumption of denial of import to the U.S. for items produced in Xinjiang or by Xinjiang-

⁷ Davidson, Helen. “Clues to Scale of Xinjiang Labour Operation Emerge as China Defends Camps.” *The Guardian*, 18 Sept. 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/clues-to-scale-of-xinjiang-labour-operation-emerge-as-china-defends-camps.

⁸ “US Seizes Items Thought to Be Made from Hair of Muslims in Chinese Labor Camps.” *The Guardian*, 1 July 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/01/china-muslim-labor-camps-uyghur-hair-products.

⁹ Xiuzhong Xu, Vicky, et al. “Uyghurs for Sale.” *ASPI*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 1 Mar. 2020, www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale.

¹⁰ Dou, Eva. “China’s Muslim Crackdown Extends to Those Living Abroad.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 Aug. 2018, www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-muslim-crackdown-extends-to-those-living-abroad-1535718957.

¹¹ “Uyghurs in Saudi Arabia Flee to Turkey As Chinese Embassy Ends Passport Renewals.” *Radio Free Asia*, 3 Feb. 2020, www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/turkey-01312020165513.html.

¹² Congressional Research Service. *Uyghurs in China* (IF10281; October 5, 2020), prepared by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.

related entities under Section 307. Regarding export controls, since 2019 the Department of Commerce has listed 48 Chinese companies and public security entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” for their connection to human rights violations in the XUAR which imposes licensing requirements for transfer or sale of U.S. items to listed entities with a presumption of licensing denial for most items.¹³

In June 2020, President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 which imposed visa and economic sanctions on PRC officials responsible for human rights abuses against ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang. The Act also required reports from various agencies on U.S. efforts to identify entities facilitating the system of detention and forced labor in Xinjiang as well as efforts by the U.S. to protect Uyghur-Americans and ethnic Uyghurs residing in the U.S. from intimidation or harassment by PRC government agents. The Administration has also acted independently under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights and Accountability Act and via the State Department to impose economic sanctions and visa denials on certain PRC officials and their immediate family members.

Other Responses

By comparison, other nations have not been as forward as the United States in seeking to hold China accountable for its human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In October 2020, 38 nations joined the United States in condemning China’s abuses in Xinjiang on the floor of the United Nations General Assembly. Other Western nations, and increasingly the European Union, have begun to voice increased criticism towards China in 2020.

However, China continues to remain relatively unscathed from international condemnation and has found support or permissibility for its actions with a number of nations in Africa, South America, and Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines. Additionally, condemnations from Muslim-majority nations in South Asia and the Middle East have been either muted or nonexistent as many of them maintain a strong economic reliance on trade with China.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

Take Action at the United Nations to Hold China Accountable

The United Nations has a unique opportunity to utilize its international forum in holding China accountable. The U.S. should work with its partners—and amplify the efforts of those partners—to highlight issues relating to Xinjiang in the United Nations. Calls for accountability should include a push by member nations to review China’s seat on the UN Human Rights Council and advocate its removal until great strides are made to improve its human rights record.

Additionally, the U.S. should unite with other nations in calling for the establishment of an independent UN monitoring mechanism on rights in China, which could include a UN Special Rapporteur or a Special Envoy appointed by the Secretary General in order to allow independent investigations into China’s actions in Xinjiang.

¹³ Congressional Research Service. *Uyghurs in China* (IF10281; October 5, 2020), prepared by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.

Strengthen International Coalition to Exert Pressure on Xinjiang Defenders

An increasing number of nations are willing to confront China on its most egregious abuses, particularly in North America and Western Europe. But more must be done to incentivize other nations to do the same, especially those who have been vocal in their defense of China for its actions in Xinjiang.

More must be done by the United States and its coalition allies to both include a broader spectrum of nations in its efforts but also exert pressure on those who value their economic partnership with China over speaking out against genocide. More must be done by a coalition in particular to mobilize the support of Muslim-majority nations to speak out against China's behavior in Xinjiang by educating the populations of those countries on the abuses being perpetuated in the XUAR and pressure those nations' representatives at the diplomatic level.

Urge the International Olympic Committee to Rebid the Winter 2022 Games

Since hosting the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China's record on human rights record has actually worsened to a drastic degree. As a regime with one of the worst human rights records in the world and a government responsible for conducting a genocidal campaign on a scale not seen since the Holocaust, China has no place hosting the Winter Olympic Games in 2022.

The U.S. and its allies should mobilize all leverage they have at the International Olympic Committee to rebid the Games to another host country with a better human rights record as soon as possible. Otherwise, the U.S. government should bar its athletes from competing and boycott the 2022 Olympic Games similar to the boycott 1980 Olympics in Moscow in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Sign Additional Sanctions and Import/Export Restrictions into Law

More must be done by the international community to hold businesses accountable for their profit from products sourced from slave labor in Xinjiang. The House passage of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the House is a good first step by the U.S. and should be signed into law. Since Xinjiang is more reliant on exports to other countries, China will only change its approach after facing significant economic pressure from those nations through actions similar to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. Significant loss of economic revenue has the greatest chance of success in forcing China to change its practices.