Chinese Detention of Uighurs

Overview

The Uighurs (also known as the Uygurs, Uighurs or Uigurs), and are an 11 million minority Turkic ethnic group found in Central and East Asia. They are recognized as natives of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the People's Republic of China; this is shown in the image below. The Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities in the XUAR are being forced into Internment Camps by the Chinese government. According to Amnesty International the government calls them “centers for ‘transformation-through-education,’ but most people refer to them simply as ‘re-education camps.’” This occurred through the passage of the “highly restrictive and discriminatory ‘Regulations on De-extremification’” that passed in March 2017. This resulted in further restrictions on religious freedom. For example, Amnesty International reported that “open or even private displays of religious and cultural affiliation, including growing an “abnormal” beard, wearing a veil or headscarf, regular prayer, fasting or avoidance of alcohol, or possessing books or articles about Islam or Uighur culture can be considered “extremist” under the regulation.” Over one million Uighurs have been detained as a result under this law’s regulations.

The NY Times reported that Britain, France, and Germany were among 18 European countries that, joined by Japan, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, drew attention to reports of mass detentions. They asked Ms. Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, to keep the Human Rights Council regularly updated on developments. The first international challenge backed by the UN was this letter sent by the western countries. NY Times said that it told, “China to uphold its laws and international obligations, and stop arbitrary incarceration of Uighurs and other Muslim and minority communities, and permit freedom of religion.” The international community has varied responses due to the economic and diplomatic weight China carries. This is seen as Muslim countries have remained silent and have even praised China’s
treatment of its Muslims. This praise was reflected in a Pro-China letter of nearly 40 countries defending China and their treatment of the Uighur population. The NY Times states that “Cameroon, a beneficiary of Chinese infrastructure spending, devoted a statement in the council last week to praising China’s “big achievement” in Xinjiang.” This praise is not uncommon, as numerous countries such as Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Russia, Cuba, and more have defended China with their second letter from the UN. The international community and the UN have a responsibility to protect the Uighur minority who are systematically sent to internment camps regardless of the influential economic and political power China yields.

**Historical Context/ Background**

East Turkistan, also known as the XUAR, is the homeland of the Uighur people, among others such as Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Tatars, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. There are approximately 11 million people in the area, of this around 8.6 million are Uighurs (according to the most recent Chinese census). This census is debated because according to Uighur sources, they have approximately 15 million Uighurs. A significant historical difference is that East Turkistan lies beyond the Great Wall of China and is historically part of central Asia. Therefore, the people are not ethnically Chinese, but rather are Turks of Central Asia. Presently, government policy has resulted in the ethnic Han Chinese population to dramatically increase from 6 percent of the total population in 1949, to 40 percent today. Records show that the Uighurs have more than 4000 years of history in East Turkistan; meaning they have their own rich culture and civilization. Historically, East Turkistan was invaded by the Manchu Empire of China in 1876. It was renamed “Xinjiang” after falling to the Manchu empire. Once this occurred, the culture of the Uighurs slowly diminished.

The Uighur American Association stated that Chinese Nationalists overthrew the Manchu Empire in 1911 and that East Turkistan fell under the rule of the nationalist Chinese government. The Uighurs, who wanted to free themselves from foreign domination, staged numerous uprisings against Nationalist Chinese rule, and twice (once in 1933 and again in 1944) succeeded in setting up the independent East Turkistan Republic. However, communist China would take power in 1949. The Uighur American Association now sees the XUAR as an area with “Heavy-handed state repression of all activities associated by the Chinese government with "Separatism" has created a dire human rights environment for the Uighur Muslim minority population of northwest China.” It is also now “an area that has been a site of heavy army and police concentrations since 1949, and is used as a base for nuclear testing, military training, and prison labor facilities.” The Chinese government now targets the Uighur population with limited to no religious freedom, and surveillance resulting in over one million Uighurs placed in “re-education” camps.

World Without Genocide explained, “In 2009 Uyghur tensions reached a boiling point and large-scale ethnic rioting broke out in Urumqi, the regional capital of Xinjiang. According to
Chinese government officials, roughly 200 Han Chinese were killed in these riots, resulting in an increased government crackdown on the Uyghur population. This crackdown increased ethnic conflict and even greater Uyghur marginalization, leading to more resistance and violence from some Uyghur separatist groups. These violent anti-government attacks peaked in 2014, prompting an extreme escalation in government surveillance and oppression to turn “ethnic Uyghurs into loyal citizens and supporters of the party.” In early 2017, the Chinese government put into place a structured system to convert the Uyghurs. The government introduced high-tech surveillance and began to incarcerate Uyghurs in re-education camps, Chinese repression of the Uyghur population became a systematic attempt to wipe out Uyghur cultural and religious identity.”


**Current Situation/ Recent developments**

The current situation in the XUAR is perilous for the Uighur population. They experience severe surveillance, interference, unfair imprisonment, and no religious freedom. For example, traveling abroad is considered extremist behavior when it is to a majority Muslim country. Similarly, the government finds it suspicious “taking phone calls from relatives abroad, praying regularly (more than once a week), growing a beard, traveling to Middle Eastern countries, the use of an unusual amount of electricity, abruptly trying to quit smoking or drinking, wearing a shirt with Islamic imagery, or praying in a public place.” The Chinese government finds this highly suspicious regardless of age or gender and is almost always an ethnically Uighur person. Through the messaging app WeChat, the government has regulatory surveillance that allows for further intervention and detainment of the Uighur population. The government has also implemented security checks in the XUAR region to search phones, and use facial recognition technology to check people's identity.

The Uighur American Association has reported from Xinjiang documents showing, “a pattern of abuse, including political imprisonment, torture, and disappearance. Mosques are summarily closed, and the Uyghur language is banned from use in universities. Uyghurs are subjected to compulsory unpaid labor in the construction of a pipeline planned to export local petroleum resources to other parts of China. Uyghurs also continue to be the only population in China consistently subjected to executions for political crimes, and these executions are often both summary and public.” The Uighurs are placed in “Re-Education camps without a trial, access to lawyers, or the right to challenge the decision. They have no access to the outside world until the authorities determine that they have been “transformed.” Kairat Samarkan was sent to a detention camp in October 2017, after he returned to the XUAR following a short visit to neighboring Kazakhstan. Amnesty International reported that, “Kairat said he was hooded, made to wear shackles on his arms and legs, and was forced to stand in a fixed position for 12 hours when first detained. There were nearly 6,000 people held in the same camp, where they
were forced to sing political songs and study speeches of the Chinese Communist Party. They could not talk to each other and were forced to chant “Long live Xi Jinping” before meals. Kairat told Amnesty that his treatment drove him to attempt suicide just before his release.” To quote, he stated, “I was kept (standing in a fixed position) for 12 hours. I completely lost my will and followed all their orders after that.” Below is a photo of the outside of a “re-education” camp.

There have been reports stating that those who do not follow orders “face punishments ranging from verbal abuse to food deprivation, solitary confinement, beatings and use of restraints and stress positions. Reports have indicated deaths inside the facilities, including suicides of those unable to bear the mistreatment.” The government justifies these reports by stating that they are necessary to prevent “religious extremism” and “terrorist” organization. They also highlight “ethnic unity” and national security as reasons to “re-educate” Uighurs. Although states are allowed to prevent any terrorism, it is supposed to be direct and proportionate; not detaining 1 million Uighurs with no respect for their fundamental human rights. Amnesty International states, “there is no plausible justification for mass detentions of members of a particular ethnic group or religion of the type witnessed in the XUAR.”

Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International’s East Asia Director stated, “So-called ‘re-education camps’ are places of brainwashing, torture, and punishment that hark back to the darkest hours of the Mao-era, when anyone suspected of not being loyal enough to the state or the Chinese Communist Party could end up in China’s notorious labor camps. Members of predominately Muslim ethnic minority groups are living in permanent fear for themselves and
their detained relatives.” Hundreds of thousands of families have been torn apart across the globe. Those within the XUAR region are fearful of contacting any family abroad, and those within the camps have no access to communication. The families are not given any explanations and are often threatened with imprisonment if they try to interfere. As a result, Amnesty International has reported that over one million Uighur families are demanding answers from the Chinese government.

The conditions in the camps and those being detained resemble factors in the Rome Statute that would dictate a Crime Against Humanity and cultural genocide.

“Article 6 For the purpose of this Statute, "genocide" means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Article 7 Crimes against humanity 1. For the purpose of this Statute, "crime against humanity" means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack: (a) Murder; (b) Extermination; (c) Enslavement; (d) Deportation or forcible transfer of population; (e) Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; (f) Torture; (g) Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity; (h) Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court; (i) Enforced disappearance of persons; (j) The crime of apartheid; (k) Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.

Within the camps, when someone does not follow instructions, they face interrogations, torture, and threats to family members locally or abroad. The camps also forced inmates to “learn and speak Mandarin, recite Communist propaganda, and denounce Islam.” Uyghur American Association stated that “The segregated surveillance of an ethnic population alone represents a grave violation of internationally-protected human rights. However, the scale and impact of Uyghur internment and re-education camps transform this surveillance from a system of
oppression into a tool of cultural genocide.” These factors have alerted the international community and caused great concern. The Uighur civilian population has experienced torture, imprisonment, and many other factors that have the potential to fall under international crimes. Further research and clarity be done for the international community to act on this matter.

Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have expressed concern; however, the most recent international action to halt the Uighur detention has been a letter organized by 22 primarily western countries. The letter urges China to stop mass detaining Uighurs and to close the internment or “re-education” camps. The 22 countries included Britain, France and Germany, Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand and more. Beijing labeled this letter as libel.

In reaction to the condemnation of China’s actions, nearly 40 countries including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Venezuela, Nigeria, Algeria, North Korea, Myanmar, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, and others created a letter defending the treatment of Uighurs. The Japanese Times reported that the letter stated, “We commend China’s remarkable achievements in the field of human rights...We take note that terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism has caused enormous damage to people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang…” Moreover, stated, “Now safety and security has returned to Xinjiang.” Although rights groups, former inmates, and others refer to the camps as “concentration camps” the letters countries chose to describe the camps as “vocational and training centers.” These letters in reaction to each other are often not common at the UN.

As a result, a general global uproar occurred, and Beijing began offering tours of the detention camps to diplomats and certain media outlets. The Japanese Times stated that the U.N. human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, has requested a fact-finding mission to Xinjiang. Although this has been requested, the UN rights office stated that the visit would only be possible with specific requirements and unlimited access to critical sites. The battle of letters shows an international power play between countries. Those condemning China’s actions attempted to “name and shame” them and increase international pressure to improve their human rights. In response, China demonstrated its sphere of influence through having nearly 40 countries (from all over the world) support them. The NY Times cited this as a demonstration of China’s “growing global political and economic leverage.” They not only defended China but praised their human rights record and treatment of Uighurs. Although this battle is not over, it is required for any improvement to occur for the Uighur population.

**Involved Actors**

- **Amnesty International & Human Rights Watch** - Has called upon the Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution establishing an international fact-finding mission to Xinjiang. They state that this was the only way to determine fact from fiction regarding
the camps and allegations surrounding them. Amnesty International reported, “During the next session of the Human Rights Council, from February 25 to March 22, 2019, the Council will consider the outcome report of China’s November 2018 Universal Periodic Review, at which Chinese officials denied allegations of grave human rights violations in Xinjiang. “The magnitude of abuses allegedly occurring in Xinjiang demand uncompromising scrutiny from the Human Rights Council” (HRC) said Kenneth Roth, Executive Director at Human Rights Watch. “The Human Rights Council’s integrity demands that states not allow China to hide behind its membership or economic might to escape accountability. The world is now looking to the HRC to determine further action and intervention for the Uighurs in China.


- **Uighurs** - Also known as the Uygurs, Uighurs or Uigurs, they are an 11 million minority Turkic ethnic group found in the XUAR of China. They are systematically repressed and targeted by the Chinese government and placed in “re-education” camps. The Chinese Government sees most of them as “religious extremists,” “terrorists,” and threats to the “ethnic unity” of China. They are seen as extreme for things such as praying more than once a week, growing beards, and even an increase in electricity. The civilian minority live in fear of being detained and has resulted in millions of families being torn apart without any reason as to why.

- **China** - Beijing (CNN) Reported from the Chinese perspective; “A senior Chinese official has alleged that authorities in the far-western region of Xinjiang have released most detainees held in government internment camps, but refused to be drawn on how many people remained in the mass detention program. During a rare press conference in Beijing Tuesday, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Chairman Shohrat Zakir, fiercely defended the controversial camps into which the United States State Department has said up to two million Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities have been held against their will in the past two years. Speaking to reporters, Zakir, the country's top Uyghur official, described the camps as being ‘hugely positive’ for the region. ‘I don't know how it has become such an international focus. It is probably due to unbalanced information,’ he said.” China has also not been cooperative with the international community regarding the Uighurs. Due to this, there is increased pressure on the Human Rights Council to require China to open their camps, limitlessly for objective inquiry.


- **The Uyghur American Association (UAA)** - “is based in Washington, DC and is a tax-exempt, non-profit membership organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the
U.S. Tax Code. The Uyghur American Association (UAA) works to promote the preservation and flourishing of a rich, humanistic and diverse Uyghur culture, and to support the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, democratic means to determine their own political future. The UAA has undertaken the Uyghur Human Rights Project for the purpose of promoting improved human rights conditions for Uyghurs and other indigenous groups in East Turkistan (also known as China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), on the premise that the assurance of basic human rights will facilitate the realization of the community's democratic aspirations.” Find more information at https://uyghuramerican.org/about_uaa

UN Resolutions and Activities

There have not been any official UN resolutions regarding the Uighur “Re-education” camps in China. Amnesty International, numerous UN experts, treaty bodies, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights have expressed grave concern about the situation in Xinjiang and called for unrestricted access to the region. China has not responded with any concrete evidence or answers. The most recent collective international reaction has been letters sent by Pro-China countries and one by Western countries condemning their actions.

- Pro-China Letter - Nearly 40 countries praised China on their Human Rights record and defended their treatment of the Uighur population. This letter served as a demonstration of global power by China, reflecting its economic and political influence.
- Western Letter- 22 Western Countries condemned China’s detention of the Uighur population. This is a demonstration of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) within the international community. R2P is a “political commitment which was endorsed by all member states of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit in order to address its four key concerns to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.” This allows the international community to intervene when a country is harming its civilians or to participate in one of the four key concerns.

Questions to Consider

- Does your country support China detaining Uighurs, condemn China, or are they neutral? Depending on the situation, why might your country support/condemn China through a social, economic, or political lens?
- Does the detention of Uighurs count as a Crime Against Humanity, a Genocide, neither or both?
- How does this set a precedent for future human rights violations in the world? Does your country support the R2P, if so will they intervene and how will this impact global power/peace?
- Are the Uighurs a threatening group of people as the Chinese government says or a non-threatening civilian religious and ethnic minority?
Further Resources


Highlighted Timeline of Events

This is a timeline of a series of unwarranted attacks on the Uighur people, also classifying them as terrorists. It also accounts for differences among what police report and civilians see, one of the reports state that the police attack and killed an identified terrorist group whereas civilians report it being a house with 6 women preparing for a wedding inside. This timeline accounts for multiple points of view of the multifaceted Uighur issue.

2009

June 25 -- Two Uighur factory workers are reported killed and dozens injured in a massive brawl with Han Chinese in Shaoguan, in the southern province of Guangdong.

July 5 -- Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Uighurs riot in the Xinjiang capital Urumqi after security forces move in on a protest over the Shaoguan incident

July 7 -- The government says nearly 200 people died in the unrest, with more than 1,600 injured and hundreds arrested. Consequently, at least 26 are reportedly sentenced to death.

September 2 -- Han residents of Urumqi protest for days over a wave of syringe stabbings that the government eventually says had nearly 500 victims, blaming "ethnic separatist forces."

2011
July 18 -- Police kill 20 protesters in clashes in Hotan, southern Xinjiang, exiled Uighur groups say. State media say police fired on demonstrators who attacked a police station, killing one officer.

September 15 -- Courts in Xinjiang sentenced four Uighurs to death following the July riots.

December 28 -- Police in Pishan kill seven "terrorists" in a hostage standoff that left one officer dead. State media reports that the terrorists engaged in a "holy war."

2012

February 28 -- Rioters armed with knives kill at least ten people in Yecheng, while police shoot two of the attackers dead, state press says. One man is later sentenced to death.

2013

October 28 -- Three members of the same Xinjiang family crash their car into tourists in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the symbolic heart of the Chinese state, killing two, before setting it on fire and dying themselves, according to authorities who call it a terrorist attack. Three people are later executed.

December 16 -- 14 Uighurs and two police officers are killed in Shufu county. Authorities describe the slain Uighurs as members of an extremist group, but campaigners say police raided a house where a family was preparing for a wedding, with six women among those killed.

2014

January 15 -- A prominent Uighur academic and critic of government policy, economics professor Ilham Tohti, is detained by police and later charged with "separatism."

January 25 -- A total of 12 people are killed in Xinhe, six in explosions and six-shot dead by police dealing with "violent incidents," a government-run news portal says.

March 1 -- Knife-wielding assailants kill 29 people and wounded more than 130 at Kunming train station in Yunnan province, more than 1,600kilometres (1,000 miles) from Xinjiang. Officials blame separatists from Xinjiang.

April 30 -- Assailants armed with knives and explosives attack a rail station in Urumqi, killing one person and wounding 79, on the final day of a visit by President Xi Jinping.

May 22 -- 39 people are killed, along with four attackers, and more than 90 wounded when assailants throw explosives and two vehicles plow through a market in Urumqi, state media say.

June 16 -- Authorities execute 13 people and send more than 100 to jail in a public mass sentencing on mostly terrorism-related offenses in Xinjiang.
July 28 -- 37 civilians and 59 "terrorists" are killed and another 13 civilians wounded in an attack on a police station and government offices in Yarkand. Police arrest 215 people in connection with the incident, according to state media.

July 30 -- Jume Tahir, the government-appointed head of the Id Kah mosque in Kashgar, the largest in China, is killed after leading morning prayers. Police shoot dead two alleged assailants and capture a third.

August 1 -- Police in Hotan shoot dead nine suspected terrorists and capture one after discovering the group in a cornfield, according to state media.

September 21 -- A total of 40 "rioters," six civilians and four police are killed in Xinjiang's Luntai county after a series of coordinated explosions at police stations, a market and a shop, authorities say days later.

September 23 -- Tohti is sentenced to life in prison for "separatism."

Sourced from http://www.iuhrdf.org/content/timeline-unrest-connected-chinas-restive-xinjiang-region