

# FACT FILE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ATROCITIES AGAINST UYGHUR MUSLIMS IN XINJIANG AND BEYOND

## WHO ARE THE UYGHUR?

The Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking population of around twelve million and are one of a number of persecuted mostly-Muslim minorities living in China's autonomous Xinjiang region. The Chinese government's "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism" initiative was officially launched in 2014 to improve security but in reality, justified reducing freedoms of the minority group. Any behaviour that was not in line with the communist party or "Han way of life" was seen as dangerous and China affirms that the crackdown was necessary to combat Islamic extremism. It is part of a wider campaign by Xi Jinping to promote Han nationalism and to suppress any other identities that compete with loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party. Human Rights Watch reported, "Officials insist that... [non-Han Chinese] beliefs and affinities must be 'corrected' or 'eradicated', going as far as to 'effectively [outlaw] Islam' in Xinjiang."<sup>[1]</sup>

The first non-governmental legal analysis of the accusations of genocide in Xinjiang was published in March 2021 and concluded China is committing genocide against the Uyghur people. Dozens of experts in international law, genocide studies and Chinese ethnic policies examined verified information such as Chinese State communications, using methods such as public satellite-image analysis to assess the evidence.<sup>[2]</sup> The report found evidence of: intent to destroy, high-level statements of intent and general plan, comprehensive state policy (government-mandated homestays; mass internment; mass birth-prevention strategy; forcible transfer of Uyghur children to state-run facilities; eradication of Uyghur identity, community, and domestic life; selective targeting of intellectuals and community leaders) as well as acts of genocide.

The report also quotes internal documents and speeches that ordered high-level officials to "round up everyone who should be rounded up," "wipe them out completely ... destroy them root and branch," and "break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins." Officials described Uyghurs

in dehumanising terms and repeatedly likened the mass internment of Uyghurs to "eradicating tumours."<sup>[3]</sup>

## RE-EDUCATION CAMPS

In 2016, Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo relocated from the Tibet Autonomous Region to assume leadership of Xinjiang. By April 2017, internment camps were being built within Xinjiang. Researchers working with the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement (ETNAM) released a series of maps showing suspected 500 labour camps, "re-education" camps, and prisons in Xinjiang in November 2019.<sup>[4]</sup> The camps have been compared to "wartime concentration camps" by Amnesty.<sup>[5]</sup> The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) officials alternatively denied the existence of the internment camps or justified it as poverty alleviation<sup>[6]</sup>. By October 2018, the Chinese government relabelled the camps as a form of "aid and education"<sup>[7]</sup> Partly due to international pressure, the XUAR officials announced the vocational and educational centres were closed and the "reeducation trainees" had "graduated".<sup>[8]</sup> This is directly contradicted by satellite evidence. Dozens of camps had been significantly expanded in the months that led up to that assertion. Camp detainees were also removed from the camps and sent to prison after being assigned long sentences.<sup>[9]</sup> Simultaneously, Between 2017 and 2019, an estimated 80,000 Uyghurs had been transferred out of Xinjiang and assigned to factories across China under a central government policy known as Xinjiang Aid.<sup>[10]</sup>

In November 2019, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists published highly confidential Chinese government documents listing out the official policies behind the camps. The China Cables detail security protocols, methods of monitoring and controlling detainees as well as policies for identifying citizens to be detained.<sup>[11]</sup> Experts have reviewed the documents and expressed confidence in their authenticity while former detainees have corroborated their contents. The documents provide a wealth of detail on the comprehensive

system of social control within the camps, including strict measures to prevent escape, that are contrary to official claims that they are humane educational facilities.

The documents show in the government's own words the operational plans behind the camps and the mass surveillance system. The evidence was submitted to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in a complaint alleging genocide against the Uyghurs by China's top leaders. There have been several attempts by lawyers and activists to open an ICC case on the Uyghur issue. For example, lawyers representing exiled Uyghur activists asked the ICC to investigate the forced repatriation of thousands of Uyghurs from Cambodia and Tajikistan in 2020. However, in a report issued in December 2020, the ICC prosecutors said that "there was no basis to proceed at this time" with an investigation into the allegations.<sup>[12]</sup>

A document, known as the "Qaraqash Document" published in February 2020, shows that detainees were swept into China's coercive re-education system for offenses related to common religious practices such as growing a beard or wearing a veil, as well as going abroad, or having too many children in violation of China's One Child policy.<sup>[13]</sup>

Alongside cells, another central feature of the camps is classrooms. Teachers have been drafted in to "re-educate" the detainees - a process activists say is designed to strip the Uyghurs and other minorities of their culture, language and religion, and indoctrinate them into mainstream Chinese culture.<sup>[14]</sup> In such camps, one former detainee described how people are coerced into eating pork, particularly on Fridays, at a time traditionally reserved for praying.<sup>[15]</sup>

Families are also separated under "centralised care", where Muslim children are removed from their families, and sent to "boarding schools", in efforts to create distance between them and their roots. Many children have both of their parents in camps. Those in "boarding schools" are reported to be dressed in unwashed, thin clothes, even during harsh winter weather. Nearly half a million Uyghur children had been sent to such boarding schools by 2019 according to a planning document published on a government website.<sup>[16]</sup>

The New York Times revealed in July 2020 that Uyghur labourers, many forcibly working, were involved in producing items shipped around the world.<sup>[17]</sup> The exact number of people held in the camps differs as access by independent bodies have been limited. However, human rights groups estimate between one and two million Uyghurs

have been held in these camps over the last few years, with hundreds of thousands sentenced to prison terms.<sup>[18]</sup> Those who attempt to contact the outside world, whether from within a camp or just from within China, face serious threats to their liberty and even life.<sup>[19]</sup>

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

First-hand accounts from inside the internment camps are rare, but several former detainees and guards have spoken to major news organisations such as the BBC or the New York Times and have testified to an organised system of mass rape, sexual abuse and torture.

The BBC interviewed a Kazakh woman from Xinjiang who was detained for 18 months in the camp system, who said she was forced to strip Uyghur women naked and handcuff them, before leaving them alone with Chinese men. Afterwards, she cleaned the rooms. "My job was to remove their clothes above the waist and handcuff them so they cannot move," said Gulzira Auelkhan, crossing her wrists behind her head to demonstrate. "Then I would leave the women in the room and a man would enter - some Chinese man from outside or policeman. I sat silently next to the door, and when the man left the room, I took the woman for a shower."<sup>[20]</sup>

A teacher forced to work in the camps, Sayragul Sauytbay, told the BBC that "rape was common" and the guards "picked the girls and young women they wanted and took them away". She described witnessing a harrowing public gang rape of a woman of just 20 or 21, who was brought before about 100 other detainees to make a forced confession.

Another woman, Tursunay Ziawudun, who fled Xinjiang after her release and is now in the US, told the BBC that women were removed from their cells "every night" and raped by one or more masked Chinese men. She said she was tortured and later gang-raped on three occasions, each time by two or three men. She said she was afraid she would be returned to Xinjiang and punished more harshly if she spoke. The accuracy of her account is impossible to verify completely due to the severe restrictions on reporting in China. However, her travel documents and immigration records have been verified by the BBC and fit the timeline. Her descriptions of the camp and the nature of methods of abuse also correspond with accounts from other former detainees.

Ziawudun also gave her testimony in June 2020 before a "people's tribunal" in London that was

established to investigate China's policies against the Uyghurs. Sir Geoffrey Nice, a barrister and former professor of law who led the prosecution of Slobodan Milosevic, former President of Serbia, at the UN's International Criminal Tribunal sits on the tribunal along with eight other British public figures. This was established as a private initiative and has no standing in international law and no powers of enforcement. It cannot arrest suspects, impose sanctions or punish anyone.<sup>[21]</sup>

Many of the women who were imprisoned testified at the tribunal about being raped, about being forced to take medications and about medical examinations whose purpose was unstated. Gulbahar Jelilova, 57, testified to how she was imprisoned for 15 months on a charge of engaging in terrorist activity. She described interrogations in which she was tied to a chair for 24 hours, during which, whenever she fell asleep, she would be awakened with an electric shock. When she refused to sign a confession, she was raped.<sup>[22]</sup>

A teacher coerced into giving classes in [Xinjiang](#) internment camps has described her forced sterilisation at the age of 50, under a government campaign to suppress birth rates of women from Muslim minorities. Qelbinur Sidik said the crackdown swept up not just women likely to fall pregnant, but those well beyond normal childbearing ages. There is increasing evidence of efforts to slash birth rates, which some experts have called "demographic genocide".<sup>[23]</sup>

The London-based tribunal concluded in December 2021, ruling China committed genocide against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in its western Xinjiang region, and accusing China's senior leadership including President Xi Jinping of "primary responsibility" for acts perpetrated against Muslim minority groups.

"The tribunal is satisfied that the PRC [People's Republic of China] has affected a deliberate, systematic and concerted policy with the object of so-called 'optimising' the population in Xinjiang by the means of a long-term reduction of Uyghur and other ethnic minority populations to be achieved through limiting and reducing Uyghur births," Geoffrey Nice, who chaired the tribunal, said as he read out the verdict.<sup>[24]</sup>

## **EVIDENCE OF FORCED LABOUR**

Along with a series of human rights abuses taking place in Xinjiang, the use of Uyghur forced labour across China has been well documented in a seminal piece of research by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). The research

draws on open-source Chinese-language documents, satellite imagery analysis, academic research and on-the-ground media reporting. The ASPI identified twenty seven factories in nine Chinese provinces using Uyghur labour. Together, these factories supply goods and materials to eighty three well-known global brands, including clothing giants Adidas, Nike, North Face, Tommy Hilfiger, Uniqlo, Abercrombie & Fitch and Victoria Secret; car giants BMW, Mercedes Benz, General Motors, Jaguar and Land Rover; and computer and electronic makers Apple, Dell, Panasonic, Microsoft, Sony and Bosch.<sup>[26]</sup>

These American and European companies are reported to use as many as eighty thousand ethnic Uyghurs who have been "transferred" to factories across China over the last three years. In September 2020, the Guardian reported that after "graduating" from the "re-education" camps, Uyghurs are often moved to factories around China as a source of free labour.<sup>[27]</sup>

As mentioned earlier, this is part of a Chinese state-sponsored programme called Xinjiang Aid, that encourages local government and business organisations to find employment opportunities for newly 're-educated' Uyghurs in order to 'aid' the region's development and stability. According to ASPI, there is a direct pipeline of Uyghurs being transported from the camps to factories across China under the Xinjiang Aid programme. Factory bosses receive money for each Uyghur worker they employ, who are recruited from specialist online booking services. One such ad, claiming to be able to supply 1,000 Uyghur workers aged 16 to 18 years, read: "The advantages of Xinjiang workers are: semi-military style management, can withstand hardship, no loss of personnel ... Minimum order 100 workers!"<sup>[28]</sup>

China's labour transfer scheme is purported to be part of the government's massive poverty alleviation campaign, where workers are paid properly for their labour, but growing evidence indicates it targets Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and coerces participation. The report by ASPI found they live in segregated dormitories and are unable to go home. They also undergo Mandarin and ideological training outside working hours, similarly to Uyghurs in the internment camps. Further sources, including government documents, show that transferred workers are assigned minders and have limited freedom of movement. "It is extremely difficult for Uyghurs to refuse or escape these work assignments, which are enmeshed with the apparatus of detention and

political indoctrination both inside and outside of Xinjiang,” the report by ASPI claims. “In addition to constant surveillance, the threat of arbitrary detention hangs over minority citizens who refuse their government-sponsored work assignments.”<sup>[29]</sup>

The use of Uyghur forced labour has global implications. For example, 84% of China’s cotton exports come from the Uyghur region, meaning that Uyghur forced labour taints 20% of the global fashion industry’s cotton garments.<sup>[30]</sup> A recent study published by Sheffield Hallam University, *Laundering Cotton: How Xinjiang Cotton is Obscured in International Supply Chains* found through analysis of link-by-link supply chain connections, how cotton from the XUAR circumvents certain supply standards and import bans to end up on clothing racks around the world.<sup>[31]</sup>

Operating in the Uyghur Region in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights has become a practical impossibility. Due to the mass surveillance and repression of fundamental freedoms and human rights by the Chinese government, there are no valid means for companies to verify that any workplace in the Uyghur Region is free of forced labour or to prevent the use of forced labour in these workplaces in line with human rights due diligence. Prominent multi-stakeholder initiatives including the Ethical Trading Initiative and Fair Labor Association have recognised this fact.

During the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022, the International Olympics Committee had ties to companies that use Xinjiang cotton. The committee’s official sportswear uniform supplier is Anta, a Chinese sportswear giant that has affirmed its commitment to Xinjiang cotton. Despite the evidence already published on Uyghur forced labour, the Olympic committee said it had carried out third-party audits for the uniforms to be provided by Anta and found “no issue” with forced labour.<sup>[32]</sup>

The Chinese government has issued blanket denials ever since evidence of what was happening in Xinjiang began emerging. Senior officials have merely admitted a clamping down on violent terrorist activity and a strengthening of “security and social management”.<sup>[33]</sup> Chinese state outlets have also repackaged the evidence published so mass internment is described as “countering terrorism”, imprisoned Uyghur academics are cast as promoters of “violent militancy”, forced labour is “poverty reduction” and forced sterilisation is “family planning”. There

has been little pushback from Muslim majority countries either, which experts attribute to a fear of economic retribution by China.<sup>[34]</sup>

In fact, when envoys from across the EU along with Australia, Canada and Japan co-signed an open letter denouncing China’s conduct in Xinjiang in 2019, UN ambassadors from 37 countries – including Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Algeria and Egypt – released a letter defending China’s treatment of Uyghurs.<sup>[35]</sup> Meanwhile, the Chinese government has also led a campaign of harassment and intimidation against Uyghurs who have left the country. Amnesty International published a report in 2019 showing information from approximately 400 Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups living in 22 countries across five continents, revealing how China targets members of the Uyghur and other diaspora communities across the globe through pressure from its embassies abroad, as well as through messaging apps and threatening phone calls.<sup>[36]</sup>

## **ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE NOW TO SUPPORT UYGHURS:**

- **Educate yourself:** For meaningful and systemic change to take place, we must first arm ourselves with the knowledge and awareness to do so. Hope Not Hate has a [resource hub](#) to help you understand what is going on in the Uyghur Region (Xinjiang).
- **Amplify:** Our recent polling found that just over half of the population know that the Chinese authorities have locked up anywhere between one and three million Uyghur and other Turkic minorities in “re-education camps”. This is an issue that is still not getting a lot of attention in the media, so it is up to everyone else to make noise. Sharing [petitions](#) and resources with your social networks can be a great way to start a conversation (take a look at the social media table below).
- **Buy consciously:** 1 in 5 cotton garments are tainted with Uyghur forced labour. You can make sure you are not financially supporting forced labour by looking for GOTS or BCI certifications on cotton garments. Better still, ask brands where they source their cotton from and let them know you are aware of the fashion industry’s complicity in the Uyghur forced labour. Support the global campaign to pressure fashion brands to end their complicity in Uyghur forced labour [here](#).

**Useful social media accounts to follow:**

Name of organisation	Twitter	Instagram
Stop Uyghur Genocide	@UyghurStop	@stopuyghurgenocide
World Uyghur Congress	@UyghurCongress	@uyghurcongress
End Forced Labour Fashion	@forcdlabourfash	@forcedlabourfashion
Uyghur Human Rights Project	@uyghurProject	@uyghurProject
Uyghur Solidarity Campaign UK	@campaignuyghur	@uyghursolidarityuk
Human Rights Watch	@HRW	@humanrightswatch
Yet Again	@YetAgainUK	@yetagainuk
Lawyers for Uyghur Rights	@L4UR_UK	@lawyersforuyghurrights
Freedom United	@freedomunitedHQ	@freedomunitedHQ

**For more information on what is happening in Xinjiang:**

- <https://live.hopenothate.89up.org/whats-happening-in-xinjiang/>
- <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>
- <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/>
- <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/timelines/forced-labour/>
- <https://uyghurtribunal.com/news/witness-after-witness-hundreds-reveal-the-atrocities-of-chinas-concentration-camps/>

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- 4 <https://www.businessinsider.com/uyghur-activists-satellite-images-china-500-camps-prisons-in-xinjiang-2019-11>
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- 9 <https://livingotherwise.com/2019/10/05/from-camps-to-prisons-xinjiangs-next-great-human-rights-catastrophe-by-gene-a-bunin/>
- 10 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>
- 11 <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables>
- 12 <https://apnews.com/article/europe-business-crime-government-and-politics-a3f92d7348b0878bed274ec40645e136>
- 13 [https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP\\_QaraqashDocument.pdf](https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf)
- 14 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071>
- 15 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-education-camps-forbidden-beards-pray-pork-xinjiang-a8835861.html>
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- 29 <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>
- 30 <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/end-uyghur-forced-labour>
- 31 <https://www.shu.ac.uk/helena-kennedy-centre-international-justice/research-and-projects/all-projects/laundered-cotton>
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