

Research Report

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Addressing Human Rights violations against Uyghurs in Xinjiang
China

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Introduction

In 2022, The United Nations Human Rights Office (OHCHR), published an assessment of the human rights concern in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region concerning the alleged abuse of the government of the People's Republic of China targeting ethnic and religious minorities in the region such as the Uyghurs.

Documentation of re-education camps under the name of 'Vocational and Educational and Training Centres', was central in the report, which violated several human rights.

Their campaign, Strike Hard Against Terrorism, to counter the violent outbreaks in the area, included implementation of the VETCs, increased surveillance, such as facial recognition and software to track individuals' data. All of which potentially contradict and violate human rights concerning freedom of expression and the practice of one's religion. Furthermore, abuses such as forced labour, sexual violence, family separation and violations of reproductive rights have been reported targetting this ethnic group, yet not followed by prosecution of the Chinese government.

Definition of key terms

Uyghurs:

Uyghurs are a Turkic, predominantly Muslim ethnic group who are primarily native to the area of Xinjiang, however also reside in other countries central in Asia.

Human Rights

Human Rights are a set of rights that every person is entitled to regardless of gender, nationality, race etc. They are protected by the treaties issued by the United Nations, which all member states have signed, and organisations such as the United Nations Human Rights Office work to make sure and help that all nations comply.

General Overview

Definition of the issue

The issue is essentially about discrimination and alleged oppression against an ethnic minority in Xinjiang China. Concern of breach of human rights in the concept of the VETCs which is part of the Chinese Government's counter-terrorism policies, the re-education camps, and breach of human rights in the manner that the Uyghurs in Xinjiang are treated by the government and regional officials.

Human Rights such as the right to privacy, freedom of religion and belief, no unfair detainment and no discrimination are some of the human rights that have been breached according to the information available from the individuals who were in the camps.

The UN report issued on the situation says that the actions and the policies implemented to counter terrorism may constitute crimes against humanity. The Human Rights Watch states China has committed the following, mass arbitrary detention in the camps, torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, separation of families, forced labour, sexual violence and violations of reproductive rights. These are all crimes against humanity.

History of the issue

Xinjiang was conquered by the Qing dynasty in the 1800s, and the area was then largely populated by ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz etc.. This area came under the name of Xinjiang and has been part of the People's Republic of China since the Chinese Civil War. In 1949, after the government was ruled by the communist party, they found religion incompatible with communism and began a so-called 'crackdown' on religion, which resulted in some of the early tensions between the Chinese and ethnic Uyghars, who were predominantly Muslim.

The Han Chinese moved into the area as the state was established as an autonomous region in 1950, and by later in the 20th century they made up more than two-fifths of the population in Xinjiang. There are several causes for the resulting tensions in the aftermath of the settlement of the Han Chinese.

Many Han Chinese moved to the area supported by state money to start businesses, and many became part of the Bintuang organisation, which is an enterprise and paramilitary organisation. Originally it was set up to protect the border around Xinjiang from the threat of Russian attack, and now they mostly focus on their economic activities and their administrative section helps support the Chinese Strike Hard Against Terrorism campaign.

The area of Xinjiang is rich in natural resources such as coal, gas and other fossil fuels, copper, zinc etc., and the businesses made up to 6.7 billion dollars in goods exported in 2018 only. Due to this though costs of living increased significantly which resulted in increased poverty levels among the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities there as they were often excluded from employment opportunities.

Then from the year of 1990 to 2016, some thousand terrorist attacks according to the embassy of China took place in Xinjiang, acts which were committed by terrorists and religious extremists. Along with this many protests under the East Turkestan movement, the name the area was under before Xinjiang, and more violent outbreaks occurred. Following

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this the campaign was set up by the Chinese government, preventing what they refer to as the three evils: Separatism, Terrorism and Religious Extremism.

Following this security measures were heightened, rules were implemented to prevent women from wearing hijabs, and young men from growing long beards, fasting was prohibited, and parents were not allowed to provide their children with Islamic and Uyghur education. Further measures such as the Quran needing to be approved by the state, and altered to fit the communist party ideology, facial recognition in security cameras and other measures and restrictions were also implemented in part of the campaign.

Any person deemed not safe, or partaking in any of the ‘three evils’, was sent to prison or the VETCs, the ‘re-education camps’. It has been estimated that there are over 1 million Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in these camps.

In these VETCs, the people learn to read and write in Chinese, they study communist propaganda, they praise Xi Jinping etc. There have been allegations of torture, violence, forced labour and improper conditions in these camps. China believes that with these camps they are preparing and bettering the ‘residents’ for future employment opportunities. According to the embassy in China, ‘Xinjiang now enjoys social stability, economic development, rising living standards, cultural prosperity, ethnic unity and religious harmony’. They deny any breach of human rights or laws.

The United States, France, United Kingdom and Canada have since January 2021, recognized this situation as a genocide. It is difficult to get an official and reliable idea of the situation as when officials visit, they are only able to see what China is willing to show them, which is likely to be an inaccurate representation. Victims of the camps that have been interviewed state that they all have to sign non-disclosure documents and are at risk of further prosecution.

In reply to the assessment published by the OHCHR, China denies all breaches of human rights and supports its actions by stating that it has helped the region of Xinjiang gain social stability. It justifies the camps, restrictions and counter-terrorism policies considered harsh by

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many other nations, by the fact that it has proved effective and that there haven't been any reports of terror in Xinjiang since 2017 when the policies were put in place. The official Chinese embassy website published their reply under the title, 'what the west doesn't tell you about the war on China's terror', it was also annexed to the official UN report. China does not have any official plans to change the situation with the Uyghurs.

The People's Republic of China is a powerful country, it has veto power in the Security Council, and as many as 83 international companies have been identified to be profiting off of the forced labour in Xinjiang.

It is important to acknowledge that the information available varies from source to source and that as information can and is restricted by the government of China, and there is potential bias in other sources, it can be difficult to have a completely accurate interpretation and understanding of the situation.



Fig. 1, Xinjiang / History, Map, Population, People & Facts / Britannica



Fig. 2, From denial to pride: how China changed its language on Xinjiang's camps / Xinjiang / Guardian



Fig. 3, China enlisting international help to force Uyghurs back within its borders

Major parties involved

OHCHR

The United Nations Human Rights Office is an office of the United Nations that works to protect the human rights in all nations, as all have signed the Universal Declarations of

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Human Rights which give them the right to operate under international law. This has significance in this situation as they are responsible for helping and making sure that nations do not breach or abuse human rights, which China is allegedly doing.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Previous sanctions have been imposed by the EU, UK, Canada and the US, on Chinese officials responsible for the abuses against the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

The United States made the Uyghur Human Rights Act an official law. This law includes the tracking and reporting of human rights breaches against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. Following that legislation in an effort to prevent the use of forced labour has been presented in Congress. In addition to this several US federal agencies have imposed sanctions on Chinese government officials for their responsibilities in the negligence of human rights in the situation in Xinjiang and the VETCs.

Possible solutions

1. Impose sanctions on Chinese officials deemed partly responsible for the situation and continuation of it.
2. Launch an investigation to further understand the realities of the VETCs and situations for the Uyghars and help the OHCHR have better access to the victims.
3. Pursuing the criminal injustices committed in the VETCs under international jurisdiction and holding those responsible accountable accordingly.

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