

CHINA

U.S. to Restrict Visas for Chinese Officials Linked to Abuse of Muslim Minorities

U.S. officials cite mass detentions, pervasive surveillance in the decision



China has engaged in a crackdown on what it sees as a long-simmering separatist movement led by the region's Muslim Uighur population. Above, a Uighur woman in Kashgar in China's northwest Xinjiang region, June 4. PHOTO: GREG BAKER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Jessica Donati in Washington and Eva Dou in Beijing

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The U.S. is imposing visa restrictions on Chinese officials linked to the abuse of Muslim minority groups in China's Xinjiang region, where as many as a million people are detained in camps.

The visa restrictions—which will limit the ability of affected Chinese officials to travel to the U.S.—come a day after the U.S. imposed export restrictions against more than two dozen Chinese firms for having a role in government policies toward minorities.

Both moves come as U.S.-China trade talks are slated to resume Thursday in Washington.

The State Department said the visa restrictions will apply to designated Chinese government and Communist Party officials, along with their families.

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Western scholars estimate more than one million Turkic Uighurs and other Muslim minorities have been arbitrarily detained in China's Xinjiang region over the past few years.

State Department officials didn't respond when asked whether the action was linked to the trade talks. The State Department didn't identify by name any Chinese official affected by the new visa restrictions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday called on China to cease mass detentions and surveillance of minorities in the Xinjiang region, along with other alleged rights abuses.

Mr. Pompeo said afterward on Twitter: "China has forcibly detained over one million Muslims in a brutal, systematic campaign to erase religion and culture in Xinjiang."

A spokeswoman for China's embassy in Washington said the Tuesday move "seriously violates the basic norms governing international relations, interferes in China's internal affairs and undermines China's interests." Beijing dismissed the export restrictions action Monday by the Commerce Department.

"The accusations by the U.S. side are merely made-up pretexts for its interference," China's foreign ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, told reporters, according to a transcript provided on Tuesday by the Chinese Embassy in Washington. Mr. Geng added that China is pursuing "counter-terrorism and de-radicalization measures in Xinjiang...aimed to eradicate the breeding soil of extremism and terrorism."

In the Commerce Department action Monday, U.S. officials added 28 Chinese companies and other entities to an export blacklist, citing their role in Beijing's repression of Muslim minorities in northwest China.

Targets of the Commerce Department action included video-surveillance and facial-recognition giants Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology, Megvii Technology Inc. and SenseTime Group Ltd., which the U.S. said "have been implicated in human rights violations and abuses in the implementation of China's campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, and high-technology surveillance" against Muslim minority groups.

"The U.S. Government and Department of Commerce cannot and will not tolerate the brutal suppression of ethnic minorities within China," U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross tweeted on Monday. U.S. stocks fell afterward. News of the visa restrictions accelerated Tuesday's U.S. stock-market declines.

The muted response in Beijing suggested China may be looking to narrow the scope of its negotiations with the U.S. to trade matters and put thornier national security issues on a separate track in a bid to break the deadlock.

“Delaying or canceling talks would have simply exacerbated an already difficult situation,” said Jake Parker, vice president of the U.S.-China Business Council.

Participating in the trade talks will be China’s top trade envoy, Liu He, along with Commerce Minister Zhong Shan, central bank governor Yi Gang and Vice Agricultural Minister Han Jun, China’s Ministry of Commerce said.

The U.S. team will be led by Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

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