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China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang

More than a million Muslims have been arbitrarily detained in China's Xinjiang region. The reeducation camps are just one part of the government's crackdown on Uyghurs.

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Summary

About eleven million Uyghurs—a mostly Muslim, Turkic-speaking ethnic group—live in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.

The Chinese government has imprisoned more than one million people since 2017 and subjected those not detained to intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and forced sterilizations.

The United States determined that China's actions constitute genocide, while a UN report said they could amount to crimes against humanity.

Introduction

The Chinese government has reportedly arbitrarily detained more than a million Muslims in reeducation camps since 2017. Most of the people who have been detained are Uyghur, a predominantly Turkic-speaking ethnic group primarily in China's northwestern region of

Xinjiang. Beyond the detentions, Uyghurs in the region have been subjected to intense surveillance, forced labor, and involuntary sterilizations, among other rights abuses.

The United States and several other foreign governments have described China's actions in Xinjiang as genocide, while the UN human rights office said that the violations could constitute crimes against humanity. Chinese officials have said that they have not infringed on Uyghurs' rights and claimed that they closed the reeducation camps in 2019. However, international journalists and researchers have documented an ongoing system of mass detention throughout the region using satellite images, individual testimonies, and leaked Chinese government documents.

When did mass detentions of Muslims start?

An estimated eight hundred thousand to two million Uyghurs and other Muslims, including ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks, have been detained since 2017, according to international researchers and U.S. government officials [PDF]. The Chinese government calls the facilities “vocational education and training centers;” the most common terms used by international media organizations and researchers are reeducation camps, internment camps, and detention camps. Some activists describe them as concentration camps.

Outside of the camps, the eleven million Uyghurs living in Xinjiang—officially called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—have continued to suffer from a decades-long crackdown by Chinese authorities.





Experts estimate that reeducation efforts started in Xinjiang in 2014 and were drastically expanded in 2017. Beginning that year, they documented the construction of new reeducation camps and expansion of existing facilities for mass detention. Reuters journalists, observing satellite imagery, found that thirty-nine of the camps almost tripled in size between April 2017 and August 2018; they covered a total area roughly the size of 140 soccer fields. Similarly, analyzing local and national budgets over the past few years, Germany-based Xinjiang expert Adrian Zenz found that construction spending on security-related facilities in Xinjiang increased by 20 billion yuan (around \$2.96 billion) in 2017.

In late 2019, Xinjiang's governor said that people detained in the reeducation camps had "graduated." Journalists found that several camps were indeed closed. But the following year, researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) identified [PDF] more than 380 suspected detention facilities using satellite images. They found that China refashioned some lower-security reeducation camps into formal detention centers or prisons; expanded existing detention centers; and constructed new, high-security detention centers throughout Xinjiang (Chinese officials have said that ASPI is an anti-China tool funded by Australia and the United States.) Instead of detaining people in reeducation camps, authorities have increasingly used the formal justice system to imprison people for years. In 2022, Human Rights Watch reported that half a million people had been prosecuted since 2017, according to Xinjiang government figures. The Associated Press found that in one county, an estimated one in twenty-five people had been sentenced to prison on terrorism-related charges, all of them Uyghurs.

Hundreds of Detention Sites Across Xinjiang



Note: Map shows suspected reeducation camps, detention centers, and prisons as of September 2020 based on satellite imagery, media reports, government documents, and other sources.

Source: Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

What has happened in the reeducation camps?

Most people detained in the reeducation camps were never charged with crimes and had no legal avenues to challenge their detentions. The detainees seem to have been targeted for a variety of reasons, according to media reports, including traveling to or contacting people from any of the twenty-six countries China considers sensitive, such as Turkey and Afghanistan; attending services at mosques; having more than three children; and sending texts containing Quranic verses. Often, their only crime is being Muslim, human rights groups say, adding that many Uyghurs have been labeled as extremists simply for practicing their religion.

Information on what happened in the camps remains limited, but many detainees who have since fled China described harsh conditions. The UN human rights office released a report [PDF] in 2022 based on interviews with dozens of people, including twenty-six individuals who were detained, that found “patterns of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment” in the camps between 2017 and 2019.

The UN report affirmed previous findings by international journalists, researchers, and rights organizations. Various exposés showed that detainees were forced to pledge loyalty to the CCP and renounce Islam, as well as sing praises for communism and learn Mandarin. Some people reported prison-like conditions, with cameras and microphones monitoring their every move and utterance. Others said they were tortured and subjected to sleep deprivation during interrogations. Women have shared stories of sexual abuse, including rape. Some released detainees contemplated suicide or witnessed others kill themselves.

Detention also disrupted families. Children whose parents were sent to the camps were often forced to stay in state-run orphanages. Many Uyghur parents living outside of China faced a difficult choice: return home to be with their children and risk detention, or stay abroad, separated from their children and unable to contact them.

What do Chinese officials say about the camps?

Government officials first denied the camps' existence. By late 2018, they started acknowledging that there were “vocational education and training centers” in Xinjiang. They publicly stated that the camps had two purposes: to teach Mandarin, Chinese laws, and vocational skills, and prevent citizens from becoming influenced by extremist ideas, to “nip terrorist activities in the bud,” according to a government report. Pointing out that Xinjiang has not experienced a terrorist attack since December 2016, officials claimed the camps have prevented violence.

As global condemnation of the abuses has grown, Chinese officials and state media have worked to discredit reports on Xinjiang using a range of tactics, including disseminating disinformation and harassing activists. They have repeated a narrative that “anti-China forces” in the United States and other Western countries are spreading “vicious lies.” Beijing tried to prevent the U

human rights office from releasing its report. After its release, Chinese officials described it as false information and published a rebuttal describing how foreign governments and organizations “spread numerous rumors and lies” about Xinjiang.

Why is China targeting Uyghurs in Xinjiang?

Chinese officials are concerned that Uyghurs hold extremist and separatist ideas, and they viewed the camps as a way of eliminating threats to China's territorial integrity, government, and population.

Xinjiang has been claimed by China since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949. Some Uyghurs living there refer to the region as East Turkestan and argue that it ought to be independent from China. Xinjiang takes up one-sixth of China's landmass and borders eight countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan.

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, the CCP has pushed to Sinicize religion, or shape all religions to conform to the officially atheist party's doctrines and the majority Han-Chinese society's customs. Though the government recognizes five religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism—it has long feared that foreigners could use religious practices to spur separatism.

The Chinese government has come to characterize any expression of Islam in Xinjiang as extremist, a reaction to past independence movements and occasional outbursts of violence. The government has blamed terrorist attacks on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a separatist group founded by militant Uyghurs, in recent decades. (In 2020, the United States removed the group from its list of terrorist organizations, saying there was no credible evidence that the group had operated for at least the previous decade.) Following the 9/11 attacks, the Chinese government started justifying its actions toward Uyghurs as part of the Global War on Terrorism. It said it would combat what it calls “the three evils”—separatism, religious extremism, and international terrorism—at all costs.

In 2009, rioting in Xinjiang's capital, Ürümqi, broke out as mostly Uyghur demonstrators protested against state-incentivized Han Chinese migration in the region and widespread economic and cultural discrimination. Nearly two hundred people were killed, and experts s

marked a turning point in Beijing's attitude toward Uyghurs. In the eyes of Beijing, all Uyghurs could potentially be terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. During the next few years, authorities blamed Uyghurs for attacks at a local government office, train station, and open-air market, as well as Tiananmen Square in Beijing.



Workers walk along the fence of a likely detention center for Muslims in Xinjiang on September 4, 2018. Thomas Peter/Reuters

While visiting Xinjiang in 2014, Xi warned of the “toxicity of religious extremism” and advocated for using the tools of “dictatorship” to eliminate Islamist extremism in a series of secret speeches. In the speeches, revealed by the *New York Times* in 2019, Xi did not explicitly call for arbitrary detention but laid the groundwork for the crackdown in Xinjiang.

In 2017, Xinjiang's government passed an anti-extremism law that prohibited people from growing long beards and wearing veils in public. It also officially recognized the use of training centers to eliminate extremism. Arbitrary detention became widely used by regional officials

under Chen Quanguo, Xinjiang's Communist Party secretary, who moved to the region in 2016 after holding a top leadership position in Tibet. Known for increasing the number of police and security checkpoints, as well as state control over Buddhist monasteries in Tibet, Chen dramatically intensified security in Xinjiang. He repeatedly called on officials to “round up everyone who should be rounded up,” according to the *New York Times* report. Chen left the position in late 2021.

Are economic factors involved in this crackdown?

Xinjiang is an important link in China's Belt and Road Initiative, a massive development plan stretching through Asia and Europe. Beijing hopes to eradicate any possibility of separatist activity to continue its development of Xinjiang, which is home to China's largest coal and natural gas reserves. Human rights organizations have observed that the economic benefits of resource extraction and development are often disproportionately enjoyed by Han Chinese people, and Uyghur people are increasingly marginalized.

Many people who were arbitrarily detained have been forced to work, according to multiple reports [PDF]. ASPI estimated that, between 2017 and 2020, eighty thousand previously detained Uyghurs were sent to factories throughout China linked to eighty-three global brands. Researchers from the Center for Strategic and International Studies say forced labor is an important element of the government's plan for Xinjiang's economic development, which includes making it a hub of textile and apparel manufacturing. Chinese officials have described the policy as “poverty alleviation.”

Are Uyghur Muslims Facing Genocide?

What is happening outside the camps in Xinjiang?

International journalists who have visited the region say that Xinjiang has been turned into a surveillance state that relies on cutting-edge technology to monitor millions of people. Under Chen, Xinjiang was placed under a grid management system, as described in media reports, in which cities and villages were split into squares of about five hundred people. Each square has a police station that closely monitors inhabitants by regularly scanning their identification cards, taking their photographs and fingerprints, and searching their cell phones. In some cities, such as western Xinjiang's Kashgar, police checkpoints are found every one hundred yards or so, and facial-recognition cameras are everywhere. The government also collects and stores citizens' biometric data through a required program advertised as Physicals for All.

Much of that information is collected in a massive database, known as the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, which then uses artificial intelligence to create lists of so-called suspicious people. Classified Chinese government documents released by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) in 2019 revealed that more than fifteen thousand Xinjiang

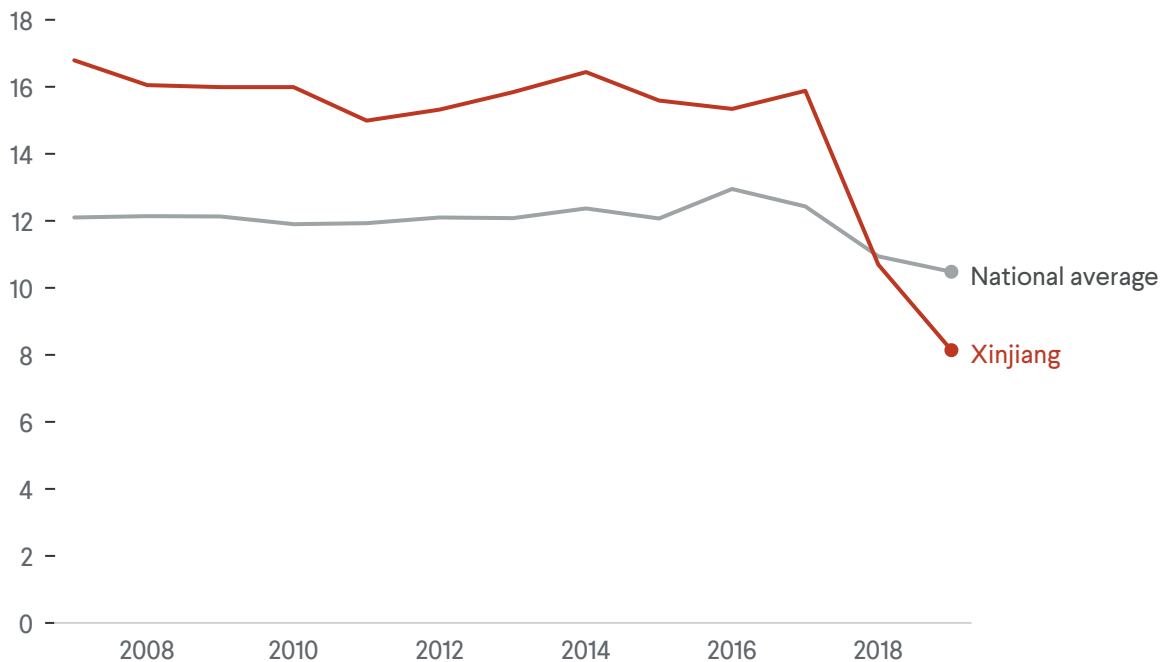
residents were placed in detention centers during a seven-day period in June 2017 after being flagged by the algorithm. The Chinese government called the leaked documents “pure fabrication.”

Many aspects of Muslim life have been erased, journalists reporting from Xinjiang have found. Communist Party members have been recruited since 2014 to stay in Uyghur homes and report on any perceived “extremist” behaviors, including fasting during Ramadan. Officials have destroyed thousands of mosques, often claiming the buildings were shoddily constructed and unsafe for worshippers. Halal food, which is prepared according to Islamic law, has become harder to find in Ürümqi as the local government has launched a campaign against it.

Uyghur and other minority women have reported forced sterilizations and intrauterine device insertions [PDF], and officials have threatened to detain anyone who violates birth-control orders or has too many children. Analyzing government data, Zenz found that in Xinjiang's top prefectures with the highest proportions of Uyghurs, the natural population growth rates (which exclude population change from migration) fell by 84 percent between 2015 and 2018 and declined further still in 2019. Uyghur parents are banned from giving their babies certain names, including Mohammed and Medina.

Xinjiang's Birth Rate Has Plummeted Since 2017

Births per 1,000 people



Source: China Statistical Yearbook.

Beijing has also pressured other governments to repatriate Uyghurs who have fled China, with a 2022 report [PDF] by the Wilson Center finding that more than 1,500 Uyghurs abroad have been detained in their host countries or forced to return to China. In 2015, for example, Thailand returned more than one hundred Uyghurs, and in 2017 Egypt deported several students. The documents released by ICIJ showed that the Chinese government instructed officials to collect information on Chinese Uyghurs living abroad and called for many to be arrested as soon as they reentered China.

What has the global response been?

Much of the world has condemned China's detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The UN human rights office has urged China to release people who have been arbitrarily detained and disclose the whereabouts of those who are missing. After the office released its report in 2022, several Western countries on the UN Human Rights Council were considering a motion against China potentially with an investigative mechanism.

Lawmakers in several countries, including Canada and the United Kingdom, have declared that China is committing genocide against Uyghurs; the U.S. government was the first to do so, in January 2021. Many countries have sanctioned Chinese officials and entities linked to rights abuses. The European Union (EU) also sanctioned Chinese officials in 2021, marking the first time the bloc placed restrictions on China since 1989.

Additionally, foreign governments have imposed restrictions to address forced labor in Xinjiang. The United States has essentially banned all imports from the region through its Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, and the United Kingdom has proposed measures to fine companies that fail to guarantee their supply chains do not use forced labor. The European Parliament adopted a nonbinding resolution in mid-2022 urging EU countries to ban imports made with forced labor.

China's partners have been notably silent. Prioritizing their economic ties and strategic relationships with China, many governments have ignored the human rights abuses. In June 2022, sixty countries signed a statement calling for the UN human rights chief to respect that Xinjiang-related issues are "China's internal affairs" and stating that they "oppose the politicization of human rights." Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were among the signatories; human rights groups have criticized Muslim-majority countries condoning the abuses.

Recommended Resources

The UN human rights office documents China's abuses in Xinjiang [PDF] in a report released in 2022.

For *Foreign Affairs*, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's Nury Turkel and the U.S. State Department's Beth Van Schaack lay out a plan for stopping China's genocide.


The BBC looks inside a Chinese reeducation camp using information from a cache of documents known as the Xinjiang Police Files.

Survivors of China's persecution share their stories with the *New Yorker*.

On *The President's Inbox* podcast, Uyghur journalist Gulchehra Hoja discusses the Chinese government's repression.

Analyzing satellite imagery of newly constructed factories, BuzzFeed looks at the rise of forced labor in Xinjiang.

For *Foreign Affairs*, journalist Nithin Coca examines how China's actions in Xinjiang could affect its relations with Muslim-majority nations.

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Will Merrow helped create the graphics in this Backgrounder.

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