

WHEN FACTS ARE NOT NECESSARILY FACTS. THE UIGHURS AND CHINA

Repeat a supposed fact sufficient times and it will become assumed truth. That seems the case very much when it comes to claims about China's oppression of the Uyghurs in its western Xinjiang province. Supposedly one million or more Uyghurs have been imprisoned in vast re-education camps with the term 'genocide' being frequently used. Even the charge of infanticide has been laid. Not all that is supposed however, is reality.

From where do these charges against China come and what evidence accompanies them? Until 2018 little was said about Xinjiang and it would be fair to say few knew of its complex history or demographic mix, though it had been the location for several terrorist attacks. Suddenly, however it was front and centre in the news, just at the time when the Chinese led 'Belt and Road Initiative,' set to radically reorient the world economic order, and heavily dependent on Xinjiang, came into play.

A man central to this sudden elevation of interest was Adrian Zenz, a fascinating figure to say the least. A fundamentalist end-time apocalyptic Christian, fiercely opposed to homosexuality and gender equality, and pro physical punishment of children, he came from obscurity to suddenly being claimed to be an expert on China and Xinjiang. Zenz describes his work concerning Xinjiang as a 'mission.' Of course, Zenz has significant backers being employed by the 'Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation.' According to research carried out by British reporter Tom Fowdy that organisation, based in Washington, had its income suddenly jump from \$US2 million to \$US12 million in 2018, the beginning of the U.S. trade war with China and the sudden emergence of stories concerning oppression of the Uyghurs. Zenz has even been invited to testify before the U.S. Congress.

Zenz's figures of supposed detained Uyghurs, which keep rising, come from reports by Istiqlal TV, a Uyghur exile media organization based in Turkey, with links to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a body declared a terrorist organisation by the U.N. Security Council. Zenz also cites reports from Radio Free Asia, a U.S. funded news agency created by the C.I.A. In an interview with the German paper, Der Spiegel, Zenz made the blatantly false charge that China has effectively outlawed the practice of Islam in Xinjiang. 'Anyone in Xinjiang who engages in any type of religious practice, anyone who even has a single Koran verse saved on their mobile phone, will be subjected to a brutal process of re-education without trial,' he maintained. This is clearly wrong. Xinjiang is often described as a 'black hole' closed off to the world. Yet in 2019, prior to Covid 19, 200 million tourists visited the region, an increase of 41.6% from 2018. To these many millions evidence of people freely attending the thousands of mosques and carrying out other religious duties would have been abundantly clear. Muslim organisations even have online guides for visiting supposedly destroyed mosques.

Another source central to these charges is the Chinese Human Rights Defenders, an organisation almost entirely funded by the U.S. Government through the National Endowment for Democracy, not that they are transparent about this. One needs to go to the tax records to find the truth. Based on interviews with just eight people from rural villages in the Kashgar Prefecture this organisation ingeniously extrapolated a figure of one million detained Uyghurs.

Of China's policies in Xinjiang sources such as these like to use such highly emotional words such as 'genocide' and 'concentration camps' so to evoke a connection with the policies of Nazi Germany. Another word loaded with such emotive content is 'sterilisation', with the charge being made that China has a policy of mass sterilisation of Uyghur women. The supposed evidence for this is that birth-rates for Uyghur women have fallen. Of course, this ignores that birth-rates for Chinese women as a whole, in line with what has been experienced across the world, have fallen as wealth

has increased. Indeed, China specifically excepted ethnic minorities from its previous 'one child policy.'

It is widely, though falsely claimed, that the U.N. through the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), has condemned China for holding 1 million Uyghurs in prison camps. This claim arose from a regular review by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on China's compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Australia's record recently came up for review, not very favourably. In the China review a single member of the review committee, the only one from the U.S., Gay Mc Dougall, made the same types of clearly errant charges that China was forbidding the most basic of Muslim practices such as beard wearing, headscarfs and Halal products while holding 1 million in detention. This claim was made in 2018, again before those millions of tourists would have clearly seen differently. The claim by one member of an independent body to a U.N. Committee is a long way from the assertion that the U.N. has condemned China! Indeed, when the issue has been brought to the OHCHR it has been resoundingly defeated, Muslim majority nations siding with China.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has joined the chorus of criticism directed at China for its Xinjiang policies. While wishing to present itself as an independent body funding sources arouse suspicion. 35% of its funding, what it designates as its core funding, comes from the Department of Defence, 32% from other Federal Government Agencies along with 17% from overseas Government Agencies, the largest being the U.S. State Department, the U.S Embassy and U.K. Foreign Office. Much of its non-government funding comes from arms manufacturers, likely to have a clear interest in stirring tensions with China. These include Thales, Naval Group Australia, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon. A major part of ASPI's analysis has involved using satellite imagery to purportedly show re-education camps. Reportedly 380 sites have been found. Many of these have since been identified as schools, with clearly identifiable sports facilities, apartments, and offices, and even a 5-star hotel. One would think there would be a suspicion of the use of satellite imagery following the Saddam 'weapons of mass destruction' episode but evidently not. Using this satellite technology, much was made of the destruction of mosques, supposedly 16,000 of them! These include the 800-year-old Keriya Aitika Mosque. A simple Google Earth search however shows it still standing untouched, its surrounds renovated with supposedly banned minarets.

The story starts to further unravel when one considers that many diplomats, including those from Muslim majority states, have visited Xinjiang in the past few years, and that in 2019 the 46th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation commended, 'the efforts of the People's Republic of China in providing care to its Muslim citizens.' Further, again in 2019 the World Bank has released a statement on its visit to Xinjiang, particularly the vocational centres, finding no aberrations.

Though the Uyghurs are of Turkic origin, the Turkish leader Recep Erdogan, a strong Turk nationalist, in 2019 claimed, 'the peoples of China's Xinjiang live happily in peace and prosperity'. Other nations dealing with Islamic fundamentalism have instigated 'anti-radicalisation programs. They include the U.K., France, Denmark and numerous Muslim majority nations, Indonesia having the most extensive program. No doubt none of these programs are perfect but no country has faced the opprobrium directed at China.

On close examination the assumed story on Chinese oppression of the Uyghurs starts to fall apart and begins to be seen for what it primarily is, part of a concerted ideological campaign to darken the name of China particularly as regards the Belt and Road Initiative. Rather than just accepting the assumed truth, one does well to read with eyes of suspicion. Concern for human rights ought

not be used in such a clearly politicised manner for in so doing we dangerously imperil genuine human rights advocacy.