



SEEKING A PLACE TO BREATHE FREELY

Current Challenges Faced by Uyghur Refugees & Asylum Seekers

World Uyghur Congress | June 2016 (Updated June 2017)

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The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) is an international organization that represents the collective interests of the Uyghur people in both East Turkestan and abroad. The principle objective of the WUC is to promote democracy, human rights and freedom for the Uyghur people and use peaceful, nonviolent and democratic means to determine their future. Acting as the sole legitimate organization of the Uyghur people in both East Turkestan and abroad, WUC endeavors to set out a course for the peaceful settlement of the East Turkestan Question through dialogue and negotiation.

The WUC supports a nonviolent and peaceful opposition movement against Chinese occupation of East Turkestan and an unconditional adherence to internationally recognized human rights standards as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It adheres to the principles of democratic pluralism and rejects totalitarianism, religious intolerance and terrorism as an instrument of policy.

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Current Challenges Faced by Uyghur
Refugees & Asylum Seekers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present report was researched, compiled and edited by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and looks to uncover the reality of day to day life in East Turkestan (officially the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China) and to document the perilous journeys made by Uyghurs seeking refuge from an increasingly restrictive and intolerant government.

It offers a unique, first-hand glimpse into conditions seldom reported and scarcely heard by the international community until now. Our goal here is to overcome the persistent obstacle that impedes our understanding of how members of the Uyghur population in China are coping with state policies. It is our intention to make these findings available to all interested parties including those working in government or civil society, and the general public.

Independent reporting in the region is highly restricted, which has had the effect of ensuring that the international community is unaware of the realities faced by Uyghur men, women and children. An additional intention of the report will be to build on reporting done by the few media outlets with some indirect access as well as the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) that continues to conduct primary research like few others. We hope that momentum will build in this effort to uncover crucial truths and to

piece together the collective narrative of the Uyghur community living in East Turkestan. We do not strive to represent the voice of all Uyghurs, but endeavor to provide a platform for some to speak out and to tell their stories.

Uyghurs currently find themselves under the heel of state repression in nearly every aspect of their lives to varying degrees. The importance of the protection of human rights has been trending steeply downward under China's current leader, Xi Jinping. The introduction and passage of legislation since 2014 has merely legalised many of the repressive measures already in place in the years prior. China's National Security Law, Anti-Terrorism Act and Overseas NGO Management Law were all passed in 2015 and 2016, and its Cyber Security Law went into effect in June 2017. Many of these laws have been touted as responses to increased insecurity and violence, but have done very little to recognize underlying issues that have persisted for decades and have given rise to real tension.

By now, it cannot be more clear that any form of dissent is not tolerated by the state in any form. Although demonstrations and protests had been met by deadly force beginning in the 1990s, collective action by Uyghurs in East Turkestan continued in the years following. Even until 2014, media reports suggested that small demonstrations continued, but were met with the same heavy resistance. It is now more clear that the consequences of any form of open

resistance may be severe and result in unjustifiably long prison sentences, or in other cases, extrajudicial killing at the hands of security forces. Because police and security forces are almost never held to account over the death of civilians, they rarely exercise restraint in their use of force.

As a result of these brutal conditions, increasing numbers of Uyghurs have been opting to flee their homelands to avoid the real risk that they may be unjustifiably arrested or even killed. The personal narratives are intended to provide the reader with an honest and penetrating perspective of the conditions on the ground for the average family or members of the community looking to live a decent life, however possible. The narratives are also intended to break through much of what is reported outside China about the situation, the bulk of which is heavily influenced by state-controlled media reports, or suffers from a dearth of reliable information or firsthand accounts.

It is in this context that the WUC spoke directly to Uyghur men and woman, currently residing in Turkey, about the challenges they faced in East Turkestan, their strained journey across China and Southeast Asia alongside human traffickers, and the motivations behind their actions. The common motivation to escape East Turkestan for many of the interviewees originated from their sense of helplessness and an inability to continue to live a normal life according to cultural and religious traditions.

With the continued regression in the ability of Uyghurs to control essential aspects of their own lives, many became unsure that they could continue to live under Chinese control. There was a definite sense that interviewees felt more and more squeezed by the government each and every day, which led to the profoundly difficult decision to leave—a decision that was by no means taken lightly. All of those whom we

spoke with cited a strong desire to remain anonymous to the public for the legitimate fear of retribution and retaliation—a tactic that continues to be employed by the Chinese government as a means of intimidation and harassment.

Some of interviewees cited trouble with police and other Chinese authorities that led them to feel trapped, as though they could not breathe any longer. We recognized a clear pattern among some who had been initially arrested as far back as the mid-1990s on crimes relating to the organization of cultural meetings, prayer on the land of a mosque destroyed by the government, or the simple recitation of poetry. These charges often carried sentences of upwards of ten years or more, and for others, months. Despite the lack of seriousness of many of these cases, police would then be required to closely monitor former detainees and their family members. This theme in particular arose on a number of occasions from interviewees from personal experience or from the experience of family or friends.

Also documented in detail here is the long and precarious journey made by Uyghur groups. Up until now, there has been sparse coverage of the situation, and still less about the details of how exactly hundreds of Uyghurs were able to escape China beyond initial detection from authorities. The majority would travel across China to the southeast border with Burma, Laos and Vietnam and then into the rest of Southeast Asia.

After crossing the border, many would eventually find themselves arrested in Thailand and Malaysia and remain in immigration detention facilities for months. At this point, fake Turkish passports and other documents were obtained by many, who were then able to fly to refuge in Turkey. These operations were planned and carried out primarily by human traffickers who often exploited their clients and



Uyghur resettlement housing, Kayseri, Turkey.

extorted large sums of money along the journey, often with the complicity of police and border authorities.

Despite relative safety for those who were able to reach Turkey—the intended destination of the majority—troubles persist among those now residing in Istanbul and Kayseri. In addition to the fact that many were callously separated from friends and even family members, the consensus among those interviewed was that the Turkish government has been altogether absent with regards to even basic support. Many complained of their inability to work or send their children to school as a result of not having been granted official documents from the state. On top of this, relatives of those that reached Turkey—those who remain in East Turkestan—have been harassed by police and even jailed for their association to the escapees.

Taking this context into consideration, the primary purpose of the report, then, will be to

present our findings in a coherent manner that is able to first sketch out the historical context and trace the relationship between the Uyghur population and the Chinese government over the last several decades. We will then move on to speak about the current situation in the region, keeping in mind the most recent state policies affecting Uyghurs, while incorporating our primary research findings. The report will also look to map out the landscape of international refugee and asylum law in the context of China and its neighbors and to examine their most recent repudiation of these norms in favor of blunt geopolitical power. The report then builds on what we have uncovered to develop a set of coherent and substantive concluding observations and recommendations for the Chinese government, UN member states, and interested civil society organizations.

Additionally, an Appendix has been added at the end of the report, documenting all known

cases of forced returns of Uyghurs to China since 1997 that may be used as a resource for the international community.

Methodology & Sources

Two researchers, both representing the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), travelled to Istanbul and Kayseri, Turkey, in September 2015, to interview 13 Uyghur refugees and asylum seekers as part of the primary research compiled in this report. The interview subjects had all recently arrived in Turkey from East Turkestan, all of whom had escaped via Southeast Asia through human trafficking networks within the year. The limited number of those interviewed was mitigated by the information that interviewees provided on family members and friends, as well as the conditions of the groups in which they found themselves on their journey.

The interviews were conducted and recorded in the Uyghur language with the aid of an interpreter and were translated in whole after the fact. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. Anonymity was also required to publish the findings to ensure that interview subjects were protected—many of whom expressed strong reservations about speaking to unfamiliar persons. It is for this reason that most identifying details have been removed to protect the interview subjects.

Primary source information has also been supported by additional research regarding the historical antecedents for Uyghur flight from East Turkestan as well as the international legal structure in which China and its neighbours operate. Interviews with members of the Uyghur diaspora around the world were also conducted between January and March 2016.

One clear barrier to accessing information throughout the process was the unwillingness of many of those recent escapees to divulge

information to outside parties for fear of reprisals against friends and family members who remain in China. It is for this reason that the WUC was unable to gain access to a larger sample size for the research. These facts were kept in mind during the drafting process and are reflected in the conclusions.

It must also be stated that the primary research contained in the report reflects the thoughts and feelings of those who were able to flee the region and were therefore available to speak to the WUC. Those who fled tended to be those who could no longer deal with repressive policies *and* had the financial means to pay for their own travel out as well as for members of their families in some cases. Primary data also comes from those who were unable to obtain the necessary documents from the Chinese government that may have allowed them to leave East Turkestan through official, legal means otherwise.

Note on terms: The terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker” present clear legal distinctions. The subtitle of the report uses both terms, despite many Uyghurs wishing to be identified as refugees in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Historically speaking, Uyghurs who have left China have voluntarily sought asylum around the world, but more recently, many of those that have found themselves caught up in the legal systems of states neighbouring China made it plainly clear that they wished not to seek asylum in their host countries, but to be permitted to travel to third countries to gain status.

Refugee Flows from East Turkestan: A Brief History

To first recognize the immediate causes of Uyghur flight from East Turkestan, one must have a firm grasp of the historical antecedents to the grievances that we are witnessing today. Likewise, members of the Uyghur diaspora who

have made homes in countries around the world over the last half century also held divergent motivations for leaving their homes. These accounts will be traced below along with the conditions in which Uyghurs found themselves, primarily after 1949.

Historical Antecedents to Conflict

It must first be noted that divergent accounts are maintained between the Chinese government and the Uyghur community. Whereas the Chinese have consistently framed their relationship with the region as one of unity since rule by the Han dynasty from 60 BCE,¹ Uyghurs emphasize that East Turkestan is historically and culturally part of Central Asia and not China.² The scholarly literature positions itself somewhere in between, however, suggesting that the Chinese central powers have exerted varying influence over the region over the past two millennia,³ beginning with sparse rule by the Han dynasty in the first to second centuries BCE.⁴

Although there had been interaction between Chinese and Uyghur groups in varying forms for the past two thousand years, weak rule from the center existed for only about half of that, with the remaining half seeing an absence of influence altogether.⁵ The period between 1700 and 1900 consisted of the gradual apportionment of the region between the imperial states of Russia and China and early contestation over the region continues to bear on the attitudes of both Chinese and Uyghurs and how they perceive the current conflict.⁶ It is for this reason that a short overview of the modern history of the area merits special attention in what follows.

Greater space for autonomy opened up following the collapse of both the Chinese (Qing Dynasty) and Russian empires, and by the the 1930s, Uyghurs were able to establish the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan in

November 1933. The Republic lasted a mere five months before being defeated by Soviet forces along with forces allied with Chinese General, Sheng Shicai. Uyghurs then established the Second Eastern Turkestan Republic in 1944 as an independent state in Ghulja, but eventually suffered a similar fate by 1949.

Real colonization of the region began only after World War Two, as Beijing began to settle People's Liberation Army soldiers on farms in the region—likely a consequence of these brief efforts at independence. This would mark the beginning of a major state policy to actively encourage significant resettlement in East Turkestan. If the central government was able to dilute the majority Uyghur population in the region, a number that stood around 83 percent in 1945,⁷ but dropped to a mere 46 percent by 2008,⁸ control over the region would likely come much more easily. The central government also knew that if it was to dilute the Uyghur population enough, it might mitigate the perceived threat of Uyghur collective action.

Stigmatization of Uyghur Population

Real stigmatization of Uyghur culture began with the Great Leap Forward under Mao. The period was characterized by an overt policy of repression towards those who contested state policy. James Millward, author and professor of Chinese and Central Asian history, suggests that, “the radical collectivization and industrialization [...] was accompanied by a more assimilationist cultural thrust, political attacks on Xinjiang natives associated with the former [East Turkestan Republic] and Soviet Union, and an upsurge in Han in-migration and settlement in northern Xinjiang.”⁹ Eradication of a supposed subversive religion and strong assimilationist policies directed at minorities would be characteristic of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s that had lasting impacts among Uyghurs. Many of the religious leaders and intellectuals who took a more determined stance against the state were



Uyghurs escorted on a flight from Thailand to China, July 2015.

killed, resulting in a definite dilution of Uyghur culture in favor of the hardline policies of the state.

The late 1980s would see relative calm in the region up until the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent fracture of its satellite states. Many of the states in Central Asia would eventually gain independence, providing the impetus for the Chinese government's renewed push for integration in its western frontier soon after. With the consequent relinquishment of these Soviet territories, the Chinese were becoming increasingly concerned about affairs in their periphery. Nicholas Bequelin, Regional Director for East Asia at Amnesty International notes that, "A second massive assimilation drive was initiated in the 1990s, prompted in part by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Beijing's fear of instability in the region."¹⁰ Some have characterized the 1990s in terms of

five principal strategies, including the recentralization of economic decision-making, increased Han in-migration, further exploitation of energy resources, greater political and economic links with Central Asia and reinforced state control over ethnic minorities' religious and cultural expression and practice.¹¹ This decade can also be characterized as one of instability in the region as a number of violent incidents took place between Uyghurs and Chinese security forces.

Documenting Extradition to China

Amnesty International began documenting cases of Uyghurs who were forcibly returned to China, many of whom had already been registered by the UNHCR as asylum seekers.¹² This trend was immediately noticeable following the attacks on September 11th, 2001, which provided China with a handy new vehicle to justify repression of certain communities.

Amnesty documented cases of Uyghurs being returned from Nepal, at least seven from Pakistan, as well some from as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between 2001 and 2004.

In one highly visible and controversial case, a Canadian citizen, Huseyincan Celil, was arrested while visiting family in Uzbekistan in 2006 and was subsequently deported to China. His case brought international attention and elicited strong objections by the Canadian government. Celil fled China back in 2001 following a short jail term for his support for religious and political rights Uyghurs and now remains in prison in Urumqi. During the ordeal, he was denied access to legal counsel and Canadian officials, his dual citizenship was not recognised, and was forced to sign a confession which led initially to a life sentence (his sentence has since been reduced to 20 years).¹³

In the years that followed, Uyghurs have been forcibly returned from a number of other states. In December 2009, 20 were returned to China from Cambodia, even after the group were in the process of having their asylum claims reviewed by the UNHCR. Only days following the extradition, China and Cambodia signed 14 trade deals worth around 1 billion USD.¹⁴ Another five were returned from Pakistan and eleven from Malaysia in August 2011, and another six again from Malaysia in what Human Rights Watch called, “a grave violation of international law” in 2013. In addition to the above mentioned cases, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Burma, and Nepal have also extradited Uyghurs to China and since 2001 at least 289 Uyghurs have been forcibly deported.¹⁵

In this context, the situation that we document below from primary sources is by no means remarkable. Uyghur asylum seekers have been forcibly deported from states with strong trade and diplomatic ties with China for many

years—as has been demonstrated here and elsewhere.

China’s Current Response to Uyghur Outflows

Historically speaking, the Chinese government has shifted its approach towards Uyghur out-migration over the years depending on factors including the attitudes of its leaders, activities of the population, and in response to major events. Our current focus will be to develop a better understanding of the Communist Party’s most recent attitude towards Uyghurs who have fled over the last 3-4 years in particular. Despite sporadic openings over the last several decades in the ability of Uyghurs and others to move in and out of the country, the internationally recognized rights of refugees and asylum seekers have been mostly ignored by the Chinese government.

2015 saw an intensification of these efforts when on 8 July 2015, 109 Uyghur refugees were returned to China from an immigration detention facility in Bangkok, Thailand, despite widespread condemnation from the international community.¹⁶ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had reportedly been given assurances by Thai authorities that those in detention would be safe from persecution, as the group made it plainly clear that they did not want to be deported. Although it was reported that the Thai government sent a delegation to China in order to check on the state of those returned, no official report or statement was ever released concerning the state of the group or their whereabouts.¹⁷

The deportation came after months of deliberations and pressure to ensure that a number of Uyghur groups, who had fled around the same time to both Thailand and Malaysia, would not have their rights under the Refugee Convention contravened. It was reported on 13

March 2014 that a group of 62 Uyghurs were arrested by Malaysian border control personnel while attempting to cross into Thailand on the northern border. Around the same time, another 200 were found in a human smuggling camp in southern Thailand and were transported to an immigration detention facility in Bangkok. Additionally, another group of 155 Uyghurs were found crammed into two tiny apartment units in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 1 October 2014, and were subsequently transported to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport Immigration Detention Depot.¹⁸

The July deportations came on the heels of Turkey's acceptance of 173 Uyghurs from the same facility in Bangkok, suggesting that the move may have been in direct response to that action. This approach also indicates the likely intention of the Thai government to appease both the international community and their call to observe international law on the one hand, and heavy pressure from China—a major economic partner—on the other. The ostensible justification given by the Chinese government was that the group was made up of “illegal immigrants” who should therefore be rightfully returned to China in the meantime.

As of early 2017, a group of around 50 Uyghurs remain in the Thai facility waiting to have citizenships verified.

The Perilous Journey Out of East Turkestan (2012-15)

“We spent at least 40,000 yuan and crossed rivers, mountains, forests and grasslands [...] sometimes by foot, sometimes by car.”

“Now we have houses in Turkey, but nothing can make up for what we lost and suffered during the journey.”

“At least I can breathe freely here, but my Uyghur brothers are dying in East Turkestan.”

The following section will provide primary source information about the journey that many Uyghurs have made over the last four years from East Turkestan, through Southeast Asia and on to Turkey. This data was compiled through the interviews that were conducted in Istanbul and Kayseri in September 2015. As stated above, identifying details of the subjects have been omitted for purposes of protection.

Planning and Chosen Destination

The information gathered during the interviews suggested that the final destinations for the vast majority was either Malaysia or Turkey. For most, Malaysia would serve as the transit point on their journey to Turkey or as a potential new home. Increasing pressure from the Chinese

government on Malaysian authorities, however, compelled many Uyghurs to make their way to Turkey, where many cited their understanding from friends and family as well as videos and articles they had seen on the internet of Turkey as a place of religious tolerance and relative freedom. It is well-known among many Uyghurs that Turkey has served as a hospitable country for the Uyghur community for many years.

The choice of Southeast Asia as a transit point, rather than Central Asian states to the west can be understood by the increasing antagonism and cooperation with the Chinese government by those states. This cooperation culminated in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a group of states devoted to close political, economic and security ties that includes China, Russia and states bordering East Turkestan (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Increasing insecurity for Uyghurs in the region and tightened border restrictions have made escape to the west altogether impossible.

One factor that has led a number of Uyghurs to leave East Turkestan outside official immigration channels (further elaborated upon in the next section) has been the inability of many to obtain passports and other documents necessary to travel within and outside of China. This was evidenced by one man in Istanbul who had been imprisoned on separatism charges from 1998-2006 who stated that, “I had been a political prisoner so I couldn’t get a passport. So, I searched the way, the illegal way, of escaping from China.” This theme came up in a number of interviews as another man, who was charged and sentenced to three years in prison for the recitation of poetry in 1997 when he was just 20 years old,

“I had been a political prisoner so I couldn’t get a passport. So, I searched the way, the illegal way of escaping from China.”

“We didn’t die, but I was thinking maybe the dead were better than us.”

mentioned that, “After I came out from the jail [...] I was asked to come to the police station every week to make a report. I can’t leave the city without their permission.”¹⁹

These details are indeed important, particularly because of the way that Uyghurs who are returned to China have been portrayed recently. Images of the 109 who were forcibly deported back to China from Thailand in July 2015 were released that showed Uyghurs with their heads covered in black hoods, each surrounded by two security officials in a passenger plane. The Chinese government has often justified these extraditions on grounds of ostensible criminality, arguing that they should be returned to China for punishment—as was the case following the return of a group of 20 Uyghurs from Cambodia in 2009.²⁰

Deals with Human Traffickers

Many of the narratives of the journeys taken by those we spoke to followed strikingly similar paths, likely a consequence of the human traffickers who facilitated their travel. All of those we spoke to addressed their complicated and often frightening relationship with the long chain of human traffickers that aided their travel from border cities in both Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces all the way to Thailand and Malaysia. The unique characteristics of this extensive network were described in detail by the interviewees, from their cold disposition to their frequent tendencies towards extortion of more and more money throughout their journeys.

Those interviewed all began their escape from China beginning in late 2012 and early 2013. To raise the necessary funds for the journey, a

number of the interviewees mentioned that they had sold land and valuable possessions beforehand.²¹ Initial contact around this time with human trafficking networks was often made through friends and associates, sometimes following lengthy inquiry into the business in one case. One man reported that he came to the city of Nanning a number of times, in central Guangxi Province, where he, “met some Uyghur guys who were doing business here. They told us there is a way we can leave China. Then after a few days of investigation, we connected with a Chinese human smuggler.”²²

Crossing the Border

According to all those interviewed, their groups would first meet in these border cities in Yunnan and Guangxi and then would be discreetly transported to smaller border towns by the traffickers themselves in small buses or cars. They travelled in groups as small as five and as large as twenty-one, many of which included partial or entire families with young children and pregnant women. In one case, a woman travelling with her husband to the Vietnam-China border gave birth and was forced to turn back home alone. Her husband explained that, “On the same night when we are preparing to cross the border, my pregnant wife birthed a child. She asked me go alone with others considering the imminent danger of exposure of our plans.”²³

Travel between borders in the region was done carefully and discreetly as the groups were passed from car to car and were forced to walk a great distance across rivers at state borders and on through mountains and jungles, away from the reaches of police or border authorities. Interviewees cited that much of the time they had little idea of where they were when they were travelling with the traffickers, but could at

least recognize that they travelled through southeast China and made their way into either Vietnam, Laos or Burma as their first point of entry. The fact that traffickers had brought the Uyghurs through all three border states further suggests that the trafficking networks are numerous and work throughout the region.

Once the groups had made their way across the borders, they would often be handed off to different traffickers and brought by foot or by car to temporary accommodation. At this point, the goal would be to travel south through Burma, Vietnam and Laos and eventually into Cambodia and Thailand. Border crossings would prove hazardous and grueling for the groups, as many were unable to eat or sleep for

“The boat was so small, it was like a homemade boat, and the motor was so small, sometimes we had to paddle by ourselves.”

long periods of time. In one case, 11 people were crammed into a car that was driven from Laos into Thailand, where one father described how, “[my] children cried because the car was so crowded and their legs couldn’t move,” and explained that, “We didn’t die, but I was thinking maybe the dead were better than us.”²⁴ Some stopped in Vientiane, Laos, and Hanoi and

Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam, to regroup and plan their travel to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.²⁵

Final Destination?

At this point in the journey for most, the immediate goal would be to make their way to Bangkok and then further on to Kuala Lumpur. Aside from those that were arrested in Thailand, many were able to make their way further south into Malaysia. One interviewee, who was travelling in a group of five including four men and one child, took a train from Bangkok for nearly 20 hours to a border city and crossed by car and on foot.²⁶ At that point, the traffickers arranged a bus that took the group into Kuala Lumpur where he would stay for 21 days before making further arrangements.



Uyghurs at an immigration detention facility in Thailand, March 2014. AP

Similarly, another man, who began his journey with eight other people in late 2012, was transferred to Bangkok after staying in a trafficker's apartment with 20-30 other Uyghurs on the same route. After two months in Bangkok, the group was taken by motorcycle, crossed the border by foot and were provided bus tickets by the traffickers.²⁷ Others reported that they had taken trains from Bangkok to the Thailand-Malaysia border, where they were also clandestinely smuggled across and subsequently picked up by car and taken to the Malaysian capital.²⁸ In another more hazardous route, a man explained how he and his two young children had to board a boat on their way from Thailand to Malaysia, describing that, "The boat was so small, it was like a homemade

“Women who stayed gave their children to the women who were leaving. Some of them were babies. I carried the two children of one woman.”

boat, and the motor was so small, sometimes we had to paddle by ourselves.”²⁹

Many others were not so fortunate in their travel through Thailand. In one of the more prominent cases, a female interviewee spoke about her travel with her sister and 20 other people across the border and into Thailand. Their group was made up of five men, four women and twelve children, making the journey across the border exceedingly difficult and dangerous. Once they had crossed the border, they were able to meet up with a much larger group in the forest, but were promptly arrested by Thai police in the middle of the night, separated into groups of men and women and taken to a detention facility. The woman described that, "I was so

frightened, and asking ‘Why we are always being arrested by the police?’ We were arrested at home and now are arrested even away from home.”³⁰

Amazingly, the combined group numbered close to 280 and would ultimately be split—around 173 were eventually safely flown to Turkey³¹ and the remaining 109, who would be forcibly extradited to China in response, as was widely reported.³² It was in this group that two sisters explained that mothers were separated from their children, wives from their husbands and brothers from their sisters.

One woman explained that, “Women who stayed gave their children to the women who were leaving. Some of them were babies. I carried the two children of one woman.”³³ She also went on to say that by her estimate, there were nearly 40 children who were made parentless as both their mother and fathers were sent back to China separately. In one case, she explained that the mother and elder sister of a 14-year-old girl were sent back to China, while she was able to make it to Turkey on her own.

Others who managed to reach Malaysia were also arrested as one man, who had been travelling with his two sons, was detained by Malaysian police because he did not have proper identification documents and remained in jail for 90 days. He also described the poor conditions in the prison, but noted that they were not comparable to China and explained that, “They didn’t torture me [in Malaysia]. That was what made me happy when I was in the jail.”³⁴ He also went on to describe that Chinese officials came to interrogate him on two

separate occasions in an attempt to extract information about his background, but cited his ability to speak Arabic as his defense.³⁵ Those who were able to stay out of the reach of police and immigration authorities were crammed into tiny apartment units and were forced to deal with scorching temperatures and a severe lack of ventilation.

Purchasing Passports

Many of the Uyghurs who were able to stay out of detention in Thailand and Malaysia weighed their options about whether to remain in Southeast Asia, or whether they would look into escaping to Turkey, further beyond the reach of the Chinese government.

Among those whom we spoke with, all were able to obtain forged Turkish passports and bribed officials for stamps from Malaysian immigration authorities that would allow them to fly to Turkey directly or indirectly. The process typically followed the same pattern in most cases. Fake passports were purchased from traffickers in Kuala Lumpur from between 700 and 1000 USD each (more concerning total costs below). At this point, the passports required official border control stamps from Malaysian immigration authorities in order to fly out of the country, which cost around the same as the passports themselves. In one instance, one man who had been travelling with eight others was required to pay 1200 USD to the Malaysian authorities to get the required document to leave the country.

In another instance, the man who was travelling with his two children flew from Malaysia to

“They didn’t torture me [in Malaysia]. That was what made me happy when I was in the jail.”

“Everyone bought a Turkish passport in Malaysia. The name on it wasn’t our true names, but we received documents in those names after we came to Turkey.”

Indonesia, Indonesia to Bangladesh, Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia, and finally from Saudi Arabia to Turkey. He also described that many of those whom he was travelling with had been arrested initially in Indonesia among the group of around 20 people,³⁶ though others also explained that had been released to Turkey after around two weeks of detention.³⁷ In total, all those interviewed remained in Kuala Lumpur from between four to twelve months before they were able to leave.

Incredible Financial Toll

In all of the narratives described, the interviewees spoke little of any real trouble involved in obtaining the passports and other documents that they were required to possess to leave. The real costs tended to be financial at all stages in the journey.

Average upfront costs that were demanded by the traffickers, although not particularly high at first, were compounded by constant demands for additional funds by members of the human trafficking networks throughout the chain from China to Malaysia. Particular instances where Uyghurs were vulnerable to their extortive tendencies would be remote locations in border areas or in the jungle or forest with little reference point for anyone unfamiliar with the terrain. One man who was travelling with his family of six explained that, “In each stage of travel, the traffickers asked us for money, and if we didn’t give it to them they threatened to drop us in the middle of nowhere.”³⁸

It was at these locations that the Uyghurs were told that more money would be required to continue on. In one case, after one group refused to pay the traffickers after they felt that

they were being treated unfairly, the interviewee explained that, “Alleged Vietnamese policemen surrounded us all of a sudden and beat us severely with wooden sticks and confiscated our cash after forcibly searching us.”³⁹ Such treatment exacerbated Uyghurs’ feelings of helplessness throughout the long process.

Traffickers typically demanded between 4000 and 5000 yuan (600-800 USD) per person to be transported discreetly to the border, where some were asked for another 15,000 yuan (2300 USD) per person to cross the border into Vietnam.⁴⁰ One man was forced to pay another 1800 yuan (275 USD) upon crossing the border after meeting with a new group of traffickers—a dilemma encountered by most of whom we

“In each stage of travel, the traffickers asked us for money, and if we didn’t give it to them they threatened to drop us in the middle of nowhere.”

spoke with.⁴¹ Each new border crossing would often require an additional payment to the traffickers along with more arbitrary demands for funds. Crossing into Thailand from Burma, Laos, Vietnam or Cambodia would cost upwards of 10,000 yuan (1500 USD) per person. Crossing into Malaysia from Thailand was likewise an additional expense, with some paying another 800-2500 USD to enter the country.⁴²

On top of these required costs, many of the Uyghurs who were travelling south through Southeast Asia were robbed or intimidated by police or other authorities. In one such case, Malaysian police stole close to 10,000 USD from one man.⁴³ What became very clear to many was that quite often, border police and other authorities throughout the region south of China made visible contact with the groups of Uyghurs travelling with the human traffickers, but little came of these encounters.

One man who had crossed over the border into Laos mentioned that he had made visible contact with both Chinese and Lao police, but neither caused any trouble in the presence of the traffickers. This man said that, “two Chinese police came by motorcycle and stopped us, then the smuggler who was leading us went to them and talked for a few minutes, then the police left.”⁴⁴ In another instance, one of the interviewees mentioned that they were given a document allegedly with the details of the traffickers that they were able to show to police whom they encountered along the route and had no significant trouble as a result. These narratives strongly support research that has identified this as a major barrier in cracking down on human trafficking.⁴⁵

For comparative reference, one Uyghur man mentioned to the WUC that for an average person to purchase an electronic visa and a plane ticket, it would cost a mere 4000 yuan (600 USD). When one takes into account the total costs for many in the Uyghur community to totally uproot their lives and travel to Turkey, seemingly outside the reach of the Chinese government, it cost upwards of 15,000 USD per person taking into consideration the entire journey. One family of six ended up spending nearly 100,000 USD throughout the process and are now suffering because of their lack of financial security in Turkey.

Conditions in Turkey & Retribution for Family Members

One major issue that was raised on a number of occasions was that of the poor conditions in Turkey and the seemingly negligent treatment by the Turkish government. There was a sense of general dissatisfaction with their continued mistreatment after enduring so much in East

Turkestan and then on the long journey to Turkey after having spent much of their life savings.

On top of this, many of the interviewees expressed that they were homesick and wished to speak to members of their families, but

“Although we were able to save our lives from Chinese repression and safely arrived in Turkey after much difficulty, we are living now in a poor condition without having proper papers to work.”

understood the real risks of trying to make contact. Some of those who were interviewed also explained that they heard that family members in East Turkestan had already been arrested. In one case, a man who was able to leave on his own learnt following his arrival in Turkey that his wife was under house arrest in Urumqi and that later his

wife and son were in jail.⁴⁶ Another man lost contact with his family members, but heard later from friends that, “some of them were arrested because of [him] and they are very afraid to have a problem with the police for communicating with [him].”⁴⁷

Others expressed their restlessness as they have not yet been able to obtain official documents to work or to send their children to school. One man explained that, “Although we are able save our lives from Chinese repression and safely arrive in Turkey after much difficulty, we are living now in a poor condition without having proper papers to work.”⁴⁸ Because they entered Turkey on fake passports, they have still been unable to obtain the requisite documents necessary from the state. As a result, they have encountered serious difficulty working, sending their children to school, or accessing healthcare.

Another man described that even after two years after arriving in Turkey and living in Istanbul, “life hadn’t become what we had hoped.”⁴⁹ He described how rent fees and other

expenses were becoming very difficult to pay for after having spent the majority of his savings during his journey there. As a result, the same man described how he had already attempted to travel to Bulgaria in hopes that he could find a job and provide for his wife and child. He explained that he was arrested by Bulgarian border police after walking for five hours towards the border on one occasion, but was later released. On an separate occasion, the man travelled again to the border, but was arrested and was eventually transferred to the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, where he was at real risk of being returned to China. Fortunately for him, Turkish authorities were able to work with Bulgarian officials to release him back to his family in Turkey.⁵⁰

There was also a definite sense of homesickness and the loss of connection with their homeland. One man asked, “Who wouldn’t want to go back to his own motherland? You can ask everybody in this community. Even if we are staying in Turkey in a good situation, we feel strong homesickness.”⁵¹ He also harkened back to his desire once again travel back to his homeland in the future and explained that, “The relatively good conditions in Turkey cannot make us really happy, because I desire to live free and without repression in my motherland.”⁵²

Uyghurs in Detention in Thailand

As of June 2017, a group of around 60 Uyghurs remain in the Thai immigration detention facilities waiting for the Thai government to make a decision on their case. The group was part of the much larger group—some of whom were transferred to Turkey and others transferred to China in retaliation in July 2015. All of those that currently remain have been in detention without charge for three full years in poor conditions.

After eleven months in detention and after many had been returned to China and others

moved to Turkey, part of the group took their case to a Thai court to adjudicate.⁵³ A lawyer for the group, Worasit Piriyaiboon, stated prior to the trial that, “The court will hold an urgent hearing on March 24 and decide whether to release the group of 17, including a four-month-old baby, who are all from the same family.”⁵⁴ The court eventually rejected the group’s case and remain in detention according to sources.

Following months and years of inaction, some of the group’s members began to take action on their own. Initially, a group of 15 Uyghurs began a hunger strike at 15:00 local time on 31 May 2016 at one of the detention locations to protest their poor treatment, challenge the legality of their indefinite detention, and bring greater attention to their circumstances.⁵⁵

In a letter sent to the WUC by those who participated, it was explained that, “International institutions for protecting refugees including the UNHCR haven’t seriously cared about the tragic situation of Uyghur refugees—not only of those who have already been repatriated, but also of those who are still suffering in inhuman conditions in the Thai detention centers.” The letter went on to describe strikingly that, “We believe that it is better to die here rather to be repatriated, tortured and imprisoned in China.”

This hunger strike came following similar actions in January 2015 when about 140 Uyghurs held at a detention facility in Hat Yai near the Thai border with Malaysia began a hunger strike. The strike was reportedly initiated on account of the worsening conditions and poor food quality that resulted in one death.⁵⁶ No follow-up information was ever provided about the length of the action and no noticeable changes were made in response.

A number of escape attempts have also been made from the facilities. In November 2014, 100

Uyghurs reportedly escaped detention, but most were subsequently recaptured according to reports.⁵⁷ In 2016, ten Uyghurs escaped from Nong Khai Immigration Detention Centre near the Laos border, but nine of the ten were subsequently re-captured. No updated information is yet available on the tenth escapee, Rachit Hachim.⁵⁸

Why are Uyghurs Leaving East Turkestan?

“We left China to seek a place where we can breathe freely.”

“It is the sacred right and responsibility of the oppressed people to protect their national identity, language and religion.”

Motivation for Uyghur migration out of East Turkestan cannot be characterized uniformly across decades and generations. The changing characteristics of the region in recent history can provide clues for numerous motivating factors, but as evidenced by interviews conducted for the purpose of this report, significant differences continue to exist among those that chose to leave beginning roughly in the 1940s and those that are choosing to leave today. Some common motives do exist across generations, however, with many referencing either deteriorating conditions in the region or when movement out of the country was made possible by official state policy.

Uyghur migration out of East Turkestan has often been described in terms of waves. Some left following the short-lived independent Republics that were established and subsequently overtaken in 1933 and 1944. Still more left following the Communist seizure of the region, including former leaders of the Second Eastern-Turkestan Republic, Yusuf Alptekin and Mehmet Emin Bughra.⁵⁹ Many of those that left during this period fled to Turkey, including some who had relocated temporarily to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the early 1960s and as a direct result of harsh policies during the Great Leap Forward, an estimated 60,000 fled to what was then the Soviet Union – now the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan primarily.

Following the death of Mao in 1976, yet another wave of Uyghurs were able to move more freely into Central Asia and elsewhere as a result of China’s Open Door Policy. Further migration was also facilitated following the collapse of the Soviet Union as Central Asian states were less able to control activity along their borders. Migration flows have slowed dramatically since then as regional cooperation between Russia, China and Central Asia that culminated in the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—an organization that strengthened the alliance between these states on political, economic and security issues. This initiated a major shift in Uyghur migration, as Jacob Zenn of the Jamestown Foundation explains, “The cooperation of Central Asian governments with Chinese authorities in extraditing undocumented Uyghurs, especially dissidents, likely spurred Uyghurs to abandon that migration route in favor of Southeast Asia in recent years.”⁶⁰

Uyghur Flight from East Turkestan Since 2012

It is not the intention of this report to analyze motivations stretching back many decades, but

simply to contextualise the current situation with reference to historical evidence. From here, the report will now look to hone in on the most current considerations of Uyghurs choosing to leave their homes in order to gain a better understanding of the reality for Uyghurs living in East Turkestan today.

From the Uyghurs that the WUC was able to speak to, who all began their escape between 2012 and 2014, many common motivations arose explaining their decisions to make the journey out of China. The most important factors, according to those interviewed, included strict control of religious belief, tightened restrictions on cultural expression, discrimination from Chinese authorities across the board, and consistent harassment by police.

Feeling of Utter Helplessness

From all those interviewed, overarching themes included a feeling of helplessness, the inability to maintain control over one's life, and a lack of dignity and value in society generally. One young woman expressed that she feared that she may lose her dignity as a Uyghur woman if she remained in China.⁶¹ Another man stated quite plainly that, "In China, human beings don't have any kind of value."⁶²

In addition to this sense of powerlessness, interviewees also spoke about their feeling that the international community has largely ignored their plight. One man explained that, "Here [in Turkey] the Syrian boy who drowned in the sea got public attention from the world, but we Uyghur suffered worse than this, nobody cares about us."⁶³ Others drew comparisons between the suffering of Muslims in other parts of the world, notably the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories as one man said, "The international

community can hear the voices of the people in many conflicts in the world, for example in Palestine, but in China, they massacre us and cover it up the next day, and nobody even knows that."⁶⁴

Others also tried to reckon with why it is that they were being treated so poorly by the Chinese government. One woman asked, "What is our crime? Either we can't stay in our own home, or we can't be treated as normal humans at another's home. Why don't we get any respect from anyone?"⁶⁵ This lack of autonomy coupled with the frustration that comes from not understanding such an arbitrary restrictions in nearly all walks of life formed the motivation for many to finally escape.

Limits to Religious Freedom

Religious belief became a strikingly common subject among those whom we spoke with. Apart from the known restrictions already outlined here and elsewhere, interviewees spoke often about their inability to practice even the most basic tenets of their faith.

One man even went so far as to say that, "In my eyes, Guantanamo prison was better than the city Urumqi [for religious freedom],"⁶⁶ citing their ability to pray as they wished. Such astounding comments were not altogether uncommon among those who were

interviewed. The same man continued to explain how government appointed imams were received in his hometown, stating that, "they didn't know the basic principles of Islam [...] so many of us didn't want to follow them and would pray in private. In the eyes of the government, however, this is a symbol of separatism or radicalism."⁶⁷

"Here [in Turkey] the Syrian boy who drowned in the sea got public attention from the world, but we Uyghur suffered worse than this, nobody cares about us."

Consequences simply for prayer at one's own home were also expressed, with some having been, "Detained and tortured for 16 days in 1993 for suspicion of participating 'illegal religious activities'."⁶⁸ Others were sentenced to long terms in Reeducation Through Labor (RTL) camps that were in full swing in the 1980s and 1990s. The camps acted as a means to rid ostensibly petty criminals of religious beliefs or any other dispositions that were perceived as anti-state.⁶⁹ The system was widely seen to be a form of extra-judicial punishment and was officially abolished in 2013, despite criticism from some suggesting that a similar system continues to operate more clandestinely.⁷⁰

Simply put, even the most mild expression of religious belief outside state-sanctioned mosques was punishable by long prison or RTL sentences. The man who described his experience in the RTL camps made plain that he was punished severely for "illegal religious preaching," "studying in underground religious courses" and "storing religious materials at home." The latter charge came about merely for carrying a version of the Quran not approved or printed by the state as one man talking about warrantless searches of his home said that, "Only the government published book we can keep—other books, including the Quran not printed in China, we can't keep. Otherwise, we may be in danger of being arrested."⁷¹

A bleak picture was also painted about the physical ability of Uyghurs to pray where they

wished. The issue of the state of mosques and their construction and repair was central to a number of interviews. One man explained that there were once nine mosques in his city that were used by the Uyghur population there in the 1980s. One was torn down following the construction of a new road through the town, and in 1991, an imam of that mosque was arrested and sentenced to a jail term for praying on the land where the mosque once stood for "illegal religious activities." He continued to explain that although eight mosques still stood in the town, all of them were very old and in desperate need of repair. Many of the mosques in his city then became too run down to enter for safety reasons, so Uyghurs would pray outside, but were effectively unable to do so during the winter months because of the cold weather.⁷²

As a result, many began to feel trapped by increasingly harsh state policies aimed at scaling back religious practice among the Uyghur population. One man described how closely Chinese authorities monitored mosques in the years before he escaped, explaining that, "If the number [of Uyghur mosque visitors] became more, the newcomers were asked why they started to pray. What influenced them? If the number became less, they were asked why they didn't want to pray. Are you going to dismiss the authority of the Imam who has been selected by the government?"⁷³ Many would feel trapped by these circumstances, as their behaviour is so

"If mosque visitors went up, the newcomers were asked why they started to pray. What influenced them? If the number became less, they were asked why they didn't want to pray. Are you going to dismiss the authority of the Imam who has been selected by the government?"

"If the people rise up against the government, they are arrested or just killed."

heavily scrutinized and probed for any hint of criminality, however trivial.

The same man put it bluntly during the interview as he tried to describe what he thought the purpose of the government's program was. He said, "Most of the Uyghur people are Muslim, and Islam still influences Uyghur society [...] Of course [Uyghurs in East Turkestan] don't only talk about religion, they also promote the idea of human rights, science and freedom. But to the government, religious belief is the key to Uyghur society and culture. So, if they can destroy religious belief, it is very easy for them to assimilate and control us."⁷⁴

The sentiment was echoed by others who also attempted to distill the Chinese strategy over the last few decades. One man understood the strategy in terms of the state breaking down Uyghur society into three groups—groups that have been treated in very distinct ways. The first group, he explained, belonged to Uyghur children up to the age of 18. The strategy here, he illustrates, is to, "remove religious belief and interest in Uyghur cultural identity, ensure they do not join any kind of social, cultural or religious event of the Uyghur community, or learn about Uyghur history and tradition."⁷⁵ The second group are those between 18 and 50, whom the state sees as the greatest threat and explains that, "If the people rise up against the government, they are arrested or just killed."⁷⁶ The third, Uyghurs over the age of 50, are mostly left alone because, "they do not have any power or strength."⁷⁷

Limits to Cultural Freedom

Also tied to restrictions on religious practice, interviewees also raised concerns about more

general cultural freedoms for the Uyghur community in East Turkestan. The reading and writing of Uyghur poetry deemed to be counter to the Communist Party was subject to strict oversight. On one occasion, an interviewee was jailed for two months in Kashgar for, "writing a poem that mocked the communist ideology."⁷⁸

In a much more extreme case, one man was jailed for three years in 1997 for the recitation of a poem on the anniversary of the death of a notable Uyghur poet, Abdurehim Otkur. The man was 20 years old at the time and was unable to complete his education at his university as a result.⁷⁹

Another man described how he was detained and sentenced to a three year jail term from 1999-2002 for planning a peaceful demonstration for religious and cultural freedom when he was only 14 years old.⁸⁰

Freedom of Movement

One particular similarity among many of those interviewed was that many had been arrested and often served a long jail term for some of the above-mentioned 'crimes'. As a result of seemingly trivial incidents, following their release from prison, members of the Uyghur community—having already served unreasonable jail terms—would then suffer further indignities. Police would maintain close surveillance for many years following and would demand that ex-prisoners report to local police stations on a regular basis, sometimes as much as several times each day.

Police would also conduct random and frequent searches of their homes, resulting in severely reduced freedom of movement. One man remarked that, "My normal social life and dignity was severely affected under these

"I can imagine the life of these Uyghurs who were deported to China. If they are under house arrest, maybe the jail is better. If they are sent to jail, maybe death is better than jail."

practices, and my close friends and even some family members tried to avoid contact with me. This repression forced me to leave this country.”⁸¹

One man reported that following his release from prison, he opened a mobile phone shop in Urumqi, but was harassed by police often and was forced to provide them with phones as bribes in order to remain open.⁸² Another man was arrested in 2002 by police after he attended a dinner at a friend’s home without permission, and then again in 2005 while he was walking with friends at night in Urumqi. Such arbitrary exercise of police power against the Uyghur community led to a definite sense of helplessness and tension for many years and culminated in their desire to leave.

Upon reflecting on those who were forcibly returned to China from Thailand, one man explained from his own experience in prison and under close surveillance that, “I can imagine the life of these Uyghurs who were deported to China. If they are under house arrest, maybe the jail is better. If they are sent to jail, maybe death is better than jail. These what I summarized from my experience.”⁸³

Because freedom of movement was so constrained for those that had been arrested in the past, there were almost no options to leave the country through any legal channels. Obtaining passports and other travel documents was nearly impossible in this case—something already highly constrained as illustrated

elsewhere.^{84 85} One man explained that, “I had the danger of being arrested again, so I started to seek a way of immigration. Because I was a political prisoner I couldn’t get a passport. So, I found the illegal way of escaping from China.”⁸⁶

The resulting conditions following imprisonment are particularly troubling given the clear rise in Uyghurs having been arrested on ostensible crimes relating to endangering state security, separatism or religious extremism. Many were also arbitrarily arrested in Urumqi following violence in July 2009 on baseless suspicions, with many more having been arrested under similar circumstances. Such an approach to policing clearly has the effect of collectively criminalising Uyghur life.

Prison Conditions

A number of the interviewees expressed, in particularly strong terms, the brutal conditions they bore witness to in Chinese prisons in East Turkestan. Frequent mention of harsh interrogation techniques and torture were made throughout a number of the interviews as many of those interviewed had a great deal of experience caught up in the Chinese prison system since the early 1990s.

In one instance, a man described how his father was imprisoned after refusing to relinquish his farmland to the Communist Party in 1956 and remained in prison for seven years. Following this, his father travelled to Beijing twice to petition the government and found himself in prison for

“My normal social life and dignity was severely affected under these practices, and my close friends and even some family members tried to avoid contact with me.”

“Unlike China, we got respect from the police [in Malaysian prison], every Ramadan day police asked us if we were planning to fast so that they can provide food to us.”

an additional 11 years from 1968 to 1979. The man even explicitly told us, “I didn’t think what happened to my father would happen to myself.”⁸⁷ Against his expectations, he was then arrested in 1998, charged with separatism, and sentenced to eight years in prison. It was at this point that he witnessed one Uyghur man who was killed while he was being tortured. It was in his case that he explained that he saw the prison at Guantanamo Bay as better than what he saw in Urumqi.

Another oft-repeated theme was a striking comparison between prison in China and elsewhere. Two of the interviewees saw the prisons in Thailand and Malaysia as much more favourable than those in China. One man mentioned that, “Unlike China, we got respect from the police [in Malaysian prison], every Ramadan day police asked us if we were planning to fast so that they can provide food to us.”⁸⁸ As was previously mentioned, another man described how he was happy to know that he, at least, would not be tortured in the Malaysian prison where he ended up during his journey.⁸⁹

The same man, whose father was imprisoned years before, knew of a number of his friends and family members who were imprisoned, including a member of his extended family who was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for wearing the hijab, along with another relative who was also sentenced to seven years for a similar offense. He also listed three other men whom he was acquainted who were all handed ten year prison sentences for “listening to radical religious lectures”—a charge that can simply involve Uyghurs gathering in a private residence to listen to an imam.

Several other interviewees also explained how they witnessed fellow Uyghur inmates having

been killed while they were being tortured by Chinese authorities. The same man mentioned a friend of his who fell gravely ill during his time in prison, while prison officials refused to provide any kind of remedy. After the jail refused to release the man to his parents who had pledged to help, he eventually succumbed to his illness and died in prison.⁹⁰

The same man also spoke about witnessing the killing of another Uyghur inmate who was shouting and celebrating after he heard about the incidents in Urumqi in July 2009. In another instance, he also described how a young Uyghur man bit off part of his tongue so that he would

**The part of his body
where it was nailed to
the wood was corroded
and we could see his
bone and corroded flesh.**

not be able to say a word to police and interrogators. Following this, Chinese authorities tortured him for seven days before nailing him to a piece of wood where he was left for months until he died. He described that, “The part of his body where it was nailed to the wood was corroded and we could see his bone and corroded flesh.”⁹¹

One other man described in detail some of the horrible things that he also witnessed while he was serving a long prison sentence for a petty crime in 1994. He was tortured the day he was arrested for nearly 14 hours and was forced to reveal false information about people he did not recognize—a common result of torture in China and endemic to China’s criminal justice system.⁹² He was subsequently released and then re-arrested after fleeing to another city and interrogated seven times over a three to four month period. During this period of detention, he was severely beaten by prison guards on the stomach and released to the jail hospital and then to his home to remain under house arrest for the next four years. During this period, he explained that he witnessed the deaths of around 12 people. After experiencing this in prison, he said that, “Every time I saw the

police coming to me, I'd be so scared and thinking 'are they coming to arrest me?' If so, please just shoot me!"⁹³

The general feeling among the interviewees was that prison conditions were so bad and torture so awful, that many simply could not stand to risk being returned to jail – a fate that many suffered after being initially arrested on dubious charges. Chinese officials maintain such close watch on these Uyghurs that they can be arrested and sentenced with absolutely no oversight or justification. Following the incidents in Urumqi in July 2009, many of those that had been previously imprisoned were arrested on unfounded suspicions that they were involved in violence. Such heightened risks were evidently a primary motivating factor in why many Uyghurs would eventually flee East Turkestan.

International Refugee and Asylum Law

The act of forcibly repatriating individuals or groups who make it clear that they wish not to be returned from the state which they originated is a clear infringement of well-established international law. The principle of non-refoulement, the cornerstone of International Refugee Law and spelled out clearly in the 1951 Refugee Convention, requires that states do not allow for the forcible return of refugees or asylum-seekers to territories where their "life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, member of a particular social group, or political opinion."⁹⁴

The Convention is the most comprehensive treaty dealing with issues relating to refugees

and asylum seekers, to which China is a state party. Thailand, however, has not yet ratified the Convention, though the principle of non-refoulement is now considered a norm of Customary International Law. States who have not yet ratified the Convention remain legally bound by this principle in particular as a result.

Every time I saw the police coming to me, I'd be so scared and thinking 'are they coming to arrest me?' If so, please just shoot me!

Thus far, the illegality of the actions taken by Thailand (and a whole host of other states for that matter) in July 2015 is clear, however the real problem lies in implementation and accountability. Although the international community expressed deep outrage following the extradition of the 109 Uyghurs from detention facilities in Bangkok, including condemnatory statements from the United Nations, the United States and other human rights organizations, no legal action has been taken. This fact underscores the sometimes futile nature of international law, even law that reaches the standard of *jus cogens*.

Consequences of forcible returns in the past have included arbitrary arrest and detention, abuse, and typically involves dubious criminal charges levelled against those who are returned—something the Convention explicitly aims to prohibit. The Chinese government has repeatedly labelled Uyghurs in this context as criminals and those who have been returned have been treated in such a manner.⁹⁵

The Refugee Convention remains the only major international human rights treaty that does not establish an interstate supervisory body to hold states accountable if they fail to meet their protection obligations. Although Article 38 to the Convention does allow for the International Court of Justice to step in to settle disputes relating to the interpretation or application of the Convention, no states have

yet taken advantage of this provision in practice. The other supervisory role spelled out in the Convention also allows for the UNHCR to play a facilitative role for states, though this does not reach the threshold whereby it holds any real coercive power over the state in question.⁹⁶

The result is that although the Convention is officially binding on states, there remains no effective system in which the provisions of the treaty may be enforced. Members of the Uyghur community have fallen victim again and again to this sad fact, as Uyghurs have consistently been forcibly returned from numerous states within China's vicinity, but no substantive action has ever been taken beyond condemnatory statements from states and civil society.

In one particularly blatant case of denying the efficacy of the Convention and international legal norms generally, the Cambodian government forcibly returned a group of 20 Uyghur asylum seekers in December 2009. Amazingly, members of the group were already in the process of applying for asylum status with the UNHCR in Phnom Penh when Cambodian authorities announced that they would be returned to China, likely as a result of pressure from the Chinese side. Only days following the extradition, China and Cambodia signed 14 trade deals worth around 1 billion USD. The group of Uyghurs were likely a hitch that the Cambodian government cared not to carry into final negotiations of these deals and submitted to Chinese pressure.⁹⁷

All told, whether or not many of these forced returns in the past violated international law is not in dispute. The real problem lies in the implementation of the Convention and the strength of the accountability mechanisms undergirding it. There have been strong calls from academics and other experts in the field pressing the UNHCR to adopt new measures to

improve compliance, including the creation of a new Supervisory Working Group tasked with the ability to request information, receive complaints, conduct investigations and report directly to the UN and states.⁹⁸

Any such mechanism within the international refugee system would, of course, be limited to addressing issues within the refugee system itself. Such a mechanism would address some of the problems at issue here, but would also leave out much of why China has been so successful in bullying its neighbours into taking actions that may not have been taken if international law were the only significant factor. To understand and address all factors at play in this case, one must move beyond the legal regime and understand the strengthened geopolitical power of China, namely as a trading partner in Asia as a whole. This fact has become increasingly obvious to the Uyghur community for many years.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following are a list of concrete recommendations directed at states involved with Uyghur refugees and asylum seekers – including China, Turkey and China's neighbours who very often play a crucial role in these cases. Other recommendations are directed at the UNHCR and other civil society actors who likewise play a role in protection and the promotion of international law with regards to refugees and asylum seekers:

- (1) China must observe international law and discontinue its harsh and inexcusable repression of the Uyghur population in East Turkestan – particularly those who have been unjustly detained in the past and continue to face severe consequences upon their release. China remains the primary actor with the ability to address

the root causes of Uyghur exodus from the region - namely, religious and cultural restrictions, restrictions on freedom of movement, arbitrary arrests and detentions, extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances, among other severe and persistent problems.

- (2) The UNHCR must continue to develop a competent interstate supervisory body to hold states accountable if they fail to meet their protection obligations under the Refugee Convention. Thus far, there remains no effective accountability mechanism to hold states liable for such a breach. The WUC urges the UNHCR to act on already existing recommendations and establish a body able to uphold the principles of the Convention.
- (3) UNHCR officials must recognize the severity of the situation among Uyghur refugees and the consequences faced by those who have been returned in the past. The UNHCR must recognize legitimate Uyghur distrust with the UNHCR following a number of cases where Uyghurs were returned to China after having begun the official asylum process. Many Uyghurs often cannot distinguish between asylum officials and officials representing the state.
- (4) States on China's border and extended periphery, particularly Thailand and Malaysia, must observe international law with regards to their handling of Uyghur refugees. Neighbouring states

cannot continue to return Uyghurs who have fled legitimate persecution and must cooperate fully with the UNHCR and other authorities to ensure the safety and protection of Uyghurs. These states must also take seriously Uyghurs' desire to continue on to a third country out of China's reach (Turkey in most cases).

- (5) Southeast Asian states in particular must take steps to ensure that rampant corruption witnessed by Uyghur refugees is rooted out. Human traffickers currently enjoy a favourable relationship with police and other authorities in the region, which compounds the exploitative ability of both parties towards refugees and other vulnerable persons.
- (6) The Turkish government must recognize the rights of Uyghur asylum seekers who have landed in Turkey. Uyghurs willing to work and to send their children to school must be able to officially register with Turkish authorities to obtain the necessary paperwork that will make this possible.
- (7) Other states on China's border to the west (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) must uphold international law and ensure that political and economic considerations, namely the influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, do not trump international law, and does not exert undue pressure on these decisions.

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Appendix A – Forced Return of Uyghurs to China Since 1997

Date	Country	Number	Name(s)	Background	Allegations	Current Whereabouts
1997	Pakistan	14	Religious Students	Arrested in Gilgit close to the Chinese border.	No known legal process undertaken. Reportedly summarily executed on the Chinese side soon after being driven across the border.	All reportedly deceased. ¹
September 1998	Kazakhstan	4	Yasim Kari, Abla Karim, two other men, four children	Yasim Kari and Abla Karim (both Mullahs) fled China initially as they feared arrest during crackdowns after failing to comply with Chinese order to acknowledge at the mosque the merits of government policies. Arrested at Almaty airport on or around 25 August 1998 and forcibly returned within a few days.		Four children were released after 18 days. Four men transferred to a prison in Kashgar. ²
11 February 1999	Kazakhstan	3	Kasim Mapir (Kasim Mahpir), Hemit Memet, Ilyas Zordon	Arrested while trying to cross the China-Kazak border. Deported despite pending asylum claims.	3 death penalties for participation in Ghulja demonstration (3-5 February 1997).	All presumed executed after torture in October 2000. ³ Later reported that two brothers of Hemit Memet, Saydakhmet Memet and Zulfikar Memet, had also been arrested in East Turkestan for “assisting terrorists”, held in Yengi Hayat prison in Gulja City and Zulfikar Memet tortured in detention, including having his fingernails pulled out. He was reportedly executed in secret in June 2000. Saydakhmet Memet was sentenced to six years in prison. ⁴
End of April 2000	Kyrgyzstan	1	Jelil Turdi (Zhalil Turdi)	First detained by Kyrgyz police in early March 2000, reportedly for having an illegal residence permit, then released a few days later and ordered not to leave the capital, Bishkek, then re-arrested a few weeks later. Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan told authorities his Chinese documents were false and was returned to China in late April.	Charged on alleged “separatist” activities, as he was allegedly wanted in China for involvement in a nationalist opposition group. ⁵	Unknown, likely in detention in China.
December 2001	Kazakhstan	2	Ahmet Memet, Turgan Abbas	Both religious students from Yerken county, Kashgar prefecture. Fled from East Turkestan in August 1999, after their release from Yerken detention center, Kashgar prefecture, where they had reportedly been detained and interrogated for one month on	Charged in Kazakhstan and sentenced in April 2000 to eighteen months in prison for “illegally crossing the border.” Unknown charges in China.	In 2004, it was reported that the two were imprisoned in East Turkestan on unknown charges.

				<p>suspicion of engaging in “illegal religious” and “separatist” activities.⁶</p> <p>Following their release, they applied to UNHCR in Almaty for refugee status, but moved to Charyn village, 250km outside Almaty, after reportedly being harassed by the police.</p> <p>Unofficial sources report that uniformed officers took them from their home in Charyn, and were then detained in Panfilov in December 2001.⁷</p>		There are no further details about their exact whereabouts, legal status or state of health.
10 January 2002	Nepal	3	<p>Shaheer Ali (Shirali), Abdu Allah Sattar (Abdullah Sattar)</p> <p>Shaheer Ali was a young Uighur nationalist from Hotan who had been imprisoned and tortured in China in 1994 in connection with his political activities.</p> <p>After he was released, he fled to Nepal via Tibet in November 2000 and applied for recognition as a refugee with UNHCR and was officially recognized as such in May 2001.</p> <p>He was then detained by Nepalese immigration authorities in December 2001 and held in Hanuman Dhoka district police office in Kathmandu for several weeks, after which he is believed to have been taken away from the police office by Nepalese police and officials from the Chinese embassy on or around 10 January 2002 and forcibly returned to China shortly thereafter.</p> <p>At least one, possibly two other Uyghurs were taken from Nepal at the same time—one of them was Abdu Allah Sattar (Abdullah Sattar). The identity of the third possible returnee remains unclear.</p> <p>Sources received no further information on Shaheer Ali until October 2003, when it was reported in official Chinese media that he had been executed.⁸</p>	<p>Reportedly sentenced to death in March 2003 after being convicted of various offences including “separatism,” “organizing and leading a terrorist organization” and “illegal manufacture, trading and possession of weapons and explosives.” His sentence was later confirmed on appeal by the Xinjiang High People’s Court.</p> <p>The court claimed that he had led and instructed members of the East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah (ETIPA) to carry out various bombings and assassinations. It also stated that he conspired and engaged in “largescale incitement and propaganda to split the country” which culminated in the Ghulja incident of 5 February 1997.</p> <p>According to interviews that Shaheer Ali gave to Radio Free Asia while he was in Nepal which were made public after his death, he claimed to belong to a group called the East Turkestan Islamic Reform Party which he described as a ‘non-militant’ organization. He also described eight months of torture while imprisoned in Guma county in 1994, including being beaten with shackles, shocked in an electric chair and having metal nails pushed under his toenails, in an attempt to make him confess to various offences.</p>	Shaheer Ali deceased, two others unknown.	
2002	Pakistan	7	<p>Golamjan Yasin, Tilivaldi, Ablikim Turahun as well as four others</p> <p>Reportedly from Ghulja, East Turkestan.</p> <p>Arrested in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, and forcibly returned, but information is lacking.</p>	Charged for political activities abroad.	Unknown ⁹	

2 February 2002	Pakistan	2	Ismail Abdusemed Haji (Ilham), Abdulhakim	<p>Reportedly arrested in Rawalpindi, and unconfirmed reports suggested that they were handed over to China without legal process.</p> <p>Other reports have also indicated that Chinese officials in plain clothes accompanied Pakistani police at the time of their arrest.</p> <p>There is no further information to suggest that the two men were part of a larger group of seven also returned from the same area.</p>	Unknown	Unknown ¹⁰
March 2002	Pakistan	1	Ismayil Kadir (Ilham Kadir)	<p>The Associated Press reported a statement by Chinese officials saying that Pakistani authorities had arrested Ismayil Kadir, who was alleged to be the third ranking member of the ETIM, in March 2002.</p> <p>Some disagreement, however, exists over where Kadir was arrested and the nature of his connection to terrorist groups in Pakistan. Official reports suggested that he had been captured by authorities in Kashmir, but the Uyghur American Association at the time claimed that he was arrested in Rawalpindi, northern Pakistan, home to a sizeable community of exile Uyghurs. They have also disputed official allegations that he was an ETIM member.</p> <p>Since his forcible return to China, no further information has become available about Ismail Kadir's place of detention or legal status. Given his alleged background, Amnesty International feared that he may have been subjected to torture, and possibly sentenced to death and executed, as is often the case with such prisoners.</p> <p>Reports indicate that Kadir was the first Uyghur to be returned to China after 9/11.¹¹</p> <p>Similarly, there is no further information to suggest that Kadir was part of a larger group of seven also returned from the same area in 2002.</p>	Charged with alleged terrorist activities.	Presumed dead.
April 2002	Pakistan	3	Elham Tohtam, Ablitip Abdul Kadir, Enver Tohti (Enver Dawut)	<p>All three went missing in Rawalpindi, northern Pakistan on or around 22 April 2002 and all had reportedly applied to UNHCR for asylum and were awaiting the results of their applications.</p> <p>Elham Tohtam was picked up by the police at around 6.30am and, according to eye-witnesses, blind-folded and led away to an unknown destination. Tohtam is originally from Ghulja city and was detained and tortured there in 1996 and 1999 for his suspected political activities. In April 1999, fearing further persecution, he fled first to Kyrgyzstan, then Kazakhstan. In November 2000 he went to Pakistan where he lived with his wife and four children in Rawalpindi. He had approached UNHCR in</p>	Deportation after applying for asylum status with UNHCR.	Unknown

				<p>Islamabad and the Australian government for emergency visas to Australia, where he had family members.</p> <p>Both Ablitip Abdul Kadir and Enver Tohti are from Gulja. The former lived together with his wife and three of his children in Pakistan. Unofficial sources suggest that the three were detained upon their return to China, although the charges against them and other details about their imprisonment remain unknown¹²</p>		
23 May 2002	Kyrgyzstan	2	<p>Memet Sadik (Mamet Sadyk), Memet Yasin (Mamet Yasyn)</p>	<p>Both reportedly arrested on 23 May 2002 and handed over to China by the Kyrgyz authorities on suspicion of being “international Islamic terrorists”.</p> <p>According to a spokesman from the US embassy in Beijing, they were suspected of being ETIM members who were planning “terrorist attacks” in Kyrgyzstan, including an attack on the US embassy in Bishkek.</p> <p>Kazak Commercial Television later reported that they had been arrested in a “joint operation by Chinese, US and Kyrgyz special services”, adding that “a detailed chart of localities and explosives had been seized from them.” The report concluded by stating that, “the fact that both the terrorists are ethnic Uighurs provides grounds that they are linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.”</p> <p>The case was later cited by the US in part justification for its decision to formally list ETIM as a “terrorist organization”.¹³</p>	Unknown	No further information is available about the current whereabouts or legal status of the two men.
Mid 2002	Nepal	1	<p>Kheyum Whashim Ali (Washim Ali)</p>	<p>Recognised as a refugee by UNHCR in Nepal in October 2001, but was arrested and detained by Nepalese immigration authorities soon afterwards.</p> <p>Transferred to Hanuman Dhoka district police office on 1 May 2002 apparently for “investigation”, although the charges against him were unclear. He was reportedly taken to the office of the Chief District Officer in Kathmandu on 23 May 2003 before being taken away again to an unknown location. According to one eyewitness, Kheyum Whashim Ali was in tears as he was being taken away.</p>	Unconfirmed reports suggest that he was charged with “subversion, separatism, involvement with an illegal organization and collecting money to buy weapons.”	<p>In February 2003, Amnesty International received reports that Ali was detained in Michuan prison, around 40km outside Urumqi.</p> <p>Later reports from unofficial sources indicated that he was being held in isolation in a single cell, his face was swollen and he lacked mobility in his legs, allegedly as a result of torture or ill-treatment.</p>
July 2002	Kyrgyzstan	2	<p>Rahmutulla Islayil (Rakhmutullah Israel), Arken Yakuf (Erkin Yakub)</p>	<p>Reportedly returned to China from Kyrgyzstan in July 2002 due to allegations over the death of a Chinese diplomat and his chauffeur in the Bishkek in June.</p> <p>Official Chinese sources indicate they were charged in China on 31 October 2002 and sentenced to death on 12 January 2004 by the Urumqi Intermediate People’s Court.</p>	<p>Alleged to have been involved in the murder of a Chinese diplomat and his chauffeur in the Bishkek.</p> <p>Shortly after their arrest in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz Interior Minister reportedly suggested that the crime was not political in nature, but was rather the accidental result of a struggle for power between criminal gangs.</p>	Reported in official Chinese media that both had been executed following the execution order on 25 March 2004.

				<p>Their appeal to the Xinjiang Regional High People's Court was then rejected, and the court issued the execution order on 25 March 2004.</p> <p>No further details have been made public about the nature of the evidence against them or the circumstances of their trial.</p>		
December 2002	Kazakhstan	2	Ahmet (Ahat), Mehmet Tugan Abbas	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
July-August 2003	Pakistan	2	Muhammed Tohti Metrozi, Abdulwahab Tohti	<p>On 16 July 2003, both went missing in Rawalpindi. Both were reportedly engaging in "pro-independence activities" in the XUAR before fleeing to Pakistan.</p> <p>Metrozi had become a student leader in Pakistan and had been recognised as a refugee by UNHCR in Pakistan and was awaiting resettlement in Sweden.</p> <p>Reported that they both disappeared after Metrozi received a telephone call from an official who reportedly worked for the Pakistani Intelligence Bureau asking them to come for a meeting. Unconfirmed reports suggested that they were both returned to China just three days later.</p>	<p>Information received by Amnesty International from an unofficial source stated that Metrozi was tried on or around 10 April 2004 in Urumqi for sheltering Uyghur activists who fled from China to Pakistan, belonging to a "separatist" group, and applying to UNHCR for asylum – the latter two of which Metrozi reportedly rejected.</p> <p>The outcome of the trial, his health condition, and his exact place of detention remain unknown.</p> <p>No further information is available about the fate of Abdulwahab Tohti.</p>	Metrozi was reported in August 2003 to be detained in Urumqi.
2003	Kyrgyzstan	2	Two young persons	Unknown	Unknown	Died in detention after probable torture.
April-May 2003	Kazakhstan	1	Abdukakhar Idris	<p>Former tailor and bookkeeper from Kashgar, Idris disappeared in Almaty, Kazakhstan while seeking asylum with the UNHCR in April or May 2003 and is believed to have been forcibly returned to China.¹⁴</p> <p>Idris was detained at the Kazakh border town of Panfilov on 19 April 2001 and reportedly sentenced to one year in prison by Panfilov District Court on 19 September 2001 for "illegally crossing the border." He was released on 7 March 2002, after which he approached the UNHCR for asylum. He then lived in hiding in Almaty, until he went missing approximately one year later after being taken from his home by Kazakh police.</p> <p>Idris was 22 years old at the time of his disappearance in 2003.</p>	Detained for three months at an unknown date in connection with funding a sports club authorities suspected of being a front for activities in opposition to the Chinese government. ¹⁵	Unknown
2004	Kyrgyzstan	1	Jalal Kasarji Mahmud	Ethnic Uyghur from Turkey who travelled to Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s to do business, detained in Bishkek and threatened return to China in early 2004. ¹⁶	Although in prison at the time, Kasarji was accused of an attack on a Chinese government delegation in May 2000 and the kidnapping of a Chinese businessman, which likely led to	Unknown

				<p>Arrested initially in Bishkek in April 1998, and accused of conducting "Wahhabi" propaganda, stirring up inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred, conducting terrorist trainings, and of illegal possession of weapons and forgery.¹⁷</p> <p>On 15 December 1998, sentenced to 14 years imprisonment in Bishkek for forgery, illegal possession of weapons and armed resistance to the authorities. Reportedly received an additional 10 years in prison in addition.</p>	rumours of his return to China for further punishment. ¹⁸	
2004	Kyrgyzstan	1	Baivaacha	Uyghur activist believed to be returned to China from Kyrgyzstan in 2004. ¹⁹	Unknown	Unknown
After March 2004	Kyrgyzstan	3	Ablimit, Tohti Niyaz, Kayser Jalal	All residents of Kyrgyzstan under threat of return to China in 2003 after sentencing in Bishkek.	Ablimit, Tohti Niyaz and Kayser Jalal were sentenced in Bishkek to 16, 17 and 25 years in prison, respectively, for forming an "unlawful East Turkestan organization" and "illegal possession of weapons." ²⁰	Unknown
December 2005	Germany	1	Burhan Zunun	<p>Zunun fled China through Kazakhstan in 2001 and flew to Germany in October to seek asylum. His asylum application was rejected in 2002 as well as his appeal in August 2003.</p> <p>Zunun then fled to Norway after his unsuccessful appeal, but was returned to Germany. From there, he returned to Kazakhstan out of fear of being returned to China. Fearing his safety in Kazakhstan, he fled back to Europe once again where he was detained by Danish authorities on 23 December 2005.</p>	Fearing imminent extradition to China, Zunun committed suicide on 25 December 2005.	Suicide prior to deportation.
February 2006	Uzbekistan	1	Husein Celil (Huseyin Celil)	<p>Celil fled China in 2001 following a short jail term for his support for religious and political rights for Uyghurs.</p> <p>After settling in Canada and gaining his Canadian citizenship, Mr. Celil was arrested while visiting family in Uzbekistan in 2006 and was subsequently deported to China.</p> <p>After extradition, Celil was denied access to legal counsel and Canadian officials and his dual citizenship was not recognised.</p>	<p>Celil was threatened and forced to sign a confession which led to a secret trial resulting in a life sentence on charges of "leaking state secrets".</p> <p>Life sentence reduced to around 20 years in February 2016, but further details remain unavailable.²¹</p>	In detention.
10 May 2006	Kazakhstan	1	Yusuf Kadir Tohti (Erdagan)	Fled China to Kazakhstan in 1996 where he became religious teacher. Chinese authorities accused him of "separatism" and he was detained by Kazakh authorities on 8 March 2006. He was 35 year old at the time of his detention.	On 10 May 2006 Tohti returned from Kazakhstan after "a decision by the specialized administrative court for violation of rules of stay in Kazakhstan." Chinese authorities reportedly requested their extradition.	Amnesty International reported that as of the end of June 2006, Tohti was being held in incommunicado detention in China and at risk of "serious human rights violations, including torture or other ill-treatment, and possibly the death penalty, should their 'crimes' be deemed to be serious."

10 May 2006	Kazakhstan	1	Abdulkadir Sidik	<p>Fled China to Kazakhstan in 1999 after publicly protesting against the Chinese government's policy on family planning and labour for ethnic minorities. He was detained in China for two months in connection with his political activities and views and filed a complaint against a local official upon release—reportedly the official came to his house, beat him, and threatened him with further punishment.</p> <p>Sadik was detained by Kazakh border guards when he crossed the border to Kazakhstan and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for allegedly possessing false passports and diskettes containing "extremist" information, though he wrote in a letter that he had been detained for 18 months.</p> <p>In May 2006, Sadik was released under pressure from human rights organizations, but went missing afterwards, along with Yusuf Kadir Tohti. In a letter that he wrote from prison before he was returned to China, Sidik stated that he had been interrogated and threatened by Chinese police officers while in detention in Kazakhstan.</p>	<p>On 10 May 2006 Sadik was extradited to China after "a decision by the specialized administrative court for violation of rules of stay in Kazakhstan." Chinese authorities reportedly requested their extradition.</p>	<p>Amnesty International reported that as of the end of June 2006, Sidik was being held in incommunicado detention in China and at risk of "serious human rights violations, including torture or other ill-treatment, and possibly the death penalty, should their 'crimes' be deemed to be serious."</p>
13 July 2006	Germany	1	Muhtar Tiliwaldi	<p>Tiliwaldi fled East Turkestan in 1998 and arrived in Germany seeking political asylum. From 2001 to 2006 he lived with exceptional leave to remain in Mainz. On 16 June 2006 he was arrested by German police and held in a police holding centre for deportees. On July 13, he was deported by German immigration authorities having failed to secure refugee status.²²</p> <p>Tiliwaldi was 42 at the time of his extradition.</p>	<p>Forcibly deported from Germany after asylum bid was rejected.²³</p>	<p>Unknown. Went missing following a few months after return to China.</p>
2007	Pakistan	1	Ismail Semed	<p>In the 1990s, Ismail Semed reportedly served two prison sentences for attending demonstrations in East Turkestan. After a demonstration in February 1997 in Ghulja, he fled to Pakistan where he was eventually deported to the PRC in 2003 by the Pakistani authorities. According to his wife, Semed was studying law while in Pakistan.²⁴</p>	<p>Semed was found guilty on 31 October 2005 by the Urumqi People's Court of the "attempted division of the motherland" and other offenses related to the possession of firearms and explosives. The latter charges were reportedly based on old testimonies taken from other Uyghurs, some of whom were reportedly executed in 1999. Separatism charges were also based on second-hand testimony about his alleged involvement with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).</p> <p>Semed confessed to the alleged offenses during the interrogation, but the confession was withdrawn in court. The confession may have been extracted through torture.²⁵</p>	<p>Executed on 8 February 2007.²⁶</p>
May 2007	Uzbekistan	1	Rehmetjan Ehmet	<p>Rehmetjan Ehmet was successful businessman, temporarily living in Uzbekistan conducting business.</p>	<p>Reportedly arrested on 11 May 2007 and returned to China on unknown charges.</p>	<p>Unknown</p>

April 2009	Pakistan	9	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
6 October 2009	Vietnam	1	Unknown	Stopped when trying to cross Vietnam-Laos border.	Unknown	Unknown
19 December 2010	Cambodia	20	Islam Urayim, Nurahmet Kudret, Mutellip Mamut, Memettersun Omer, Ilyar Hamut, Musa Muhammad, Helil Abdugheni, Abduqadir Abdugheni, 12 others	<p>An initial group of 22 Uyghurs fled China following ethnic rioting in early July 2009 with the help of Christian missionaries into Vietnam and then into Cambodia in mid-November. Many of those who fled were witness to the events in Urumqi and feared they may be arrested along with thousands of others at the time.</p> <p>Twenty of the Uyghurs began their application for asylum/refugee status with the UNHCR office in Phnom Penh in late November.</p> <p>The other two Uyghurs fled the refugee camp on account of the threat of return.</p> <p>Twenty Uyghurs were returned to China from Phnom Penh on December 19 despite protest from the United States and the United Nations.²⁷</p>	<p>Shortly following their extradition, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said the Uighurs were “under investigation for suspected criminal activities.”²⁸</p> <p>Two members of the group, Nurahmet Kudret and Islam Urayim, were sentenced to life in prison. Urayim spoke to Radio Free Asia and reported that he witnessed security forces killing and beating Uyghur demonstrators. He also wrote to the UNHCR about how he had learned of mass detentions of Uyghur males in the wake of July 2009 unrest. Originally from Uchturpan County, Aksu Prefecture, Urayim is serving his life sentence in XUAR Prison No. 1 in Urumqi.</p> <p>Nurahmet Kudret, originally from Gulbagh town, Yarkand County, is reportedly serving his life sentence in XUAR Prison No. 3 in Urumqi.</p> <p>Memettersun Omer and Ilyar Hamut and two others sentenced to 20 years in prison. Musa Muhammad and three others were sentenced to 17 years in prison. Helil Abdugheni and Abduqadir Abdugheni were sentenced to 16 years in prison. All allegedly had lawyers appointed by the court.²⁹</p>	Most in detention, others unknown or missing.
18 January 2010	Myanmar	18	Akbar Sadik, Mamutjan Kerim, Gheni Ayup, Yahya Kadir, Habibulla Yasin, Turghun Abla, Mamut Sadir, Muhabbat Yasin, Aygul Tursun, Iminjan Ismail, Askar Awut, Tursun Tiliwaldi, Abdureshit Rozi, Kawser Aziz,	<p>Seventeen Uyghurs, together with one Chinese man, were deported on 18 January 2010 from Burma after being accused of being involved in “criminal activities.”</p> <p>The full list of names once appeared on the website, Sina.com, but have since disappeared.</p>	Reportedly charged with “involvement in criminal activities.”	Unknown

			Senewer Ablikim, Hekim Yasin, Abulla Nurmemet			
March 2011	Laos	1	Memet Eli Rozi, Gulbahar Sadiq, five children	<p>Rozi was initially part of the group of 22 that fled to Cambodia, but escaped to Laos and met his family there by March 2010.</p> <p>Information from his wife indicates that on the day in March when he met his wife, Gulbahar Sadiq, and five children, they were all detained by Laotian police and deported to Yunnan province. The family was then held in detention for 32 days and questioned by authorities from East Turkestan.</p> <p>Gulbahar Sadiq was then released with her five children to Kashgar while Rozi was transferred to the Kashgar district public security bureau detention center.³⁰</p> <p>Rozi reportedly injured his arm in Cambodia and was required to have three metal plates, inserted during treatment, removed from his wrist in February 2010 and that failure to remove the metal pieces could infect his hand and cause risk to his life.³¹</p>	<p>Rozi grew up in Ghulja, but operated a bakery in Guangzhou prior to leaving for Cambodia. He had also been detained on two occasions—once for 15 days for alleged involvement in Ghulja demonstrations in February 1997 and was given a three year sentence in 2000 in connection with “illegal religious activities.”³²</p> <p>He reportedly fled China because of reports that Uyghurs were being detained for their involvement in the July 2009 rioting.</p>	Rozi was initially detained at Kashgar district public security bureau detention center, but he may have been moved.
January 2011	Pakistan	1	Omer Muhter	Muhter went missing from Rawalpindi in Pakistan in January 2011 and is feared to have been deported.	Unknown	Unknown
January 2011	Tajikistan	3	Ablimit Dawatoglu (Abdulhamit Davutoglu), Kamiljan Omeroglu (Kemal Ömeroglu), Ehmet Rashidi (Ahmet Resit)	<p>Three Uyghur businessmen who travelled to Tajikistan frequently were detained by Tajik authorities on unknown charges. On 8 January 2011, Ablimit Dawatoglu was reportedly picked up by Tajik security forces in Dushanbe and on the following day, Kamiljan Omeroglu and Ehmet Rashidi were then held when they went to the police department to inquire about Dawatoglu.³³</p> <p>All three had left East Turkestan within the last 10 years prior and two of them had received Turkish citizenship over the previous three years while the third received it four months prior.</p> <p>Dawatoglu’s brother was reportedly executed in China years before in Hotan on charges of “splittism.”</p> <p>At the time of detention, Omeroglu, Rashidi and Dawatoglu were 37, 47 and 48 respectively.</p> <p>Turkish officials reportedly made contact with Tajik authorities, but little information was ever divulged.</p>	Unknown	Unknown
30 May 2011	Kazakhstan	1	Ershidin Israil, (Ershidin Israel)	Ershidin Israil, a 38-year-old former geography teacher from Ghulja, fled East Turkestan on 24 September 24, 2011 to Almaty following his disclosure of witnessing the September 18th beating death of Shohret Tursun, who had been detained among a group	According to the Kazakh foreign ministry in a statement, Israil’s arrest in June 2010 was on account of alleged “terrorism charges” following a request from Interpol. ³⁵	In detention in China.

				<p>of about 40 Uyghurs in July 2009 following ethnic riots in Urumqi.</p> <p>After making his way to Almaty, Israil was eventually granted refugee status in March 2010 and accepted for resettlement in Sweden on April 1st. Kazakh authorities, however, denied Israil's application for an exit visa and arrested him on June 23, 2010. In May 2011, a Kazakh court denied his application for political asylum.³⁴</p> <p>Israil was reportedly deported from Kazakhstan to China on May 30, 2011.</p>	<p>Israil had previously served a six-year jail sentence in 1999 for "separatism." Kazakh authorities alleged that Israil confessed to taking part in a "terrorist act" in July 1997.</p>	
6 August 2011	Thailand	1	Nur Muhemmed	<p>Initially reported that Muhemmed fled Urumqi after Chinese authorities accused him of involvement in deadly ethnic unrest in Urumqi in 2009. These reports suggested that he was arrested by Thai authorities for illegally entering the country after fleeing China through Burma.³⁶</p> <p>Later reports suggested that Muhemmed left Urumqi years earlier, around 2003-2004, after he began to be monitored by state security forces after a religious class he attended in his neighborhood was broken up by police who accused attendees of holding an illegal gathering.³⁷</p> <p>Muhemmed applied for asylum with the UNHRC in Thailand in 2006, but was rejected.</p> <p>He was detained on 6 August 2011 for "illegally entering Thailand" and handed over to Chinese authorities in Bangkok where he was deported.</p>	<p>Deported to China in alleged connection with unrest in Urumqi in July 2009 and for "illegally entering Thailand."</p>	Unknown
8 August 2011	Pakistan	5	Manzokra Mamad, Menzire Memet, as well as two children and one other adult.	<p>The group of five was brought to the Benazir Bhutto International Airport on 8 August 2011, and boarded flight CZ6008 operated by China's Southern Airline and returned to Urumqi.</p> <p>The five were reportedly brought handcuffed and blindfolded onto a Southern Airline flight, a Chinese carrier, and taken through a VIP gate to the plane.</p>	<p>Allegedly wanted for political activities abroad.</p>	Unknown
August 2011	Pakistan	1	Abduxur Ablimit	<p>Ablimit was initially scheduled to be returned to China with the group of five (above), but was not taken for unspecified reasons.³⁸</p> <p>Manzokra Mamad reportedly was accompanying the two children.</p>	<p>Unknown</p>	Unknown
18 August 2011	Malaysia	11	Kurbanjan Sirajidin Ahmet Sadiq, 10 others	<p>Ahmet Sadiq and ten others were among 16 Uyghurs who were detained by Malaysian police in separate raids in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru city on 6 August 2011. Of the group of 16, two</p>	<p>According to relatives, a number of those returned to China were sentenced on separatism charges. The mother of one of the men told media that her son was serving a three-year</p>	<p>Many likely in detention.⁴¹</p>

				<p>were released soon after arrest and three were released into the agency's custody as "persons of concern."³⁹</p> <p>On August 26, the group of 11 were deported to China. Prior to the deportation, UNHCR officials reported that they had tried to meet with the group, but were denied access by the Malaysian government.⁴⁰</p>	<p>sentence for separatism in a Hotan prison following a secret trial in July. Friends of others told media that they have heard that the others had also been jailed for up to 15 years.</p> <p>It was later reported that Ahmet Sadiq, who had been living legally in Malaysia for five years before he was deported, was given a six-year jail sentence for separatism, but the sentence was later reduced to three years.</p> <p>The group was reportedly arrested in Malaysia under Malaysia's counterterrorism police for violations of Malaysia's security laws as well as under Malaysia's Internal Security Act.</p>	
30 November 2011	Sweden	1	Faruh Dilshat	<p>Reportedly participated in demonstrations held by the Swedish Uyghur community in front of the Chinese embassy in Stockholm.⁴²</p> <p>Deported from Sweden in November 2011.</p> <p>23 years old when he was deported.</p>	<p>Request for political asylum was refused.</p> <p>Radio Free Asia reported that Swedish immigration authorities treated them as Han Chinese citizens, and appeared not to understand that they could face retaliation and further persecution if they returned.⁴³</p>	Unknown
31 December 2012	Malaysia	6	Unknown	<p>The group of six men had been detained earlier in 2012, allegedly for attempting to leave Malaysia on false passports and held in Kuala Lumpur.⁴⁴</p> <p>While in detention, the six were registered by UNHCR and were permitted to proceed with refugee status determination (RSD) interviews.</p> <p>Despite having their asylum claims under review for first instance decisions, on December 31, Malaysian police clandestinely transferred the men into the custody of Chinese authorities, who escorted them from Malaysia to China on a chartered flight.</p> <p>Human Rights Watch sent a letter to the Malaysian government condemning the action and requesting information, but received no response.⁴⁵</p> <p>The deportations came two months prior to a visit from China's then leader of the National Committee, Jia Qinglin, on 5 February 2013.⁴⁶</p>	Unknown	Unknown
2 January 2012	Sweden	1	Adile Omer	<p>Adile Omer, originally from Urumqi, was forcibly deported on 2 January 2012, after being held in an immigration detention center in Stockholm since December 23.⁴⁷</p>	<p>Deported after an appeal to a asylum claim was denied.</p> <p>Radio Free Asia reported that Swedish immigration authorities treated them as Han</p>	Unknown

				<p>It was reported through a friend that her deportation came after a swift appeal with Swedish immigration authorities.</p> <p>Reportedly participated in demonstrations held by the Swedish Uyghur community in front of the Chinese embassy in Stockholm.</p> <p>Omer was 25 years old at the time of her deportation.</p>	<p>Chinese citizens, and appeared not to understand that they could face retaliation and further persecution if they returned.⁴⁸</p>	
January 2014	Vietnam	4	<p>Abdullajan Abdulmennan, 3 others</p>	<p>Abdullajan Abdulmennan travelled to Vietnam with three friends after Chinese authorities refused to allow him to travel to Turkey to reunite with his father, who lived there as a Turkish citizen. He had reportedly been granted Turkish citizenship eight years prior and obtained his passport from the Turkish embassy in Beijing.⁴⁹</p> <p>Radio Free Asia reported that he and three of his Uyghur friends, who also had Turkish passports, paid human traffickers to enter Vietnam to meet with their respective fathers. In Vietnam, he met his father for the first time in 18 years and met at the Turkish embassy in Hanoi to discuss travel arrangements.</p> <p>After arriving at the airport, Vietnamese authorities detained the youths after discovering Chinese identification cards in their bags and because their new Turkish passports contained no entry visas.</p> <p>Abdulmennan was initially jailed for 11 months in Pingxiang prison on the China-Vietnam border in Guangxi, but the charges against the other three are unknown.</p> <p>Abdulmennan relatives tried to visit him in prison several times, but authorities turned them down and would not accept clothes or money.</p> <p>Abdullajan Abdulmennan died in prison under mysterious circumstances at age 21 in early October 2013 after serving 9 months of his sentence. He was reportedly healthy when his father saw him in Vietnam in early 2014.</p>	<p>Detained in Hanoi by Vietnamese authorities for illegally entering the country.</p> <p>Upon return to China, Abdulmennan was initially jailed for 11 months in Pingxiang prison on the China-Vietnam border in Guangxi, but the charges against the other three are still unknown.</p>	<p>Abdulmennan died after 9 months in detention.</p> <p>Three others unknown.</p>
18 April 2014	Vietnam	11	<p>Rizwangul Tursun, 10 others.⁵⁰</p>	<p>A group totalling 16 including ten men, four women and two small children were initially detained and brought to Bac Phong Sinh for “illegally entering” Vietnam from China.⁵¹</p> <p>A border guard reported that while the group was waiting to be transferred back to China, some of the men began attacking the guards, armed with wooden bars that they had broken off the furniture inside the interview room.</p> <p>In a conflict that reportedly lasted three hours, two Vietnamese border guards were killed along with five of the group of 16. It was</p>	<p>Unknown</p>	<p>Five killed during a confrontation.</p> <p>11 transferred to China, current whereabouts unknown.</p>

				<p>reported that some were shot dead and others died after jumping from the tall building.</p> <p>Newspapers reported that the bodies of those killed along with the remaining group were handed over to Chinese special forces where they were quickly handed over to Chinese authorities.</p> <p>The group was thought to be very likely Uyghurs, considering photographs that were published but later removed of the women wearing headscarves and distinctive Uighur clothing as well as reports of many other Uyghurs crossing the border during this period.⁵²</p>		
18 April 2014	Vietnam	21	Unknown	<p>In the evening of April 18, a group of 21 suspected Uyghurs was said to be detained in Mong Cai, not far from the location of a shooting incident earlier in the day involving a group of 16 and Vietnamese border agents and police.</p> <p>It is suspected that the group was handed back to Chinese authorities soon after.⁵³</p>	Unknown	Unknown
Summer 2014	Afghanistan	12	Israel Ahmet, 11 others	<p>Israel Ahmet immigrated to Afghanistan from East Turkestan and lived and worked as a businessman in Kabul for more than a decade.⁵⁴</p> <p>He was detained in Kabul allegedly for lacking legal documentation and carrying counterfeit money. Ahmet was also reportedly accused of being a spy and was held in a jail cell with more than two dozen other Uyghurs including women and children.</p> <p>After a short stay in detention, he was then escorted to the Kabul International Airport, where Chinese officials forced him onto a plane back to China.</p> <p>Eleven other Uyghur men sharing the cell were sent back to China, according to the same NDS official, who also stated that six women and 12 children in another cell had refused to go.</p>	An NDS official was quoted as saying that some of the detainees were spies, some were [potential] suicide attackers and some illegally entered the country.	Unknown
January 2015	Kyrgyzstan	1	One Uyghur, Two Kyrgyz	<p>Kyrgyz border guards detained three men on 7 January 2015 after they had crossed the border into Kyrgyzstan from China. The men had no identification documents but said they were natives of Kyzyl-Su Kyrgyz prefecture of East Turkestan.</p> <p>All three men were deported to China on January 11 on the basis of a local court's ruling.⁵⁵</p>	Detained for "crossing the border illegally."	Unknown
January 2015	Afghanistan	15	Unknown	Afghanistan arrested and deported a group of 15 Uyghurs reportedly in an effort to persuade China to use its influence with	Unknown	Unknown

				<p>Pakistan to help start negotiations with the Taliban in January 2015.</p> <p>The Uyghurs had allegedly been training with militants in camps in Pakistan and three were arrested in Kabul and another 12 later in the eastern province of Kunar bordering Pakistan.</p> <p>According to a member of Afghanistan's intelligence agency, they had been in contact with al Qaeda and other militants operating in Pakistan and were based in North Waziristan before moving to Afghanistan after the Pakistani army launched an offensive there.⁵⁶</p>		
July 2015	Thailand	109	Unknown	<p>In March 2014, a group of around 200 Uyghurs were found in a human smuggling camp in southern Thailand and were transported to an immigration detention facility in Bangkok.</p> <p>On July 1, 2015, a group of 173 Uyghurs were granted asylum in Turkey and landed there on the next day – the group was made up mostly by women and children.⁵⁷ On July 8, 2015, 109 Uyghurs were returned to China from facilities in Bangkok, despite widespread condemnation from the international community.⁵⁸</p> <p>The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had reportedly been given assurances by Thai authorities that those in detention would be safe from persecution, as the group made it plainly clear that they did not want to be deported. The Thai government reportedly sent a delegation to China to check on the state of those returned, but no official report or statement was ever released about the group or their whereabouts.⁵⁹</p> <p>As of early 2016, a group of around 50 Uyghurs remain in the Thai facility waiting to have citizenships verified.</p>	<p>State photos showed the group escorted onto a passenger plane with black hoods over their heads.</p> <p>Chinese media stated after their deportation that had planned to go to Syria and Iraq to carry out jihad. State media claims that at least 13 of those returned are suspected of terror offences. Neither report was supported by evidence.⁶⁰</p>	Many likely in detention.

Notes

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- ⁴ Ibid.
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