

Briefing on the Human Rights Crisis in the Uyghur Region

(2016-2020)

Submitted to:

Conservative Party Human Rights Commission

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Contents

Table of Contents

I. Summary	2
II. Human rights violation in the context of COVID-19	4
III. Freedom of Expression	5
IV. Right to Privacy	7
V. Organ harvesting	8
Recommendations	10



I. Summary

The Chinese authorities have been committing human rights violations for decades. In late 2016, when the newly appointed CCP Secretary for the Uyghur Region, Chen Quanguo, introduced a grid-style system of total surveillance, first tested on the Tibetan people, in both the public and the private sphere. He also established political indoctrination camps all over East Turkistan, numbering in the thousands. The CCP has extended its outright assault on basic human rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed under international and Chinese law by effectively criminalizing even the most basic aspects of Uyghur life and identity.

China has also formalized the discrimination and marginalization of the Uyghur people and Uyghur identity by passing repressive legislation. China's *Counter-Terror Law* came into effect on 1 January 2016 and has already led to unparalleled abuse. Its drafting was widely condemned by the international community for its excessively broad and vague language. Regional implementation guidelines for the XUAR were passed by the regional government on July 29, 2016. The guidelines refine the scope of the national legislation and make direct connections between what is broadly defined as "extremism" and terrorism. The legislation makes a direct link between religious practice, extremism, and terrorism.

In June 2017, China passed a revised version of its Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) which codifies greater state control over religious practice. The amendments give greater control to the government to monitor religious practice, control religious activities, and contain restrictions designed to "curb extremism" and "resist infiltration". A much greater focus on the role of religious practice, national security, and online expression is included.

Since spring 2017, the Uyghur region has witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented re-education campaign. Since April 2017, 1.8 -3 million Uyghurs have been rounded up by Chinese police and detained against their will in large internment camps (called 'reeducation' camps by the Chinese government) where they have been subjected to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, political indoctrination, torture, and other serious human rights violations. The arbitrary detention of over 1 million people marks a dramatic increase in China's oppression of the Uyghur population and the scale and gravity of this act amount to a crime against humanity. The targeted nature of the arbitrary detentions and the situation inside of the camps reveal that they function as part of a larger campaign of cultural assimilation and ideational oppression aimed at 'stabilizing' the Uyghur Region by eroding the unique Uyghur ethnicity. This has been in the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs both inside and outside of the camps.



These camps began construction on a large-scale in mid-2017, but have increased in size in 2018. Satellite imagery has shown the extent of the camps, construction, and security bids indicate that no decline is yet expected, and Uyghurs have yet not been released in significant numbers. The camps operate as prisons, with razor-wire strung across the tops of high walls and no communication possible with family outside. Conditions in the camps are very poor, with overcrowding and squalid living spaces. In December 2017, two young Uyghurs died in custody under uncertain circumstances. A prominent Uyghur scholar and religious figure Muhammad Salih Hajim died in a camp in January 2018, another was driven to suicide in February 2018, and a teenager died under mysterious circumstances in March 2018.¹ In May 2018, WUC President Dolkun Isa received verified information -one month after the event- that his mother had died in an internment camp, where she was detained under “religious extremism” charges.²

The recent major leaks – “Xinjiang Papers” published by *the New York Times*, “China Cables” by *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, and the Karakax List – all provided explicit picture of China’s mass internment camp system and confirms Xi Jinping’s motivations. These documents contribute to our collective understanding of what is taking place in one of the least accessible regions in the world today.

Adding to issues faced by Uyghurs in East Turkistan, Uyghurs in the diaspora have been targeted more strongly than in the past. Relatives and friends of Uyghurs overseas have been targeted by Chinese authorities for maintaining communication and many have been sent to camps. Increasingly, the WUC has been facing stronger pressure from the Chinese government in our own advocacy work at the UN and European Parliament. In addition to Dolkun Isa’s trouble accessing the UN in New York, the WUC as an organization has been met with Chinese pressure submitting official documentation to the UN in Geneva.

WUC continues to closely monitor all of the above issues so that we can best respond to them in our own work. At the end of 2018, the situation facing Uyghurs in East Turkistan and abroad has never been graver. The following briefing will focus on four specific topics: human rights violations in the context of the COVID-19, freedom of expression, right to privacy and forced organ harvesting.

¹ World Uyghur Congress (March 2018). “World Uyghur Congress Parallel Submission 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), p.4. Retrieved from: <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/WUC-UPR-Submission-China-3rd-Cycle-March-2018.pdf>

² Hoshur, S. (July 2, 2018). “Uyghur Exile Group Leader’s Mother Died in Xinjiang Detention Center”. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/mother-07022018164214.html>



II. Human rights violation in the context of COVID-19

Due to the heavy censorship in the Uyghur region, as well as mainland China, the situation in Xinjiang regarding the COVID-19 remains highly obscure. Radio Free Asia's Uyghur Service has been at the forefront of reporting on the spread of COVID-19 in the region, with limited access to information inside the region. The lack of transparency and control over information by the Chinese government have increased even further during the current pandemic.

The focus shifted to the region towards the end of January, when the local authorities started placing various parts of East Turkistan on lockdown, after discovering at least two cases of COVID-19 in the capital, Urumqi. Reports have shown that the residents weren't given notice of the quarantine measures before the authorities ordered them to confinement. These harsh measures made it impossible for residents in the region to get any supplies. Starting mid-February, disturbing videos photos and other information has emerged on Uyghur-language social media suggesting Uyghurs were facing food shortages, and residents were starving.³

RFA reported that in early February, Uyghur medical staff were being deployed to Wuhan to dance for patients infected with COVID-19. This was reported to be used as a tactic by the government to divert public attention from its mismanagement of the outbreak. This came to the attention of Uyghurs in the diaspora after a video went viral on social media depicting an ethnic Kazakh named Bargul Tolheng, who is according to *Global Times* from the Second Hospital in Urumqi. In the video, she was seen teaching patients with "light symptoms" traditional Uyghur dances at the Fang Cang Hospital in Wuhan, while wearing a medical suit.⁴

The Chinese authorities regularly change their narrative on Uyghurs, sometimes portraying them as religious extremists or separatists, and sometimes portraying them as docile citizens and using their unique culture for damage control.

³ Uyghur Human Rights Project (February 26, 2020). "UHRP Briefing : Local Residents in Danger of Starving in East Turkistan", *Uyghur Human Rights Project*, pp. 1, 5, 6. Retrieved from: <https://uhrp.org/press-release/uhrp-briefing-local-residents-danger-starving-east-turkistan.html>

⁴ Seytoff, A. (February 14, 2020). "China Seeks to Divert Attention From Virus Mishandling With Dancing Xinjiang Minorities: Uyghur Exiles". *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/dancing-02142020171104.html>



Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, videos re-emerged on Chinese social medias⁵ showing large groups of Uyghurs being sent to factories to work. This comes at the heels of a previous published reporting from the *Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)* on Uyghur forced labour. Various reporting suggests that over 20, 000 Uyghurs from mostly poor counties in the south part of the Uyghur region were sent to work in big cities, such as Hotan, Kashgar and Urumqi. According to *Xinjiang Daily*, the state-run newspaper, the quota of these transfers was fixed to 50, 000 people until the end of March.⁶ Some reports also allege that thousands of Han Chinese were being transferred to East Turksitan and installed in vacated Uyghur homes, as part as a planned demographic shift.

The timeline suggests that these videos came out when the whole country was mostly under lockdown.⁷ The videos were also used by the Chinese government for its propaganda to portray the Uyghurs as happy people, but most importantly as part of their “poverty alleviation” policy.

Around end of March, according to Radio Free Asia Uyghur health workers from East Turkistan were being forced to live in hotels in Ghulja city, set up as quarantine centers to treat patients infected with COVID-19.⁸ Only Uyghurs have been sent to work in these centers and they have not been allowed to return home. This create doubt on statements from the authorities who have claimed there are no new cases in East Turkistan.

III. Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression for Uyghurs is effectively non-existent. Many Uyghur websites have been shut down and their administrators imprisoned on charges of “harming ethnic unity” or “endangering state security”.⁹ Ilham Tohti, the Uyghur economist, writer and professor who founded the website “Uighurbiz.net” to promote conciliation between Uyghur and Chinese, arrested in 2014 on and convicted of “inciting separatism” remains one of the most blatant cases of large-scale attack on freedom of expression.

⁵ Ingram, R. (April 1, 2020). “Coronavirus: Uyghurs Deported to Other Provinces as Slave Laborers to Restart Economy”. *Bitter Winter*. Retrieved from <https://bitterwinter.org/coronavirus-uyghurs-deported-as-slave-laborers-to-restart-economy/>

⁶ Ramzy, A. (March 30, 2020). “Xinjiang Returns to Work, but Coronavirus Worries Linger in China”. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/world/asia/china-coronavirus-xinjiang.html>

⁷ Seytoff, A. (March 26, 2020). “TikTok Videos Show Hundreds of Uyghurs Transferred to Chinese Factories”. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from https://www.rfa.org/english/video?v=1_yjoodoqr

⁸ Hoja, G. (April 1, 2020). “Uyghur Health Workers Forced to Treat Virus Patients in Xinjiang’s Makeshift Quarantine Centers”. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/workers-04012020175724.html>

⁹ Long, Q. (January 27, 2016). “China Shuttters Uyghur Websites For ‘Harming Ethnic Unity’”. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/china-uyghur-01272016122318.html>



In November 2019, a group of twelve UN special procedures has sent a communication to China expressing their concerns on the implementation of the *Counter-Terrorism Law and the Implementing Measures*. The experts have concluded that its extremely vague and broad definition of “terrorism” could lead to the criminalization of peaceful civic and religious expression¹⁰. Any peaceful expression of Uyghur identity or manifestation of religious identity, acts of non-violent dissident, or criticism of ethnic or religious policies are penalized in these laws, which violates article 2, 18 and 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Article 19 of the above-mentioned law grants the power to network communications to interrupt transmission of information online. The officials also have power to delete and block content, order websites shutdowns, and end other services without any judicial review.

Article 61 allows the authorities to control media reporting after a terrorist attack. Article 63 and 99 require for medias to publish state-approved information on terrorist incidents under threat of large fines and administrative detention, thus limiting press freedom and freedom of expression. With these regulations in place, it leaves no freedom for journalists, civil society and human rights defenders to carry on their essential work.

The surveillance and censorship are widespread across the Uyghur region. Journalists in the region risk imprisonment for daily reporting. They are often charged as “two-faced” individual or a “separatist”. Individuals with these charges usually disappear and are sent to internment camps¹¹.

Consequently, this has drastically limited the freedom of expression in the Uyghur region. Uyghurs who have shared information or communicated with relatives outside of East Turkistan have been targeted in particular for detention in the camps. The Chinese government also tries to inhibit the freedom of expression of the Uyghur diaspora, through threats, intimidation and by punishing the family members of those who speak out.¹²

¹⁰ ONHCR. (November 1, 2019). Official Joint Letter. *ONHCR*. Retrieved from: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24845>

¹¹ Committee to Protect Journalists. (September 7, 2018). “China arrests Uighur editor, newspaper directors for being 'two-faced'”. *CPJ*. Retrieved from: <https://cpj.org/2018/09/china-arrests-uighur-editor-newspaper-directors-fo.php>.

¹² Hoja, G. (April 13, 2020). “Subsidies For Han Settlers ‘Engineering Demographics’ in Uyghur-Majority Southern Xinjiang”. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/settlers-04132020172143.html>



IV. Right to Privacy

With the appointment of Chen Quanguo in 2016 as the Communist Party Secretary in Xinjiang, he has dramatically reduced the right to privacy for the Uyghurs, by introducing a series of drastic measures to control their daily life activities. These measures are deployed in different ways, from facial recognition to intrusive home visits, all spheres of private life are being targeted.

In the Uyghur region, the Chinese government has established a tight network of police checkpoints and CCTV cameras. The *China Electronics Technology Group Corporation* (CETC) devised so-called “three-dimensional portrait and integrated data doors”, which scan the faces of individuals and read information from their electronic devices. These devices are being used for regular checks at many of the police checkpoints as well as at the entrances to residential gated communities and public institutions, such as schools and mosques¹³.

On top of this comprehensive surveillance scheme in XUAR, Mainland Chinese provinces and regions have been investing, since 2018, in facial recognition systems for public surveillance which are claimed to be able to identify “Uyghur attributes”¹⁴. In 2019, the Chinese camera manufacturer *Hikvision* attempted to promote an AI camera capable of automatically recognizing Uyghurs¹⁵.

Since early 2018, the so-called “Becoming Family” (结对认亲) campaign, which was instituted in October 2016,¹⁶ picked up pace, involving roughly one million CCP cadres and Han-Chinese civilians¹⁷. Under this program, every two months, a group of Han-Chinese visit the same family in XUAR for a period of between five and eight days. These visitors are tasked to “rectify” any “problems” or “unusual situations” they find¹⁸. Besides reporting on cleanliness or alcohol abuse, the cadres are also supposed to indoctrinate people with CCP ideology and discourage them from following Muslim traditions or explore their Turkic identity¹⁹. The hosting families appear to have no way of objecting to the visits²⁰.

¹³ Human Rights Watch. (2019). “China’s Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App”. *Human Rights Watch*, p. 22. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass-surveillance>

¹⁴ Mozur, P. (April 14, 2019). “One Month, 500,000 Face Scans: How China Is Using A.I. to Profile a Minority”. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/14/technology/china-surveillance-artificial-intelligence-racial-profiling.html>

¹⁵ Rollet, C. (November 11, 2019). “Hikvision Markets Uyghur Ethnicity Analytics, Now Covers Up”. *IPVM*. Retrieved from: <https://ipvm.com/reports/hikvision-uyghur>

¹⁶ https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzI2MzMzMyNTkzNA==&mid=2247484120&idx=2&sn=8fdd8687165e68d643a59f45aa961778&chksm=eabcd359ddcb5a4f210f0379c9e82d29965bd179650e8a3bd262ea03a946bbeb3df0ece147a8&mpshare=1&scene=5&srcid=1028lz2iKMyJtGWRvwbr6yPu#rd.

¹⁷ http://www.xjtz.gov.cn/2018-02/15/c_1122421367.htm.

¹⁸ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/YDEolkMx8MEApU2DQ0ziNg>.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch. (May 13, 2018). “China: Visiting Officials Occupy Homes in Muslim Region”. *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/13/china-visiting-officials-occupy-homes-muslim-region>

²⁰ *Id.*



The WeChat and Weibo accounts of the public institutions who dispatch the intruding visitors openly show even the most private aspects of the host families' lives,²¹ "and there is no indication that [the families] consented to having them posted online"²². In 2019, the "Pair Up and Become Family" program went one step further. Male Han Chinese sent on these intrusive home visits have been reported to regularly sleep in the same beds as the wives of men detained in the region's internment camps²³.

The basic information of almost every aspect of Uyghur citizen's lives are recorded by Chinese authorities, including the amount of electricity used, when they leave the house and if they are religiously observant, among many other categories of information. A file is kept on each person and stored and analysed by artificial intelligence in the Integrated Joint Operations Platforms. Cell phones and laptops are regularly examined by Chinese police.²⁴

V. Organ harvesting

In recent years, there were several allegations that the Chinese authorities were practicing forced organ harvesting on Uyghurs.

Numerous survivors from the internment camps and other detention facilities have testified that they were forced to undergo medical evaluations (often while blindfolded) where blood samples and other biometric data was taken against their will.²⁵²⁶ The prevalence of these claims among survivors point to a forced systematic collection of DNA and other biometric data of ethnic Uyghurs in arbitrary detention.

This targeted action against Uyghurs complemented ongoing policies from the Chinese government to collect and store genetic and biometric data at a massive level, of dissidents and ethnic minorities in particular. Since the early 2000s, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security built a massive DNA Database, the "Forensic Science DNA Database System", as part of a larger police information project known as the Golden Shield. It has already collected and cataloged the biometric data of over 40 million individuals.

²¹ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fnlZkrpxvBKUmER5dIGKyQ>.

²² Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 19.

²³ Hoshur, S. (October 31, 2019). "Male Chinese 'Relatives' Assigned to Uyghur Homes Co-sleep With Female 'Hosts'". *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/cosleeping-10312019160528.html>.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 13, p.37.

²⁵ Stublely, P. (August 12, 2019). "Muslim Women 'Sterilised' in China Detention Camps, say Former Detainees". *The Independent*. Retrieved from : <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/uyghur-muslim-china-sterilisation-women-internment-camps-xinjiang-a9054641.html>

²⁶ Tursun, M. (November 28, 2018). "Hearing: The Communist Party's Crackdown on Religion in China". *Congressional-Executive Commission on China*. P.4 and 7. Retrieved from: https://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/documents/REVISED_Mihrigul%20Tursun%20Testimony%20for%20CECC%20Hearing%2011-28-18_0.pdf



Despite claims from the Chinese government that the purpose of this database was to fight crime, there has been no evidence that the 40 million already collected had ever been involved in any criminal activity.²⁷

A number of credible activists and China's Independent Tribunal Into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience In China asserted that "the medical testing of groups including Falun Gong and Uyghurs was related in some way to the group concerned because other prisoners were not tested", that "the methods of testing are highly suggestive of methods used to assess organ function", and that "no explanation has been given by the PRC for this testing; blood or otherwise".²⁸ The same Tribunal concluded, with certainty, that Uyghurs were being subjected to crimes against humanity and acts of torture. The Tribunal has provided a detailed review on the evidence available of mass medical testing of Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious groups. Other findings of the Tribunal include short waiting times for organs to be available for transplantation, evidence of torture of Uyghurs and Falun Gong, the massive infrastructure development of facilities and medical personal for organ transplant surgeries.²⁹ However, the Tribunal didn't receive enough evidence to conclude *beyond reasonable doubt* that China was practicing organ harvesting on Uyghurs.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch. (March 15, 2017). "China: Police DNA Database Threatens Privacy". *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/15/china-police-dna-database-threatens-privacy>

²⁸ China Tribunal (June 2019). "The Independent Tribunal Into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience in China". *China Tribunal*. P.63-67. Retrieved from <https://chinatribunal.com/final-judgment/>

²⁹ *Id.*, p.148-153.



Recommendations

In terms of recommendations, we urge the British government to:

1. Call on the Chinese authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all the arbitrarily detained Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Turkic ethnic groups, and to close the camps;
2. Reiterate its calls on the Chinese authorities to allow free and unhindered access to the Uyghur region for independent journalists, observers, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the mandate holders of the UN Human Rights Council Special Procedures;
3. To halt the import of Xinjiang cotton, given the overwhelming and credible evidence of forced labour facilities in the Uyghur region, where Uyghurs are subjected to this regime;
4. Take appropriate measures to ensure British companies are not complicit in using Uyghur forced labour in their supply chains in China.
5. Reconsider all technology transfers of goods and services that are being used by China to extend its cyber surveillance; reconsider its agreement with Huawei for its 5G network;
6. To better protect Uyghurs living in the United Kingdom from reprisals and harassment by the Chinese authorities;
7. Adopt targeted sanctions, asset freezes and visa bans against Chinese officials responsible for crimes against humanity and gross human rights violations against Uyghurs;
8. Re-evaluate its relationship with China as long as it is actively committing crimes against humanity against Uyghurs; business as usual cannot be continued with a government committing mass atrocities;
9. Actively raise the situation in East Turkistan in the UN and in other international organizations and fora and work in broad coalitions to collectively address this ongoing crisis;
10. To establish a better engagement with civil society.