



Source: BBC News

XUAR: A Homeland or Prison for Uyghur?

📅 September 13, 2022 (<https://orcaasia.org/2022/09/xuar-homeland-or-prison/>)

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The UN Human Rights office (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/un-human-rights-office-issues-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang>) recently assessed human rights concerns in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The assessment highlights the profound allegations of Human rights violations against Uyghurs, Turkic and other followers of Islam. John Fisher, Global Advocacy Deputy Director at Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/31/china-new-un-report-alleges-crimes-against-humanity>), said, "The UN Human Rights chief, for the first time, lays bare the Chinese government's grave abuses and concludes they may amount to crimes against humanity." In this background, this piece highlights the policies of the Chinese government in XUAR.

China has imprisoned more than one million Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities such as Kazaks in "Re-education Camps" scattered across XUAR. Since the People's Republic of China took control in 1949, the Uyghur, a Turkic Muslim ethnic minority living on China's northwestern border, have remained victims of the government's harsh policies. China has every possible step to establish its control over Xinjiang. One of the primary factors for such active coercive policies appears to be the forced integration of the Uyghur distinct cultural identity into the Chinese one. Furthermore, Xinjiang is a natural resource centre and a gateway to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and extended Europe to meet its economic purposes.

Uyghurs routinely protest about inhumane practices carried out by Chinese officials. On the other hand, despite such complaints, China has recently implemented substantial security measures over the province of Xinjiang. However, China has a long history of imposing security measures in Xinjiang to maintain authority in this region. Since the mid-1990s, PRC has adopted strict measures that have rattled the hearts and minds of the Uyghurs in XUAR.

In 1996, the Chinese government launched a "Strike Hard Campaign" to address public security concerns. However, this programme frequently resulted in significant numbers of individuals being wrongfully arrested and executed. The execution of more than 200 ethnic minorities was pointed out in the report of Amnesty International in Xinjiang as a result of such operations between 1997 and 2003, the majority on state security grounds. Only some portion of death penalty sentences is available in a report as far as media is concerned and total data are still lying with the state authorities. The execution for a separatist offence occurred in March 2003. Despite being registered as a refugee by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/04/11/devastating-blows/religious-repression-ughurs-xinjiang>) (UNHCR), the accused criminal, Shaheer Ali, was forcefully deported from Nepal. Following his return, he was prosecuted secretly on separatist and terrorist allegations. Local politicians, eager to demonstrate their commitment to the initiatives, frequently appear to be more concerned with numbers than evidence. Religion appears to be as much of a focus in Xinjiang as criminality. Thousands of examples of such nature have been reported, especially against Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Following the success of the “Strike Hard Campaign,” China developed the “Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (SCO) the same year. It was founded in 1996 as the “Shanghai Five” (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and was named SCO after Uzbekistan joined in 2001. It was essentially a ‘Border and Trade Organization’ (https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/06_08_3_4_gladney_dru_statement.pdf) between member countries. The evolution of SCO as a commerce and border-resolution organization to security cooperation indicates the Chinese government’s policies toward XUAR. Hence, China took advantage of SCO and even used it against the innocent Uyghur people by claiming they were involved in terrorist activities.

The 9/11 attacks sparked the United States government’s self-proclaimed “Global War on Terror.” The Chinese government used the international outrage over terrorism prompted by the 9/11 attacks to justify the governmental mistreatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In September 2002, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage formally designated the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization. The ‘Global War on Terror gave the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) a framework for its leaders to criminalize Uyghur ethnicity in the name of ‘counter-terrorism’ and ‘de-extremism.’ Tim Grose, Associate Professor of China studies at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (USA), mentioned that “The CCP now had a convenient frame to trace all violence to an ‘international terrorist organization’ and connect Uyghur religious, cultural and linguistic revivals to ‘separatism.’” However, in 2020, Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo withdrew ETIM from the United States government’s terrorist list, citing “no credible evidence that ETIM (<https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/09/china-hijacked-war-on-terror-511032>) continues to exist.”

China’s government approved an anti-extremism law in March 2017 to combat religious extremism. The government ramped up its fight against what it claims is the increasing threat of terrorism and separatism in the Uyghur homeland. The law prohibits various behaviours, including wearing veils or “abnormal” beards, without defining the word. It also prohibited refusing to watch or listen to state television or radio or preventing children from getting national education since they are considered “manifestations” (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2083479/ban-beards-and-veils-chinas-xinjiang-passes-regulation>)” of extremism.

Chinese officials began taking passports from residents of Xinjiang in 2016. Human rights organizations have criticized this security measure, which the government claimed intended to prevent “terrorism.” Furthermore, when filing for travel credentials in Xinjiang passport authority, police compelled citizens to produce DNA samples and other biological data. As per new restrictions, all persons in Xinjiang must turn in their travel passports to the police for “safekeeping” (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-38093370>.)” Human Rights Watch expressed this act of Chinese authority as an infringement of freedom of movement. The World Uyghur Congress feared that while the new regulations were to give direction to all citizens, they would disproportionately affect the Uyghur group in all ways.

In one of its reports, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute provided a detailed description and analysis of a mobile app used by police and other officials to communicate with the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), one of the leading systems used by Chinese authorities for mass surveillance in Xinjiang. The program collects data on people and alerts officials to those it deems potentially dangerous. Some of those targeted are arrested and transferred to political education camps and other institutions. According to the research, Xinjiang authorities suspect numerous sorts of legal, daily, nonviolent activity, such as “not interacting with neighbours, frequently avoiding accessing the front door (<https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/explainers/how-mass-surveillance-works-in-xinjiang/>),” or utilizing encrypted communication technologies such as WhatsApp – all as suspicious activities.

Experts believe that re-education initiatives in Xinjiang began in 2014 and intensified in 2017. Reuters journalists examined satellite images and discovered that the size of thirty-nine of the camps nearly quadrupled between April 2017 and August 2018. Adrian Zenz, a Xinjiang researcher, based in Germany, discovered that construction spending on security-related infrastructure in Xinjiang surged by 20 billion yuan (<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang>) (about \$2.96 billion) in 2017.

However, there is scant information on what happens in the camps, although several captives who have escaped China have described brutal conditions. Detainees claim that the communist party compelled them to vow devotion to the red flag, renounce Islam, sing communist propaganda, and study Mandarin.

Some claim that the increased surveillance made them feel like a prison, with cameras and microphones recording their every move and remark. Others said they were abused and deprived of sleep during interrogations. Women have spoken out about sexual abuse, including rape. Some freed convicts considered suicide or watched others commit suicide. President Xi Jinping has warned of the “toxicity of religious extremism” and has called for employing “dictatorship” (<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang>)” tactics to combat Islamist extremism.

To sum up, this brief understanding of the role of the Chinese government in XUAR points out that government policies control the region firstly by internal policies like the ‘strike hard’ campaign, secondly using regional and international fora like SCO and war on terrorism to run its campaign. Therefore, PRC was putting pressure on the UN to avoid publishing this report on the Human rights of XUAR. However, merely the ‘report’ on Human rights will not solve the issue; democratic countries need to point out the Human rights violation issues in bilateral and multilateral fora, to counter the PRC policies toward XUAR.

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