

## Human Rights Council (HRC)

*The Encampment of Uyghur Muslims  
in Chinese “Re-Education Camps” as a  
result of the Xinjiang Conflict*

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RESEARCH  
REPORT



**Forum:** Human Rights Council (HRC)

**Issue:** The encampment of Uyghur Muslims in Chinese “re-education camps” as a result of the Xinjiang Conflict

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## Introduction

The Xinjiang Conflict is a conflict in China’s far-northwest autonomous region of Xinjiang, centered on the Uyghurs, a Turkic minority ethnic group that makes up the region’s largest minority.

In China, Muslim Uyghur Turks have been exposed to religious violence and forced conversion to the point that it is now labeled a major human rights crisis. This issue was subject to dispute at the 44th United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR). Although the Chinese government shut down all allegations, 39 countries condemned China’s treatment of Uyghur Turks in June 2020.



**Figure 1: The Xinjiang region in China.**

Muslim Uyghurs are taken from their homes, placed in detention camps titled "re-education camps," where they are banned from practicing their religion, engage in praying, wear religious clothing, forced to eat pork, and drink alcohol, which are all condemned in Islam. There are reports of torture and human rights violations in these detention centers, including deaths.

The labor these minorities perform in the "re-education camps" has been compared to the "re-education through labor" program, a system of administrative detention in China for individuals guilty of "minor crimes," abolished in 2013. The international community has labeled the sinicization campaign as an instance of cultural genocide.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Uyghur Turks:** Uyghur Turks are a Turkic ethnic group mostly living in Central and East Asia. The ethnic group is recognized as native to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwest China. They are officially accepted and recognized as an ethnic minority by the Chinese government; however, only as a regional minority within a multicultural nation. The Chinese government rejects the belief that Uyghur Turks are an indigenous group within China.

**Sinicization:** It is the process of non-Chinese societies, and individuals are modified by the influence of Chinese culture, particularly Han-Chinese culture, language, societal norms, ethnic identity, and religion.

**Re-education Camps:** Re-education Camps are titled Vocational Education and Training Centers by the Chinese government, where Uyghur Turks are imprisoned without being guilty of any crimes and have to endure inhumane living conditions. These camps are operated by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

## General Overview

### The Xinjiang Region

Xinjiang borders eight countries, namely Mongolia, The Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The region is officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; however, some refer to the region as East Turkestan, advocating for its independence from China. It is the largest of China's administrative regions and is home to many ethnic minority groups, including the Uyghurs (45%) and the Han Chinese (40%). Xinjiang came under official Communist Chinese rule in 1949, after the failed declaration of an independent East Turkestan state.



Figure 2: A Map of China, indicating the Xinjiang region and the confirmed 27 reeducation camps marked with red.

One main issue in the region is the conflict between the Uyghurs and Han regarding which group has a greater historical claim on the Xinjiang region. The Uyghurs state that their ancestors were indigenous to the area, whereas government policy considers present-day Xinjiang to have belonged to China since 200 BC, during the Han Dynasty. The Chinese government classifies Uyghurs as a National Minority and considers the minority to be no more indigenous to Xinjiang than the Han, therefore, deeming them no special rights to the land under the law.

### Background on the Xinjiang Conflict

In 1933, the corruption, appropriation of land, and the commandeering of grain and livestock by Chinese military forces led to the Kumul Rebellion that established the First East Turkestan Republic. However, the region was soon conquered with the aid of the Soviet Union, where the Xinjiang region's valuable natural resources were exchanged for Soviet help in crushing revolts within the region. Although it was often used before, the term "Uyghur" was officially used instead of the generic "Turkic" to address the ethnic minority widely living in Xinjiang.

In 1944, the Ili Rebellion led to the establishment of the Second East Turkestan Republic, where the rebel forces were primarily made up of Turkic Muslims, Uyghurs. This state declared its independence over the Soviet Union in terms of trade, arms, and "tacit consent." However, when the Communists defeated the

Republic of China in the Chinese Civil War, the Soviet Union helped the Communist People's Liberation Army (PLA) recapture it, therefore, absorbing the East Turkestan Republic in 1949.

### **The Xinjiang Conflict and Restrictions Imposed on the Uyghurs (1990-2017)**

In response to growing tensions between the Han Chinese and the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, at the beginning of 1996, Chinese authorities in Xinjiang launched the "strike hard" campaign, which included measures targeting cell phones, computers, and religious materials belonging to the Uyghurs. The government also banned long beards and women wearing veils in public places. The protests to exercise the right to free thought and religion led to many arrests, executions, and constant human rights violations.

The campaign was relaunched once again in early 2014. This time, the government took further repressive measures in Xinjiang where the authorities collected DNA, iris scans, and voice samples from the Uyghur population and used ID cards and CCTV cameras to track the members of the minority's every move. Although receiving sharp criticism from the international community, the Chinese government has stood by the campaign and said that "practice has proved that our party's ruling strategy in Xinjiang is correct and must be maintained in the long run." (Wong).

Further religious restrictions include the inability of the Uyghurs to send their children to be educated in Islamic private schools and attend mosques, although Hui Muslims, which are an ethnoreligious group composed of Chinese-speaking adherents to Islam, are allowed to do so. Additionally, Uyghurs are not allowed to fast during Ramadan, not able to build their own mosques, and not allowed to name their children with common Muslim names such as "Muhammad."

On another note, there have been many terrorist attacks by the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an Islamic extremist terrorist organization seeking China's expulsion from East Turkestan, mostly active between the years of 2007 and 2017. It is said that hundreds of Uyghurs fight alongside the terrorist group and are members of TIP, which has increased tensions between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government.

### **The Reeducation Camps and Responses from the International Community**

In 2017, the Chinese government reportedly detained more than a million Muslims in reeducation camps. Those who were detained were predominantly Uyghurs. These camps are reportedly operated outside the legal system, and many Uyghurs have been reported to be sent to the camps without trial, and no charges levied against them. The Chinese government defends that these camps were established for the purpose of "countering extremism and terrorism and promoting social integration."

Uyghurs seem to have been targeted for a variety of reasons, including traveling to or contacting people from any of the twenty-six countries China labels sensitive, such as Turkey and Afghanistan, attending services at mosques, having more than three children, and sending texts containing Quranic verses (Council on Foreign Relations).

To this day, there have been a hypothesized number of 27 to 39 reeducation camps in Xinjiang, and satellite images show that the camps almost tripled in size between April 2017 to August 2018; "they cover a total area roughly the size of 140 soccer fields." (Council on Foreign Relations).

Although what happens in the camps is unknown, many detainees who have since fled China describe harsh conditions ranging from being subject to political indoctrination to enduring hours of torture. It is reported that detainees are forced to pledge loyalty to the CCP and renounce Islam while praising communism and being forced to learn Mandarin, a clear case of sinicization. Some former detainees also report prison-like conditions such as constant surveillance of those staying in the camps. Women have shared stories of sexual abuse where some are forced to undergo abortions or have contraceptive devices implanted against their will. Children whose parents have been sent to the reeducation camps are also forced to stay in state-run orphanages, enduring challenging living conditions as young as the age of 5. Detainees are also unable to contact their children.



Picture 1: Workers walking along the fence of a possible detention center in Xinjiang, September 4, 2018.

The international community has mostly denounced the Chinese government and called China to respect religious freedom and change its policies in Xinjiang, such as the European Union. Moreover, many human rights organizations have urged China to immediately shut down the camps and answer questions about disappeared Uyghurs; however, no nation has been able to take definitive action due to sovereignty concerns. The former US President Donald J. Trump has also labeled the Chinese government's abuses as a "genocide" and a "crime against humanity."

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

**People's Republic of China:** In the earlier years, in 2017, government officials denied the camps' existence. However, as time went by, they started calling the camps "vocational training centers" or "boarding schools," as the Xinjiang governor Shohrat Zakir described them in March 2019. Although official documents were leaked in late 2019 that showed how officials within the camps repressed Uyghurs, locked them in camps, and prevented them from leaving, Chinese officials maintained the camps and did not address any of the concerns many nations had upon the leakage of the documents. The government justifies the importance of their existence as teaching Mandarin, Chinese laws, and vocational skills to prevent citizens from being influenced by extremist ideas and inhibit the growth of terrorist organizations. The government has resisted international pressure to allow outside investigators, saying anything happening inside Xinjiang is an internal issue.

**The United States (US):** As aforementioned, former US President Donald J. Trump labeled the reeducation camps as attempting "genocide." Since then, the US has imposed visa restrictions on Chinese

officials and blacklisted many Chinese companies and agencies linked to the reeducation camps in the region, inhibiting them from buying US products. In September 2019, the US government passed a bill that mandated federal US government bodies to report human rights abuses by the CCP and the Chinese government against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, named the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2019. It was effectuated and signed by Donald J. Trump on June 17, 2020.

**United Nations (UN):** China's partners have been notably silent and ignorant upon Uyghur Muslims' encampment, indicating how they prioritized their economic ties and strategic relationships with China. As a response, in July 2019, a group of mostly European countries (no Muslim-majority countries were included) signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Chief condemning China's actions in Xinjiang. Other UN officials have been among those who have urged China to stop the abuses and call the camps an infringement of Uyghur's human rights.

Moreover, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has also been meticulously observing the region and was among the first to report receiving many credible reports that 1 million ethnic Uyghurs in China were being held in "re-education camps."

## Timeline of Events

<b>1933</b>	<i>The Kumul Rebellion takes place</i>
<b>1944</b>	<i>The Ili Rebellion takes place</i>
<b>1949</b>	<i>Xinjiang enters Chinese rule</i>
<b>1996</b>	<i>The "strike-hard" campaign is initiated</i>
<b>2014</b>	<i>The "strike-hard" campaign is relaunched</i>
<b>2017</b>	<i>1 million Uyghurs are detained in reeducation camps, reported by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination</i>
<b>April 2017-August 2018</b>	<i>Uyghur reeducation camps are reported to triple in size by satellite images</i>
<b>July 23, 2019</b>	<i>A joint letter to the 41st Annual Session of the UNHRC is issued</i>
<b>September 2019</b>	<i>The US Senate passes the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act</i>

<b>October 29, 2019</b>	<i>European Countries issue a Joint Statement at the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination</i>
<b>June 17, 2020</b>	<i>Donald J. Trump signs the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act</i>

## Treaties and Events

- [A Joint Letter to the 41st Annual Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/41/G/11 \(23 July 2019\)](#)

This letter, which included signatures from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany, called the Chinese government to refrain from human rights violations and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion. Moreover, the letter also called the Chinese government to refrain from the detention of Uyghur Turks in re-education camps in Xinjiang.

- [Joint Statement, Delivered by UK Representative to the United Nations, on Xinjiang at the Third Committee Dialogue of the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination \(29 October 2019\)](#)

This joint statement issued by predominantly European nations urged China to "uphold its national and international obligations and commitments to respect human rights."

## Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

As seen from the previous section, much of the earlier attempts have comprised joint letters to China that condemn the maltreatment of Uyghur Turks in reeducation camps and call for the government of China to be mindful of human rights and freedoms granted to every individual no matter their race, ethnicity, or gender. However, no treaties or agreements have been made with China's government or the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwest China to close down the re-education camps.

Moreover, after the publication of the July 23rd Joint Letter, ambassadors of many countries, including the Russian Federation, released a [“counter-letter,”](#) expressing support for China's position on issues related to the Xinjiang conflict. In the joint letter, the Ambassadors commended China for its economic and social progress, effective counter-terrorism and de-radicalization measures, and strong guarantee of human rights (New China).

The conflict remains to be a prominent issue in the 21st century. It is evident that there is a division between the United Nations Member States upon the Xinjiang conflict and the maltreatment of Uyghur Turks. Therefore, it is fundamental that, first, all Member States of the United Nations and the UNHCR recognize this issue as a significant human rights violation made against Uyghur Turks and act accordingly to solve the issue.



## Possible Solutions

Considering the previous attempts to resolve the issue, although many nations have denounced the establishment of the "reeducation camps", China has refused to recognize these camps as a major human rights violation and an active attempt of sinicization. As aforementioned, China is perhaps further motivated to maintain the "reeducation camps" by the approval it receives from its ally countries as the number exceeds those denouncing the camps.

China has also refused to cooperate with the United Nations to shut down the camps, labeling the attempts as a "breach of sovereignty" and an "interference with internal affairs."

Taking note of these, the most viable solution to the issue at hand seems to be the interference of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). According to the UN Charter, the UNSC has the authority to interfere with the management of internal wars and internal relations especially when they constitute a threat to the maintenance of international peace and security. In the 2005 World Summit, all members of the United Nations unanimously passed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which is an important global principle and commitment based upon the underlying premise that sovereignty entails a responsibility to protect all populations from mass atrocity crimes and human rights violations. If this is not maintained by the nations themselves, R2P seeks to ensure that the international community never fails to halt the mass atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect). Paragraph 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document reads as:

*“The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In this context, we are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. (...)”*

Therefore, with the help of Member States denouncing the encampment of Uyghur Turks, the UNSC can establish a multinational force to provide, facilitate, and secure humanitarian relief in Xinjiang, as well as to monitor the region until all reeducation camps are shut down by the Chinese government. This can be supported by the continuous delivery of relief packages, including such but not limited to food and clothing to the Uyghur Turks detained in the camps. An integration program should also be established for the detainees for them to be able to adapt to their lives after enduring inhumane living conditions. This can also be done by establishing an UN-affiliated support group where former Uyghur detainees will be able to freely share their experiences in the reeducation camps freely alongside detainees who have also endured such conditions.



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