

Statement by Concerned Scholars on China's Mass Detention of Turkic Minorities
November 26, 2018

As concerned scholars who study China, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Central Asia, and other related regions of the world, we issue this statement to highlight our concerns and to call the international community to action in relation to the mass human rights abuses and deliberate attacks on indigenous cultures presently taking place in China's XUAR. The signatories to this statement are united in viewing the present situation in this region of China as one of significant international concern. This situation must be addressed to prevent setting negative future precedents regarding the acceptability of any state's complete repression of a segment of its population, especially on the basis of ethnicity or religion.

Background

The Chinese state is engaged in the mass detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other Muslim minorities in their homelands in the Central Asian borderlands of Northwest China.

Researchers estimate that around one million people have been detained without trial. In the camps, these detainees, most of whom are Uyghur, are subjected to deeply invasive forms of surveillance and psychological stress as they are forced to abandon their native language, religious beliefs and cultural practices. Outside of the camps, more than 10 million Turkic Muslim minorities in the region are subjected to a dense network of surveillance systems, checkpoints, and interpersonal monitoring which severely limit all forms of personal freedom.

What is Happening in the Camps?

Until October 2018 the Chinese authorities officially denied the existence of the camps. They have since declared that the camps are "vocational training" schools which Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities attend voluntarily. In programing featured on state television on October 16, Uyghur detainees were shown learning Chinese, receiving training in industrial production, and discussing their regret concerning past religious and ethno-national beliefs while proclaiming a new-found love for the Chinese political system. Yet in many of the shots at the camp, it is clear that the detainees are being monitored by numerous cameras.

Reports from eyewitnesses have noted malnourishment and severe psychological distress among the detainees, and some report detainees being forcibly given psychiatric drugs. In some cases, shoelaces and belts are confiscated, due to the prevalence of self-harm and suicide. Those who do not fully participate in political reeducation are often subjected to beatings, solitary confinement, and forms of religious and psychological violation. There have been numerous reports of deaths in the centers, particularly among the elderly and infirm, but also of younger people who were in good health when they were taken. While there are frequent reports of more people entering the camps, there are very few reports of those being released.

Why is this happening now?

China's present signature foreign policy initiative is the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) that seeks to connect the PRC economically to the rest of the Eurasian continent through large infrastructure projects that will stimulate international trade. The western and south-western components of the BRI require the XUAR to serve as a transportation and commercial hub to trade routes and pipelines that will join China with Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and the entirety of Europe. As a result, the XUAR has become a very important strategic region for China, and the state views its indigenous populations as an obstacle to developing its vision for this future critical center of international commercial networks.

What are the implications of the mass detention system in the XUAR for the rest of China?

China's approach in the XUAR is consistent with the CCP's broader implementation of the concept of "social management" as a means of preserving its hold on power. For the Party, the goal of "social management" and the "social credit" system is to ensure that the population internalizes the Communist Party's ideology and supports the Party's hold on power. In the XUAR, this requires that key markers of Turkic Muslim identity such as religious observance and language be forcibly "cured" or "eradicated" through mass incarceration and "re-education." There are concerns that such extreme measures could be replicated to address other segments of the Chinese population who are perceived as threatening the Party's monolithic vision of the PRC.

What are the implications for the rest of the world?

China has defended its mass incarceration of Turkic Muslims on the basis of counter-terrorism. However, it is also apparent that China is both seeking to embed its Xinjiang-focused policies in counter-terrorism cooperation with international partners and to export the methods and technologies that have underpinned its "surveillance state" in Xinjiang. If what is happening today in the XUAR is not addressed by the international community, there is a likelihood that we could see its replication in other authoritarian states who have used the label of "terrorist" to describe those who peacefully resist state hegemony.

Policy Suggestions

There is now significant discussion among US and European leaders regarding economic sanctions directed at key Chinese leaders and security companies. There is also discussion of new forms of assistance to Uyghur and Kazakh asylum seekers outside of China and the establishment of a Congressional Act in the US that would earmark resources to protect the human rights of Uyghurs inside China. The signatories support these initiatives and call for the following additional measures to be taken by the international community:

- 1) We call on states and institutions to issue formal statements demanding that Xi Jinping and Chen Quanguo immediately abolish the “transformation through education” detention system and release all Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other detainees.
- 2) We call on states and institutions to demand and impose economic sanctions on Chinese authorities and technology companies in- and outside of China, which are benefiting from this process. Such sanctions should go beyond lower-level officials and target Chen Quanguo, under whose leadership in the region this system of mass incarceration has been instituted. Likewise, they should include high-profile technology companies, whose concessions to the Chinese government on internet surveillance have implicated them in the repression presently taking place in the XUAR.
- 3) We call on states and institutions to introduce legislation joining Germany and Sweden in granting expedited asylum to Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic Muslim minorities from China and a blanket refusal to deport Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims to China.
- 4) We call on Beijing to cease its extra-territorial campaign of harassment against members of the Uyghur diaspora community around the globe and urge relevant states and institutions where those communities reside to make the protection of Uyghurs a matter of priority in their diplomatic relations with Beijing.
- 5) We call on the thirteen UN member states that expressed grave concern about the existence of this system of mass incarceration at the recent UN Universal Periodic Review of China’s human rights record to spearhead a movement for UN action aimed at investigating this mass internment system and closing the camps. Additionally, we call on those states that have yet remained silent on this issue, including Muslim-majority states and those in Central Asia whose own citizens or citizens’ relatives have been interned, to join in this action.
- 6) We call upon countries presently engaged in negotiations regarding projects that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly those that are linking to the XUAR as a hub for trade and commerce, to make their involvement in these projects contingent on the closing of the mass internment camps and the ceasing of other means of mass repression to which the Turkic minorities in this region are currently subjected.
- 7) We call upon academic institutions around the world with formal partnerships with state-run Chinese academic institutions to express their concern about the present situation in the XUAR with their colleagues and to consider suspending their partnerships until the camps have been closed and all detainees are released.

