



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing on Uyghur Human Rights in China and Abroad

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Introduction

The Chinese government has long conflated peaceful activism with violence in Xinjiang, and has treated many expressions of Uyghur identity, including language and religion, as a threat to national security. Uyghur opposition to government policies has been expressed in peaceful protests but also through violent attacks. However, details about protests and violence are scant, as authorities severely curtail independent reporting in that region.

While central Chinese government and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) level policies have long been repressive, the human rights situation has deteriorated significantly following the July 2009 protests in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, and following the transfer of former Tibet Party Secretary Chen Quanguo to Xinjiang in August 2016.

Recent developments

In 2017, the Chinese government continued its 2014 “strike-hard” campaign in Xinjiang, vowing to adopt “unconventional tactics” in countering terrorism. In the latter half of 2016, the Xinjiang regional government expanded its already pervasive security measures by hiring thousands more security personnel. In 2017, the Xinjiang government waged a campaign against “two faced” Uyghur cadres thought to be disloyal to the Communist Party's stance on Uyghurs. In April, 97 officials in Hotan prefecture were reprimanded.

Authorities have increasingly restricted and punished Uyghurs' foreign ties. Since October 2016, authorities have arbitrarily recalled passports from residents of Xinjiang. Since about April this year, authorities have [arbitrarily detained](#) thousands of Uyghurs and other Muslims in centers where they were forced to undergo “patriotic education.” The justification of political education facilities is to change Uyghurs' “thoughts” so they can become more patriotic towards the central Chinese state. Authorities also ordered Uyghur students studying abroad, [including in Egypt](#), to return to Xinjiang; and in July, Egyptian authorities rounded up those who failed to return – possibly at China's behest. Some of those who returned were detained; a Xinjiang court

sentenced Islamic scholar Hebibulla Tohti to 10 years in prison after he returned with a doctorate degree from Egypt's Al-Azhar University. Human Rights Watch is aware of at least two cases in which Chinese authorities have pressured the families of Uyghurs studying in the US.

Authorities also announced new restrictions that impinge on religious freedom and civil liberties. In April, the Xinjiang Counter-Extremism Regulations, which prohibit the wearing of “abnormal” beards or veils in public places, went into effect. Also in April, Xinjiang authorities issued a new rule banning parents from [naming children](#) dozens of names with religious connotations, such as Mecca and Medina, on the basis that they could “exaggerate religious fervor.”

This year, Human Rights Watch documented alarming new uses of technology for surveillance in Xinjiang, including the collection by police of [DNA samples](#) absent a legal basis for doing so or privacy protections for the affected individuals. In July, authorities forced residents in a district of Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, to install surveillance apps on their mobile phones. In 2016, police bureaus in Xinjiang [purchased voice pattern collection systems](#), following the “Notice to Fully Carry Out the Construction of Three-Dimensional Portraits, Voice Pattern, and DNA Fingerprint Biometrics Collection System” (关于全面开展三维人像、声纹、DNA 指纹生物信息采集系统建设相关工作的通知). A local police station reported that front-line officers are given monthly quotas for biometric collection. Human Rights Watch had earlier documented that [Xinjiang passport applicants](#) are required to submit their biometrics to the police, which includes a voice pattern sample.

Chinese authorities justify their harsh policies in Xinjiang as essential to combating terrorism. In February, a video believed to be released by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) showed Uyghur fighters who pledged to return to China and “shed blood like rivers”—the first reported direct threat by the group against Chinese targets. A 2016 study reported that at least 114 Uyghurs had joined ISIS, but estimates vary widely and the level of participation remains unconfirmed, and there is little reliable evidence to suggest ties between actors inside Xinjiang and organized, international Islamist extremist groups.

Recommendations for the United States government and Congress:

- Condition cooperation, including information-sharing or training, on counterterrorism with China on measurably greater respect by Beijing for human rights in Xinjiang, including greater disclosure of the evidence in terrorism-related prosecutions and a repeal of vaguely worded and abusive policies.
- Press publicly for release of individuals wrongfully detained for peaceful advocacy, including imprisoned Uyghur economist [Ilham Tohti](#), [his students](#), activist [Zhang Haitao](#), and scholar Hebibulla Tohti.
- Examine and tighten the export control list to prohibit any transfer of technology that enables the Xinjiang police bureau to collect Uyghurs' biometrics.

- Press countries with Uyghur communities, including Egypt and Turkey, to not forcibly return Uyghurs to China without those individuals being given an opportunity to properly contest their case before an independent and impartial court.
- Ensure that Uyghurs in the US are not subject to threats, harassment, or other reprisals issued by Chinese authorities.
- The US ambassador to China should issue a standing request to visit Xinjiang.
- Work with the newly-formed “Friends of Xinjiang” coalition in the European Parliament.