Uyghurs in China

Uyghurs (also spelled "Uighurs") are an ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) northwest. Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The XUAR, often referred to simply as Xinjiang (pronounced "SHIN-jyahng"), is a provincial-level administrative region which comprises about one-sixth of China's total land area and borders eight countries. The region is rich in minerals, produces over 80% of China's cotton, and has China's largest coal and natural gas reserves and a fifth of its oil reserves. Beijing hopes to promote Xinjiang as a key link in the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative, which includes Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and energy development in neighboring Central and South Asia.

Sources: CRS using U.S. Department of State Boundaries; Esri; Global Administrative Areas; DeLorme; NGA.

All or parts of the area comprising Xinjiang have been under the political control or influence of Chinese, Mongols, and Russians for long periods of the region's documented history, along with periods of Turkic or Uyghur rule. Uyghurs played a role in the establishment of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. The PRC asserted control over Xinjiang in 1949 and established the XUAR in 1955.

Uyghurs once were the predominant ethnic group in the XUAR; they now constitute roughly 45% of the region's population of 24 million, or around 10.5 million, as many Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, have migrated there, particularly to the provincial capital, Urumqi. Many Uyghurs complain that Hans have benefitted disproportionately from economic development in Xinjiang.

Human Rights Issues

Since an outbreak of demonstrations and ethnic unrest in 2009 and clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel that spiked between 2013 and 2015, PRC leaders have sought to "stabilize" the XUAR through more intensive security measures aimed at combatting "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism." PRC official data indicates that criminal arrests in Xinjiang increased from approximately 14,000 in 2013 to 228,000 in 2017.

Two prominent Uyghurs serving life sentences for state security crimes are Ilham Tohti (convicted in 2014), a Uyghur economics professor who had maintained a website related to Uyghur issues, and Gulmira Imin (convicted in 2010), who had managed a Uyghur language website and participated in the 2009 demonstrations. In September 2017, former Xinjiang University President Tashpolat Tiyip, an ethnic Uyghur, was convicted of separatism in a secret trial and received a death sentence with a two year reprieve. His status is unknown.

In tandem with a new national religious policy referred to as "Sinicization," XUAR authorities have instituted measures to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society and reduce the influences of Uyghur, Islamic, and Arabic cultures and languages. The XUAR government enacted a law in 2017 that prohibits "expressions of extremification," and placed restrictions, often imposed arbitrarily, upon face veils, beards and other grooming, the practice of some traditional Uyghur customs, and adherence to Islamic dietary laws (halal). Thousands of mosques in Xinjiang reportedly have been demolished as part of what the government calls a "mosque rectification" campaign; others have been "Sinicized"—minarets have been taken down, onion domes have been replaced by traditional Chinese roofs, and Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed.

China's new religious policies also have placed greater restrictions on the Hui, another Muslim minority group in China who number around 11 million, although these have been less severe than those placed on the Uyghurs. The Hui are more geographically dispersed and culturally assimilated than the Uyghurs, are generally physically indistinguishable from Hans, and do not speak a non-Chinese language.

With the apparent strong backing of Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, beginning in 2016, the new Communist Party Secretary to the XUAR, former Tibet Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, stepped up security measures aimed at the Uyghur population. Such actions have included the installation of thousands of neighborhood police kiosks, more intrusive monitoring of Internet use, and the collection of biometric data for identification purposes. In addition, the central government has sent an estimated one million officials and state workers from outside Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Han, to live temporarily in the homes of Uyghurs to assess their loyalty to the Communist Party.

Mass Internment

According to some estimates, since 2017, Xinjiang authorities have arbitrarily detained approximately 1.5 million Turkic Muslims, mostly ethnic Uyghurs and a smaller number of Kazakhs, in "reeducation camps." PRC officials describe the Xinjiang facilities as "vocational education and training centers" where "trainees" study Chinese, take courses on PRC law, learn job skills, and undergo "de-extremization" or are "cured of ideological infection." Some may have engaged in religious and ethnic cultural practices that the government now perceives as extremist, or as manifesting "strongly religious" views or thoughts that could lead to the spread of religious extremism or terrorism. Detainees reportedly are compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs and to undergo self-criticisms. According to some former detainees, treatment and conditions in the camps include crowded and unsanitary conditions, food deprivation, beatings, and sexual abuse. Some reeducation centers reportedly contain factories producing goods for export.

In July 2019, Xinjiang officials claimed that most detainees had "returned to society." Some Uyghurs living abroad, however, state that they still have not heard from missing relatives in Xinjiang. Some reports indicate that many of those released from reeducation centers are still heavily monitored and their movements are restricted; many are required to attend political study classes or have been assigned to jobs in factories where they are strictly supervised. Some detainees have received prison sentences.

Forced and Involuntary Labor

The PRC government, as part of its national "poverty alleviation" policy, has provided financial incentives for companies from wealthier provinces to relocate or invest in manufacturing facilities in poorer, western areas of China, including the XUAR. According to some reports, this economic policy has been combined with "stability maintenance" efforts in Xinjiang, where the government has begun to move large numbers of Uyghurs into the formal workforce, particularly into labor intensive textile and apparel factories. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment may be threatened with detention.

U.S. Responses

Trump Administration officials have openly condemned PRC forced-assimilation policies and the mass, arbitrary detention of Uyghurs. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has held two hearings on human rights issues in China during the 116th Congress, in which witnesses provided accounts of the mass internment of Uyghurs. In October 2019, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China held a hearing entitled "Forced Labor, Mass Internment, and Social Control in Xinjiang."

In January 2019, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act was introduced in the Senate and House (S. 178 and H.R. 649). S. 178 was passed by the Senate on September 11, 2019. The act would mandate four U.S. agency reports on the Uyghur human rights situation and urge the Administration to establish a U.S. Special Coordinator for Xinjiang in the Department of State, among other provisions. It would urge the Secretary of State to consider imposing visa and economic sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act (subtitle F of P.L. 114-328) upon PRC officials responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The UIGHUR Act of 2019 (H.R. 1025), introduced in February 2019, would in part call upon the Administration to engage in international advocacy in support of Turkic Muslims in China, promote Radio Free Asia's Uyghur language programming, and restrict the export of U.S. technologies that facilitate the mass detention of Turkic Muslims in China.

On October 1, 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection announced that it had blocked certain shipments of goods suspected of having been made with forced labor from five countries, including China, pursuant to Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930. The Chinese goods, sportswear made for a U.S. company, were suspected of using forced labor from a Xinjiang reeducation camp.

On October 7, 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that it would add 28 PRC entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) "entity list" under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR), for their connections to PRC human rights abuses against Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang. The action imposes licensing requirements prior to the sale or transfer of U.S. items to these entities. On October 9, 2019, the State Department announced visa restrictions against an unspecified number of Chinese government and Communist Party officials who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, the detention or abuse of Uighurs or other members of Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang.

Alleged Terrorism

The PRC government has attributed numerous deadly incidents in the XUAR to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it portrays as a Uyghur separatist and terrorist group with ties to global terrorist organizations. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002 (to block terrorist financing) and placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List in 2004 (to prevent the entry of terrorists into the United States). ETIM is not on the Department of State's narrower "Foreign Terrorist Organization" (FTO) list. Roughly 100 Uyghurs from China entered Islamic State territory during 2013-2014, according to the New America Foundation.

At its height, ETIM, whose members reportedly spent time in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s, was a small, loosely organized and poorly financed group that lacked weapons and had little if any contact with global jihadist groups, according to some experts. The U.S. government "identified sufficient evidence" to consider three violent incidents in China purportedly involving Uyghurs as terrorist attacks in 2014. The lack of available information in most other cases has made it difficult to verify PRC accounts of alleged terrorist activity. The Department of State reported that in 2018, there was a lack of independent evidence that ETIM is still active.

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IF10281

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