



CHINA: “WHERE ARE THEY?”

TIME FOR ANSWERS ABOUT MASS DETENTIONS IN THE
XINJIANG UIGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION

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Cover photo: Family members of ethnic Kazakhs share photos of missing relatives they believe have been detained in “transformation-through-education” centres in China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Almaty, Kazakhstan, September 2018.
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INTRODUCTION

Located in China's far northwest, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is a huge, sparsely populated area encompassing vast semi-desert steppes in the north and severe desert basins ringed by historic oasis towns in the south. Roughly three times the size of France, the area covered by the XUAR was renowned over centuries for the ancient Silk Road and its flourishing conduit of trade and culture between China and the rest of the world.

That history made the XUAR one of the most ethnically diverse regions in China. More than half of the region's population of 22 million people belong to mostly Turkic and predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, including Uighurs (around 11.3 million), Kazakhs (around 1.6 million) and other populations whose languages, cultures and ways of life vary distinctly from those of the Han who are the majority in "interior" China.

Rich in coal, natural gas and oil and sharing borders with eight different countries, the XUAR is intertwined with many of China's economic, strategic and foreign policy goals. But decades of inter-ethnic tensions have led to cycles of sporadic violence and heavy-handed repression. China's leaders now consider stability in the XUAR vital to the success of the "Belt and Road Initiative", a massive global infrastructure development programme aimed at strengthening China's links to Central Asia and beyond.¹



Map of the People's Republic of China showing the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in yellow.

¹ D. Tweed, "China's New Silk Road," *Bloomberg*, 23 August 2018, www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/china-s-silk-road

Today, however, the world's attention has focused on the XUAR for other reasons. Over recent months, disturbing details have emerged from the region describing intrusive surveillance, arbitrary detention, political indoctrination and forced cultural assimilation being carried out there on a massive scale and targeting the region's Uighurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim peoples. In concluding observations to its August 2018 review of China, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD Committee) expressed alarm about reports of arbitrary, prolonged and incommunicado mass detention of Uighurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities under the pretext of countering terrorism and religious extremism.²

The picture of what is happening in the XUAR is gradually coming into focus, but as the Chinese government has long barred any form of meaningful independent investigation in the region, much remains unknown. In recent months Amnesty International has spoken with more than 100 people across four continents who say they have lost touch with relatives and friends inside the XUAR and fear that they have been detained. The secretive and undocumented way people are going missing there makes it nearly impossible to trace or confirm the whereabouts of any particular individual. Amnesty International has begun to collect accounts from affected individuals, and these accounts corroborate many of the details that are being reported by others.

At this point, our concern about recent developments in the XUAR demands that we urgently speak out and call on the Chinese authorities to begin providing credible answers to questions about the current crackdown.

Among all those questions, perhaps most urgent is one all those family members who've reached out to us want answered more than any other. On behalf of the missing inside the XUAR and the people worldwide who care about them, it is that question we are now asking the Chinese government in a strong, unified voice: "Where are They?"

NOTE ON HOW THIS BRIEFING WAS PREPARED

Investigating sensitive human rights issues in the XUAR has always been exceptionally difficult. Diplomats and UN human rights experts typically only gain access to the region through visits carefully managed and controlled by the local authorities. Foreign reporters are routinely followed and harassed by security officials.³ Some have even been expelled or denied work visas for investigations in the XUAR.⁴ Locals are often reluctant to share information with outsiders, fearing repercussions. It is extremely difficult under such conditions to collect and present accurate evidence of human rights violations that may be taking place.

Amnesty International has been closely following the reporting of media organizations and other NGOs about the situation in the XUAR. Our organization has not independently verified many of the descriptions of the detention system that have been reported so far through on the ground investigations in the XUAR. We initially conducted remote interviews with eight individuals who contacted us for help locating relatives or friends. In September 2018, we collected testimonies from more than 100 ethnic Kazakhs originally from the XUAR during a four-day visit to Kazakhstan. Based on these interviews and the reporting of others, we are sufficiently convinced that the detention system in the XUAR exists and that further action needs to be taken to investigate it.

Most of the interviews with the Kazakhs in this briefing were arranged by Serikzhan Bilash and Kydyrali Orazuly who founded the organization Atajurt (Атажурт), which helps to document the cases of Chinese-born Kazakhs living in Kazakhstan who have lost contact with relatives who are either detained in "political re-education camps", under house arrest or have had their passports confiscated by the Chinese authorities.

Except where otherwise noted, all interviewees consented to the use of their full names and the names of relatives missing or presumed detained.

² Concluding Observations of UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: China, UN Doc. CERD/C/CHN/CO/14-17, para. 40. See also Amnesty International, *China: Systematic repression of ethnic minorities laid bare in UN findings* (Press release, 30 August 2018), www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/china-systematic-repression-of-ethnic-minorities-laid-bare-in-un-findings/

³ "Harassment of journalists in China: reporters covering Xinjiang prevented from conducting interviews", Foreign Correspondents Club of Hong Kong, www.fcchk.org/harassment-of-journalists-in-china-reporters-covering-xinjiang-prevented-from-conducting-interviews/

⁴ M. Forsythe, "China Says It Will Expel French Journalist," *New York Times*, 19 January 2018, www.nytimes.com/2015/12/27/world/asia/china-says-it-will-expel-french-journalist.html; A. Ramzy & E. Wong, "China Forces Out Buzzfeed Journalist," *New York Times*, 24 August 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/world/asia/china-buzzfeed-reporter.html

FAMILIES FEARING THE WORST

“When will the nightmare start again? What can I do? Who is going to care about us?”

Uighur journalist Gulchehra Hoja, on the detentions her family has faced in the XUAR, 13 March 2018.

For months, relatives of the missing kept their anguish largely to themselves. They hoped that loss of contact with loved ones back home would be temporary, and they feared making things worse if they sought outside attention. Now, with no clear end in sight for their worries, more and more are willing to speak up and share what they know.

They come from the diaspora of Uighur emigrants and refugees who have settled across the world and the thousands of Chinese-born Kazakhs who have taken up residence in neighbouring Kazakhstan, having until very recently been able to travel relatively freely back and forth between the two countries.

BOTA'S ACCOUNT: “I WANT TO SEE MY FATHER AGAIN”



Bota Kussaiyn, 26, holds a photo of her father, Kussaiyn Sagymbai, who was detained in a political “re-education” camp in the XUAR after returning to China from Kazakhstan to seek medical treatment, September 2018. © Amnesty International.

Bota Kussaiyn, a Kazakh student studying at Moscow State University, last spoke with her father in November 2017. Originally from the XUAR, their family had re-settled in Kazakhstan in 2013. A leg ailment led Bota’s father, **Kussaiyn Sagymbai**, to return to the XUAR for medical treatment.

Bota’s father told her that local police had confiscated his passport without giving any reason. Three months later, her mother who had stayed behind in Kazakhstan learned from relatives back in the XUAR that her father was in a political “re-education” camp in E’min County, across the Kazakhstan

border in the northwestern part of the XUAR, but the family did not know the exact location where he was being held.

Those relatives were so afraid that further contact might put them under suspicion that they stopped communicating with her mother altogether after that.

“My father is an ordinary citizen. We were a happy family before he was detained. We laughed together. We can’t laugh any more, and we can’t sleep at night. We live in fear every day. It has done great harm to my mother. We don’t know where he is. We don’t even know if he’s still alive. I want to see my father again.”

(Online interview, 29 August 2018 and interview in Kazakhstan, 7 September 2018)

To avoid arousing such suspicion, Uighurs, Kazakhs and others inside the XUAR have been cutting ties with friends and family living outside China. They warn acquaintances not to call and delete outside contacts from social media applications.⁵ The resulting communications vacuum only intensifies the information black hole that the XUAR has become. When you lose all contact with loved ones back home, how do you know whether it is because they are intentionally avoiding you for self-protection or because they have been taken away by the authorities? Unable to get reliable information from home, many Uighurs and Kazakhs living abroad inevitably fear the worst.

AKEDA’S ACCOUNT: WORRIES FOR MOTHER, PROMINENT UIGHUR SCHOLAR NOW MISSING



*Uighur scholar Rahile Dawut, undated photograph at Oxford University.
© Private*

Akeda (who asked to be identified only by her first name) last spoke with her mother, **Rahile Dawut**, in December 2017. She now fears her mother, a prominent Uighur scholar, has been detained at a “re-education” camp in the XUAR.⁶ When Akeda, who is studying in the USA, contacted relatives and her mother’s students back in China, no one was able to provide her with any information.

“I am scared for my mom. I am really concerned about her health and safety,” Akeda told Amnesty International by email. “She is an honest and assiduous teacher. She dedicated all her life [to] teaching and research. I can’t think of any reason why she should suffer.”

(Email correspondence with Amnesty International, 3 September 2018)

⁵ N. VanderKlippe, “Uyghurs around the World Feel New Pressure as China Increases Its Focus on Those Abroad,” *The Globe and Mail*, 29 October 2017, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/uyghurs-around-the-world-feel-new-pressure-as-china-increases-its-focus-on-thoseabroad/article36759591/

⁶ C. Buckley & A. Ramzy, “Star Scholar Disappears as Crackdown Engulfs Western China”, *New York Times*, 10 August 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/world/asia/china-xinjiang-rahile-dawut.html

Adding to the pressure on those living abroad are aggressive efforts by Chinese security officials to recruit spies in overseas communities.⁷ Those targeted are reportedly threatened that if they do not cooperate, family members back in the XUAR will be detained. If they do cooperate, on the other hand, they receive promises that family members will be treated leniently.

Not knowing who among the community living overseas might be reporting back to security authorities in China plants seeds of suspicion and distrust that take root and further feed the sense of isolation and fear. The omnipresence of these feelings is contributing to a growing crisis of despair and depression among the diaspora community, according to a clinical social worker who has surveyed Uighurs living abroad.⁸



NURSHAT'S ACCOUNT: TEENAGE DAUGHTER, SON BOTH GONE MISSING

Nurshat Mamish went to Kazakhstan in November 2017 and is now a Kazakhstani citizen. She appeared heartbroken when she told Amnesty International that her 13-year-old daughter, **Dinara Yergali**, had gone missing after returning to Zhaosu County, XUAR, in March 2018. A month earlier, Dinara had gone to Kazakhstan to stay with her mother, but she returned when relatives back in Xinjiang warned Nurshat that other family members would be in trouble if she and her family did not return immediately.

Dinara did not want to leave her mother, but Nurshat and her family had her return, thinking that nothing would happen to a 13-year-old girl and it might reduce pressure on other family members. Now, however, Dinara's whereabouts are unknown and her family fears she has been detained.

Two months before Dinara went missing, Nurshat's 24-year-old son **Yerbol Yergaliuli** called from the XUAR to say that he had been detained. He, too, had been planning to join the family in Kazakhstan, but now Nurshat has no idea where he is.

Having lost track of two children, Nurshat now says she can only hope that they will soon be allowed to travel to Kazakhstan to reunite as a family.

(Interview with Amnesty International, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 8 September 2018)

Uighurs overseas also fear what might happen to them if they return to the XUAR. Those with the right to reside in other countries at least have the ability to stay where they are. But students on short-term visas or people seeking asylum in other countries do not always have that option. In 2017, more than 200 Uighur students were detained in Egypt, of whom at least 22 were forced to return to China.⁹ To date, there is no news of their whereabouts. Even amid growing reports of the ongoing repression in the XUAR, an immigration panel in Sweden initially denied asylum to a Uighur family of four who were seeking to rebuild their lives in safety there.¹⁰

States have an obligation under international law to comply with the principle of *non-refoulement* by ensuring that people are not returned, either directly or indirectly, to a country where there is a real risk of serious human rights violations or abuses.

⁷ M. Rajagopalan, "They Thought They'd Left the Surveillance State Behind. They Were Wrong." *BuzzFeed News*, 9 July 2018, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/china-uighur-spies-surveillance

⁸ N. VanderKlippe, "Uyghurs around the World Feel New Pressure as China Increases Its Focus on Those Abroad."

⁹ Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: More Uighur Students at Risk of Forcible Return* (Index: MDE 12/6848/2017).

¹⁰ J. Olsson, "Sweden about to deport a Uyghur family to Xinjiang", *INBEIJING.se*, 5 September 2018, inbeijing.se/bulletin/2018/09/05/Sweden-about-to-deport-a-uyghur-family-to-xinjiang/

GULCHEHRA'S ACCOUNT: JOURNALIST FEARS FOR FATE OF DETAINED FAMILY MEMBERS



Uighur journalist Gulchehra Hoja (Back-R) with her parents and brother, undated. © Private

Gulchehra Hoja, a Uighur journalist based in Washington, DC, has worked with Radio Free Asia for 17 years. Because of the critical nature of some of her reporting, the Chinese government has been harassing her family for years.

Gulchehra phones her parents each week. At least she did up until early February 2018, when she lost contact. She learned from friends of the family that her parents had been caught up in a sweep of arrests targeting some 20 members of her family.

Gulchehra's elderly mother, Qimangul Zikri, was only released after she became sick, and together with her father remains under house arrest at home after her father was also released on the same day from the hospital where he was under guard. Many of her other family members are still missing, including her brother.¹¹

Gulchehra feels she has to continue working to get her family released and to speak out in the meantime. "If this is how they treat a woman in her seventies, what is happening to my brother?" she asked. "Even if they are all set free, that fear still lives with me," she said. "My mother used to say that I'm lucky enough for not experiencing the Cultural Revolution. However, we witnessed ever worse situations. I don't want my kids say similar sentences in the future."

(Interview for Amnesty International, Washington, DC, 13 March 2018. Online correspondence with Amnesty International, 5 September 2018)

¹¹ Amnesty International, *China: 20 relatives of Uighur journalist detained* (Index: ASA 17/7964/2018); Amnesty International, "Separated Souls: Uighur journalist's unbreakable resolve to help her detained family", 16 March 2018, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/uighur-journalists-unbreakable-resolve-to-help-detained-family/

“NO RIGHTS ZONE”

Meanwhile, Chinese officials claim that, thanks in large part to the prosperity and stability they say that government policies have brought to the XUAR, the region’s Uighurs are the “happiest Muslims” in the world.¹² Chinese diplomats assert that the region is a place where “[p]eople of all ethnic backgrounds respect and love each other, and work together for a better life”.¹³

In fact, ethnic tensions in the XUAR are nothing new. For decades, many Uighurs have felt resentment towards what they see as systematic ethnic and religious discrimination in the XUAR. Promised broad autonomy under China’s laws and policies, many Uighurs and other ethnic minority groups instead experience social and economic disadvantage. Though they acknowledge that government policies have led to economic development of the XUAR, they see many of the benefits of growth either flowing out of the region or going to the many Han immigrants who have been encouraged to settle in the region over the years.¹⁴ On top of this is a sense of cultural alienation, as they are repeatedly being told that their traditions are backwards compared with the modernity of Chinese culture and their children receive a “bilingual education” that focuses on teaching Chinese language and Han culture at the expense of their own language and traditions.¹⁵



Undated photo of Uighur woman walking through an alley in the western city of Kashgar. Under the “Regulation on De-Extremification” implemented in the XUAR since March 2017, the wearing of traditional veils and headscarves can lead to punishment. © Feifei Cui-Paoluzzo/Getty Images

¹² B. Blanchard, “China Official Says Xinjiang’s Muslims Are ‘Happiest in World,’” *Reuters*, 25 August 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang/china-official-says-xinjiangs-muslims-are-happiest-in-world-idUSKCN1B50ID

¹³ Liu Xiaoming, “Harmony in Xinjiang Is Based on Three Principles,” *Financial Times*, 20 August 2018, www.ft.com/content/05a81682-a219-11e8-85da-eeb7a9ce36e4

¹⁴ Ilham Tohti, “Present-Day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Overview and Recommendations”, translated by Cindy Carter, *China Change*, chinachange.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ilham-tohti_present-day-ethnic-problems-in-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-overview-and-recommendations_complete-translation3.pdf

¹⁵ Amnesty International, *China: Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 96th Session, 6–30 August 2018* (Index: ASA/17/8742/2018).

ILHAM TOHTI: TIRELESS EFFORTS TO BUILD ETHNIC UNDERSTANDING LEAD TO LIFE SENTENCE



Uighur economist Ilham Tohti, 6 November 2009. © Private

Under the present environment in the XUAR, even relatively mild and constructive criticism of the government's handling of ethnic policy can lead to heavy punishment. **Ilham Tohti**, a respected Uighur economist and founder of a popular bilingual website aimed at fostering inter-ethnic dialogue, knows this only too well.

In 2014, Ilham was sentenced to life in prison for “separatism” and portrayed as having tried to incite ethnic tensions. Several students of his were also sentenced to prison.¹⁶ Through his writing and lectures, Ilham had been highlighting how Uighur discontent and ethnic tensions were fuelled by government policies limiting the use of the Uighur language, severely restricting Uighurs' ability to practise their own religion, blocking their chances of getting a job and encouraging Han migration into the region. Though critical, Ilham consistently opposed violence and was never an advocate of Uighur independence. Amnesty International considers Ilham Tohti to be a prisoner of conscience and has called on China to release him immediately and unconditionally.¹⁷

The resentment has led some Uighurs to dream of declaring independence from China and forming their own country, which they call “East Turkestan”. It is this advocacy for independence that has led law enforcement authorities in the XUAR to wage a longstanding campaign to root out and punish those believed to be engaging in so-called “separatist” activity.¹⁸ This campaign escalated after 11 September 2001, when China began to link its suppression of pro-independence activity among Uighurs to the spreading “war on terror”.¹⁹

Things took another turn in 2009 after inter-ethnic riots in Urumqi, the region's capital, left nearly 200 dead.²⁰ In response, a much stronger military and security presence was deployed throughout the XUAR, stoking even more tension. This escalated further after authorities blamed sporadic attacks in 2014 on Uighurs inspired by radical Islamist propaganda online.²¹ Since then, the XUAR has witnessed an expansion of police presence and security checkpoints, as well as a heavy blanket of surveillance cameras using cutting-edge facial recognition and other systems to track people through big data analysis.²² All this is part of a publicly declared “People's War on Terror” that has shifted the focus to combatting “religious extremism”, making all expressions of Islam potentially suspect.

¹⁶ BBC News, “China jails students of Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti”, 9 December 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30390801

¹⁷ Amnesty International, “Five facts about Ilham Tohti, award-winning activist jailed in China”, 20 October 2016, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/10/five-facts-about-ilham-tohti-uyghur-activist-jailed-in-china/

¹⁸ Amnesty International, *People's Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region* (Index: ASA 17/018/1999).

¹⁹ C. Chung, “China's ‘War on Terror’: September 11 and Uighur Separatism”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2002-07-01/chinas-war-terr-r-september-11-and-uyghur-separatism

²⁰ Amnesty International, “Justice, Justice”: *The July 2009 Protests in Xinjiang, China* (Index: ASA/17/027/2010).

²¹ Yang Fan & Gao Shan, “China Says ‘Religious Extremists’ Behind Xinjiang Attack”, *Radio Free Asia*, 1 May 2014, www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/attack-05012014155928.html

²² M. Rajagopalan, “This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like”, *BuzzFeed News*, 17 October 2017, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/the-police-state-of-the-future-is-already-here; J. Chin & C. Bürge, “Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China's Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life”, *Wall Street Journal*, 20 December 2017, www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355

PARTY SECRETARY CHEN QUANGUO OVERSEES “NO RIGHTS ZONE” IN XUAR



XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo (Back-R) attends a meeting of the 19th Communist Party Congress at the Great Hall of the People on 19 October 2017 in Beijing, China. © Etienne Oliveau/Getty Images

The spread of the surveillance and social control measures being used in the XUAR coincided with the arrival in 2016 of the region’s current party secretary, Chen Quanguo. Before being appointed to the top of the political hierarchy in the XUAR, Chen held the same position in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) from 2011 to 2016. During his time there, he established a reputation as an “ethnic policy innovator” who won praise for maintaining relative stability and bringing an end to a series of self-immolation protests by Tibetans in the TAR.²³ Chen’s strategy has involved heavy investment in the XUAR’s security infrastructure, recruiting thousands of additional police and security personnel, setting up “convenience police stations” throughout urban areas, deploying high-tech surveillance equipment and increasing checkpoints to monitor people’s movement. These measures have contributed to turning the XUAR into what CERD Committee Co-Rapporteur Gay McDougall characterized as a “no rights zone”.²⁴

²³ A. Zenz & J. Leibold, “Chen Quanguo: The Strongman Behind Beijing’s Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang”, *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, 21 September 2017, jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/

²⁴ “Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviews the report of China” (Press release, 13 August 2018), www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23452&LangID=E

“TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EDUCATION”

Mass detention camps began making their appearance locally in 2014, spreading rapidly throughout the XUAR after the adoption of regional “Regulations on De-Extremification” in March 2017.²⁵ Many call them “re-education camps”, but most are officially known as centres for “transformation-through-education” (*jiaoyu zhuanhua*).²⁶ Despite this bland-sounding name, the goal of these facilities appears to be replacement of religious affiliation and ethnic identity with secular, patriotic political allegiance.²⁷ The Chinese government mostly denies that these facilities exist, but their construction has been documented by recruitment and procurement documents and satellite imagery.²⁸

No one knows exactly how many people have been detained since the crackdown began. One widely accepted estimate, published in May 2018, put the total number of detained at “anywhere between several hundred thousand and just over one million”.²⁹ This range was cited by the CERD Committee in its concluding observations to its review of China.³⁰ Whatever the actual number at the time the estimate was produced, it is almost certain to have risen since then.

The legal basis for both the detention facilities and the detentions themselves is extremely murky.³¹ Those sent for “transformation” are not put on trial; they have no access to lawyers or right to challenge the decision. Detentions are apparently open-ended and can last weeks, months – possibly even years. Because there is no fixed “sentence”, the authorities are left to decide when an individual has been satisfactorily “educated”.

²⁵ “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-Extremification,” *China Law Translate*, March 30, 2017, www.chinalawtranslate.com/%e6%96%b0%e7%96%86%e7%bb%b4%e5%90%be%e5%b0%94%e8%87%aa%e6%b2%bb%e5%8c%ba%e5%8e%bb%e6%9e%81%e7%ab%af%e5%8c%96%e6%9d%a1%e4%be%8b/?lang=en

²⁶ A. Zenz, “New Evidence for China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, 15 May 2018, jamestown.org/program/evidence-for-chinas-political-re-education-campaign-in-xinjiang/

²⁷ G. Shih, “China’s Mass Indoctrination Camps Evoke Cultural Revolution,” AP News, 18 May 2018, apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8bbd972e4b; R. Thum, “China’s Mass Internment Camps Have No Clear End in Sight,” *Foreign Policy*, 22 August 2018, foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/22/chinas-mass-internment-camps-have-no-clear-end-in-sight/; C. Buckley, “China Is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: ‘Transformation.’” *New York Times*, 8 September 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-detention-camp.html

²⁸ A. Zenz, “New Evidence for China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang”; S. Zhang, “List of Re-Education Camps in Xinjiang,” *Medium.com* (blog), 20 May 2018, medium.com/@shawnwzhang/list-of-re-education-camps-in-xinjiang-%E6%96%B0%E7%96%86%E5%86%8D%E6%95%99%E8%82%B2%E9%9B%86%E4%B8%AD%E8%90%A5%E5%88%97%E8%A1%A8-99720372419c.

²⁹ A. Zenz, “New Evidence for China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang.”

³⁰ Concluding Observations of UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: China, UN Doc. CERD/C/CHN/CO/14-17, para. 40.

³¹ J. Daum, “XJ Education Centers Exist, but Does Their Legal Basis?,” *China Law Translate*, 14 August 2018, www.chinalawtranslate.com/xj-education-centers-exist-but-does-their-legal-basis/?lang=en



DETAINEE TESTIMONY: “X” TELLS OF ELDERLY WOMEN FORCED TO LEARN CHINESE

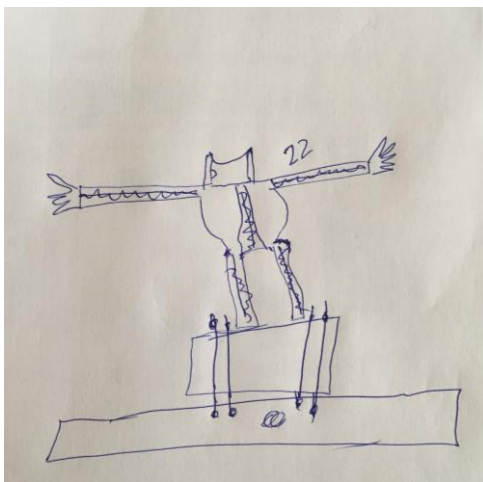
“X”, a young woman who requested anonymity for security reasons, was detained in a political “re-education” camp in Urumqi from February to August 2018. She told Amnesty International she witnessed older women in the camp – including Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim ethnic minorities – being forced to learn 100 to 200 Chinese language characters per day. Some of them cried and resisted, saying that they are Uighurs and Kazakhs and questioning why they needed to learn Chinese characters. The people teaching the political classes in the camp scolded the women for being unpatriotic and insisted they must learn Chinese as they are Chinese nationals.

(Interview with Amnesty International, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 9 September 2018)

According to those who have spent time in “transformation-through-education” centres, life inside for detainees is subject to a harsh discipline all but indistinguishable from that in formal detention facilities.³² They are lectured about the dangers of “religious radicalism”, made to study Chinese, and forced to memorize legal provisions and patriotic songs and write “self-criticisms” that are key to determining whether they have been sufficiently “educated” for release.

Those who resist or fail to show enough progress reportedly face punishments ranging from verbal abuse to food deprivation, solitary confinement, beatings and use of restraints and stress positions – likely to amount to violations of the absolute prohibition under international law of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.³³ There have been reports of deaths inside the facilities, including suicides of those unable to bear the mistreatment.³⁴

DETAINEE TESTIMONY: KAIRAT TELLS OF TORTURE, FORCED INDOCTRINATION



Drawing by former detainee Kairat Samarkan to illustrate the way he says police shackled and attached him to an iron bar with his arms spread wide and his body fixed in place so that he had to stand straight, unable to bend. © Amnesty International

Kairat Samarkan still vividly recalls how he was treated in a “re-education” camp. He returned to the XUAR from Kazakhstan in October 2017 in order to collect some money. A few days after arriving in Altay, his hometown in the far north of the XUAR, Kairat was called and taken away by the police, who questioned whether he had moved to Kazakhstan. Kairat said that when he told them that he had

³² S. Denyer, “Former Inmates of China’s Muslim ‘Reeducation’ Camps Tell of Brainwashing, Torture,” *Washington Post*, 17 May 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/former-inmates-of-chinas-muslim-re-education-camps-tell-of-brainwashing-torture/2018/05/16/32b330e8-5850-11e8-8b92-45fdd7aaef3c_story.html; Shih, “China’s Mass Indoctrination Camps Evoke Cultural Revolution”; N. VanderKlippe, “‘Everyone Was Silent, Endlessly Mute’: Former Chinese Re-Education Instructor Speaks Out,” *The Globe and Mail*, 2 August 2018, www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-everyone-was-silent-endlessly-mute-former-chinese-re-education/; E. Dou, J. Page & J. Chin, “China’s Uighur Camps Swell as Beijing Widens the Dragnet,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 August 2018, www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-ughur-camps-swell-as-beijing-widens-the-dragnet-1534534894.

³³ G. Shih, “China’s Mass Indoctrination Camps Evoke Cultural Revolution”; Human Rights Watch, “*Eradicating Ideological Viruses: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims*” (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018), pp. 33–36, www.hrw.org/node/322139.

³⁴ S. Denyer, “Former Inmates of China’s Muslim ‘Reeducation’ Camps Tell of Brainwashing, Torture.”

obtained permanent resident status in Kazakhstan, the police threatened him with jail for between three and nine months.

On 21 October 2017, Kairat was taken to a political “re-education” camp. There, he says he was hooded and made to wear shackles on his arms and legs. He told Amnesty International that for 12 hours he was attached to an iron bar with his arms spread wide and his body fixed in place so that he had to stand straight, unable to bend. He said police told him that they took him there because he had dual citizenship and betrayed the country and visited some sensitive websites.

Kairat recalls there were 5714 people in his camp – 3500 Kazakhs, 2000 Uighurs and 214 Dungans (Hui) – as they were required to do the roll call every day. People in the camp were separated in three categories – the religious, those who had travelled and “opposed the government” and those who broke the rules in the camp. He said that he and other detainees at the camp were forced to sing political songs and study the speeches of the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress and other materials praising how great the country has done. They were asked to write down what they had learned from the documents and forced to listen to the government radio news every evening.

Not allowed to talk to each other, detainees were forced to say “Long live Xi Jinping” before they could eat. Everyone was forced to watch each other two hours per day. Kairat attempted suicide when he was forced to take some medicine. He banged his head very hard on the wall and fainted. He was taken to a camp doctor and later transferred to a hospital outside the camp. To his surprise, he was released on 15 February 2018 and returned to Altay for a month before being allowed to travel on to Kazakhstan on 14 March 2018.

(Interview with Amnesty International, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 9 September 2018)

Male, female; young, old; urban, rural – all can wind up targets for “transformation”. There is no public listing of what criteria determine exactly who should be detained. Some locations have issued lists of “signs of extremism” and “illegal religious activities”.³⁵ Otherwise, it may simply be up to local officials to decide what passes for suspect behaviour. Some officials talk in dehumanizing terms of “eradicating tumours” or “pulling up weeds”.³⁶ There are even reports that, at least in some locales, authorities may have detained people indiscriminately in order to meet numerical quotas.³⁷

Travel abroad for work or education, particularly to majority Muslim countries, seems to be a major cause for suspicion. Contact with people outside China is also a clear trigger. So are open or even private displays of religious and cultural affiliation. This could include growing an “abnormal” beard, wearing a veil or headscarf, regular prayer, fasting or avoidance of alcohol or possessing books or articles about Islam or Uighur culture.



ZHAZIRA'S ACCOUNT: RELATIVES DETAINED FOR PHONE CONTENT, FAMILY VISITS

When Zhazira Anuarbeki lost contact with her brother-in-law, **Mursali Mazhanshe**, and learned that he had been taken to a “re-education” camp in Hutubi County in April 2017, she could not believe that the reason for his detention was simply because he had been found reading the Qur’an on his mobile phone. Zhazira was even more confused and shocked when she heard that her sister, **Munira Anuarbeki**, was also taken to a “re-education” camp in E’min County five months after visiting her and their mother in Kazakhstan in August 2017. Another relative, **Nurgazi Malikuli**, an imam, was reportedly sent to a “re-education” camp in Urumqi in August 2017.

(Interview with Amnesty International, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 8 September 2018)

³⁵ B. Dooley, “‘Eradicate the Tumors’: Chinese Civilians Drive Xinjiang Crackdown on Separatism,” *Japan Times Online*, 26 April 2018, www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/26/asia-pacific/eradicate-tumors-chinese-civilians-drive-xinjiang-crackdown-separatism

³⁶ R. Thum, “What Really Happens in China’s ‘Re-Education’ Camps,” *New York Times*, 7 August 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/opinion/china-re-education-camps.html

³⁷ C. Buckley, “China Is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal.”

Systems of intense surveillance, intrusive monitoring and restrictions on mobility make it possible for the authorities to scrutinize and control entire populations. The ubiquitous security checks that are now a routine part of daily life for all in the XUAR provide ample opportunity to search mobile phones for suspicious content or check people's identities using facial recognition software.³⁸ Individuals might come under suspicion through routine monitoring of messages sent on social media apps like WeChat, which does not use end-to-end encryption.³⁹ Use of alternative messaging apps with encryption, such as WhatsApp, can be cause for detention.



NIYAZIBIEKE'S HUSBAND: WOMEN HELD FOR HAVING WHATSAPP ON PHONES?

The last time **Niyazibieke Ayineur's** husband (who asked not to be named for security reasons) heard from her was a WeChat message on 23 February 2018. He now suspects the 49-year-old Kazakh former secondary school teacher was taken later that month to a "re-education" camp in Tacheng, in the northwestern XUAR. Her husband, who obtained citizenship in Kazakhstan this year, told Amnesty International that Niyazibieke had gone to Kazakhstan to visit him and their teenage daughter for 15 days in October 2016 before returning to the XUAR to finish her teaching job.

According to what her husband learned from Niyazibieke's relatives, the police who took her away said that she had registered three phones installed with WhatsApp and with Kazakhstan SIM cards. He says Niyazibieke told a relative that 20 people in the camp, including herself, were being held there for, among other reasons, having WhatsApp on their phones. Some of the women were pregnant or elderly. Relatives helped Niyazibieke send a message on WeChat to her husband back in Kazakhstan, saying: "I hope my daughter will study well."

(Interview with Amnesty International, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 8 September 2018)

The mass surveillance has been aided by a push to collect detailed biometric data from residents of the XUAR, part of a comprehensive population monitoring programme linked to "stability maintenance" and predictive policing. Such data includes fingerprints, DNA and voice samples and 360-degree body imagery, all of which can be used with various surveillance technology and big-data analysis programmes.⁴⁰



SYRLAS' ACCOUNT: POLICE CONFISCATE PASSPORTS, COLLECT BIOMETRIC DATA

When Syrlas Kalimkhan, a Kazakh university student, and his parents attempted to return to the XUAR in July 2017 to attend his older brother's wedding in Tacheng, in the northwestern part of the XUAR, their passports were confiscated at the Chinese border. Syrlas was asked by the police to go to the local police station, where officers made a recording of his voice, took his fingerprints, photos and other biometric data. The police also asked him if he took part in any religious activities. He remained in Tacheng for a month. After getting back his passport by presenting his university document, he returned to Kazakhstan. The Chinese authorities kept his parents' passports, however, preventing them from leaving the country. His father, **Kalimkhan Aitkali**, 53, a farmer who obtained permanent resident status in Kazakhstan in 2011, was taken to a "re-education" camp on 22 November 2017. According to Syrlas' mother, who occasionally communicated with him via WeChat, his father was sent to the camp in part because he used WhatsApp.

(Interview with Amnesty International, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 8 September 2018)

³⁸ M. Rajagopalan, "This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like"; J. Chin & C. Bürge, "Twelve Days in Xinjiang."

³⁹ S. Denyer, "China Detains Relatives of U.S. Reporters in Apparent Punishment for Xinjiang coverage", Washington Post, 28 February 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-detains-relatives-of-us-reporters-in-apparent-punishment-for-xinjiang-coverage/2018/02/27/4e8d84ae-1b8c-11e8-8a2c-1a6665f59e95_story.html. See also Amnesty International, *For Your Eyes Only?: Ranking 11 Technology Companies on Encryption and Human Rights* (Index: POL/40/4985/2016).

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses": China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims, p. 18.

Some data specifically targeting Uighurs and other Muslim groups is obtained through more low-tech means. Details about individuals and families have been collected through visits by work teams to Uighur homes and rural villages and through a programme known as “Becoming Family”.⁴¹ All this information goes into the compilation of detailed files and watch lists of “key individuals” and their networks of family and friends. Individuals are reportedly being assessed on their “trustworthiness” and assigned scores that determine how much scrutiny they should face or, even, whether they should be sent for “transformation”.⁴²



CONSEQUENCES OF BREAKING UP FAMILIES COULD BE LONG-TERM

Detentions can result in children being separated from their parents. Older children might be sent to state-run vocational training centres, while younger ones wind up in one of the massive “welfare centres” that have been constructed since 2017.⁴³ The detention of adult family members can also lead to economic hardship for families unable to harvest crops or replace lost sources of income.⁴⁴ Some suspect that the attempt to break up families is a deliberate way to push individuals away from traditional affiliations with family, culture and religion so that they will be more amenable to identify with the party state.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch, “China: Visiting Officials Occupy Homes in Muslim Region”, 13 May 2018, www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/13/china-visiting-officials-occupy-homes-muslim-region; B. Dooley, “Eradicate the Tumors”; Human Rights Watch, “Eradicating Ideological Viruses”: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims, pp. 79-82.

⁴² J. Chin & C. Bürge, “Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China’s Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life”.

⁴³ E. Feng, “Uighur Children Fall Victim to China Anti-Terror Drive”, *Financial Times*, 10 July 2018, www.ft.com/content/f0d3223a-7f4d-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d

⁴⁴ C. Buckley, “China Is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: ‘Transformation.’”

⁴⁵ R. Thum, “China’s Mass Internment Camps Have No Clear End in Sight”; S. Samuel, “China’s Jaw-Dropping Family Separation Policy”, *The Atlantic*, 4 September 2018, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/china-internment-camps-ughur-muslim-children/569062/

TIME FOR ANSWERS

China's Constitution, laws and ethnic policies all stress ethnic unity and prohibit discrimination against ethnic groups. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and other treaties China is a state party to, impose the obligation to end and prevent discrimination on grounds of race, colour, disability, sex/gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, language, religion or belief, political or other opinion, ethnicity, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. But China's expressed determination to eradicate the "forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism"⁴⁶ leads officials to pursue discriminatory policies that target members of ethnic groups merely for exercising their rights to freedom of religion and belief, thought, peaceful assembly, association, movement, opinion, expression and access to information.⁴⁷

Since 2014, the Chinese government has created a comprehensive "national security" legal architecture that presents severe threats to human rights. Vague and overbroad concepts of "national security", "separatism" and "extremism" used in China's Criminal Law, National Security Law, Anti-Terrorism Law, Cyber Security Law and other pieces of legislation contribute to the environment in which perceived threats are used to justify unlawful and arbitrary restrictions incompatible with China's obligations under international law on the right to liberty and the peaceful exercise of human rights. The "Regulation on De-Extremification" adopted in the XUAR, which is the purported legal basis for the detention of Uighurs, Kazakhs and others in that region, is a case in point.

Amnesty International recognizes that every government has the right and duty to protect its citizens, and that some countries have specific security concerns that differ from others. However, these concerns may never be used as an excuse to deny people the ability to exercise their human rights as protected by international legal standards. States should ensure that all measures aimed at counter-terrorism or protecting national security fully comply with their obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.

Detention of individuals resulting solely from the peaceful exercise of human rights, involving sufficiently serious violations of international norms relating to fair trials, or in violation of the principles of equality and non-discrimination constitutes arbitrary detention, which is prohibited under international human rights law. So do detentions that take the form of prolonged detention without charge or trial, or secret, prolonged incommunicado, or indefinite detention without review.

Arbitrary arrest or detention is consistently prohibited under international human rights law. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has stated that the prohibition constitutes a peremptory norm of international law, meaning that no derogations from it are permitted.⁴⁸ Arbitrary detention facilitates torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and other abuses. An important means of

⁴⁶ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of All Ethnic Groups*, 27 September 2009, www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-09/27/content_18610362.htm

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, *China: Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 96th Session, 6–30 August 2018* (Index: ASA/17/8742/2018).

⁴⁸ Report to the Human Rights Council, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, UN Doc. A/HRC/22/44 (2012), paras 37-76. See also Human Rights Committee, General Comment 24, Issues Relating to Reservations Made upon Ratification or Accession to the Covenant or the Optional Protocols thereto, or in Relation to Declarations under Article 41 of the Covenant, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.6 (1994), para. 8, and Human Rights Committee, General Comment 29, Article 4: Derogations during a State of Emergency, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.11 (2001), para. 11.

preventing these abuses is to ensure that proper grounds and procedures for deprivation of liberty are adhered to at all times.

Any system in which people are being detained on the basis of their ethnic or religious identity, when they have not committed any recognizable criminal offence, for indeterminate periods of time without trial under secretive conditions where they may be exposed to torture or other ill-treatment would constitute multiple human rights violations. Were such a system to be used on as massive a scale as current estimates suggest is taking place in the XUAR, the gravity of those violations would be extreme indeed.

It is essential that the Chinese government hear the concerns being voiced across the world about what is happening in the XUAR. The Chinese government needs to hear that the vilification of entire ethnic or religious groups will not bring the stability and harmony they seek in the XUAR. By targeting these groups and forcing them to undergo political and cultural assimilation, China's leaders are inviting conflict, chaos and large-scale human tragedy.⁴⁹

It is no longer acceptable for the Chinese government to simply deny carrying out any arbitrary detention or involuntary indoctrination in the XUAR. It is time for the government to open up to independent investigation and reveal full details of the measures being taken in the XUAR, as newly appointed High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called for in her first speech to the UN Human Rights Council on 10 September 2018.⁵⁰ And those suspected of responsibility for human rights violations must be brought to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty. Above all, there needs to be a full accounting of all those who have been detained for "transformation-through education" or any other measure associated with the current programme of "de-extremification".

⁴⁹ N. Bequelin, "The Dark Side of the China Dream: Erasing Ethnic Identity", *The Diplomat*, 17 August 2018, thediplomat.com/2018/08/the-dark-side-of-the-china-dream-erasing-ethnic-identity/

⁵⁰ "Opening Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet," 10 September 2018, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23518&LangID=E

RIGHT NOW, PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD WANT TO KNOW:

“WHERE ARE THEY?”

JOIN AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL IN CALLING ON THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT TO:

- Ensure that nobody is subjected to arbitrary detention;
- Immediately release all persons held in “de-extremification”, “transformation-through-education” or other facilities in the XUAR, unless there is sufficient credible and admissible evidence that they have committed an internationally recognized offence, are transferred to recognized detention facilities, and are granted a fair trial in line with international standards, and allow all those wrongfully held to legally challenge their continued detention;
- Pending their release, ensure that all detainees in “de-extremification”, “education” or other facilities in the XUAR have prompt and regular access to a lawyer of their choice, independent medical personnel and their families and are not subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;
- Ensure that everybody in the XUAR is able to communicate with family members and others without interference, including with those living in other countries, unless specifically justified in line with international human rights law;
- Repeal or amend all laws and regulations, and end all related measures, that impermissibly restrict the exercise of human rights by Uighurs and other ethnic minorities and ensure that any legal provisions aimed at protecting national security or counter-terrorism are clearly and narrowly defined and conform to international human rights law and standards;
- Conduct impartial, independent, prompt, effective and transparent investigations of anybody alleged to be responsible for violating the human rights of Uighurs or others in the XUAR and ensure that they are appropriately brought to justice without recourse to the death penalty and that the victims are granted full reparations for the harm they have endured;
- Stop requesting other countries to return individuals to China in violation of the *non-refoulement* principle;
- Respond promptly and positively to any and all requests to visit China by UN special procedures and provide them with unrestricted access to the XUAR.

ALSO, CALL ON YOUR GOVERNMENT TO:

- Cease, in accordance with their obligations under international law, all forced transfer, directly or indirectly, to China of Uighurs, Kazakhs or other Chinese nationals from the XUAR, if they would face a real risk of serious human rights violations;
- Ensure that any Uighurs, Kazakhs or others have prompt access to a fair and effective asylum process, legal counsel, a thorough assessment of the risks of human rights violations or abuses they might face upon return and the ability to challenge any removal orders;
- Provide Uighurs, Kazakhs or others seeking sanctuary with real opportunities to rebuild their lives in safety.

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CHINA: “WHERE ARE THEY?”

TIME FOR ANSWERS ABOUT MASS DETENTIONS IN THE XINJIANG UIGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION

Over recent months, disturbing reports have emerged of intrusive surveillance, arbitrary detention and forced indoctrination targeting Uighurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The secretive and undocumented way in which estimates of up to one million people are reportedly being detained indefinitely for so-called “transformation-through-education” creates conditions in which numerous human rights violations are taking place.

Relatives and friends of people who have gone missing in the XUAR are fearing the worst and beginning to voice those fears publicly. Amnesty International has spoken to more than 100 individuals, including former detainees, about the situation in the XUAR. Their testimonies corroborate the alarming picture that is slowly coming into sharper focus.

It is time for the Chinese government to open up to independent investigation and reveal full details of the measures being taken in the XUAR. Above all, there needs to be a full accounting of all those who have been detained under the current programme of “de-extremification”.

Join Amnesty International and people from around the world who want to know: “Where are They?”