

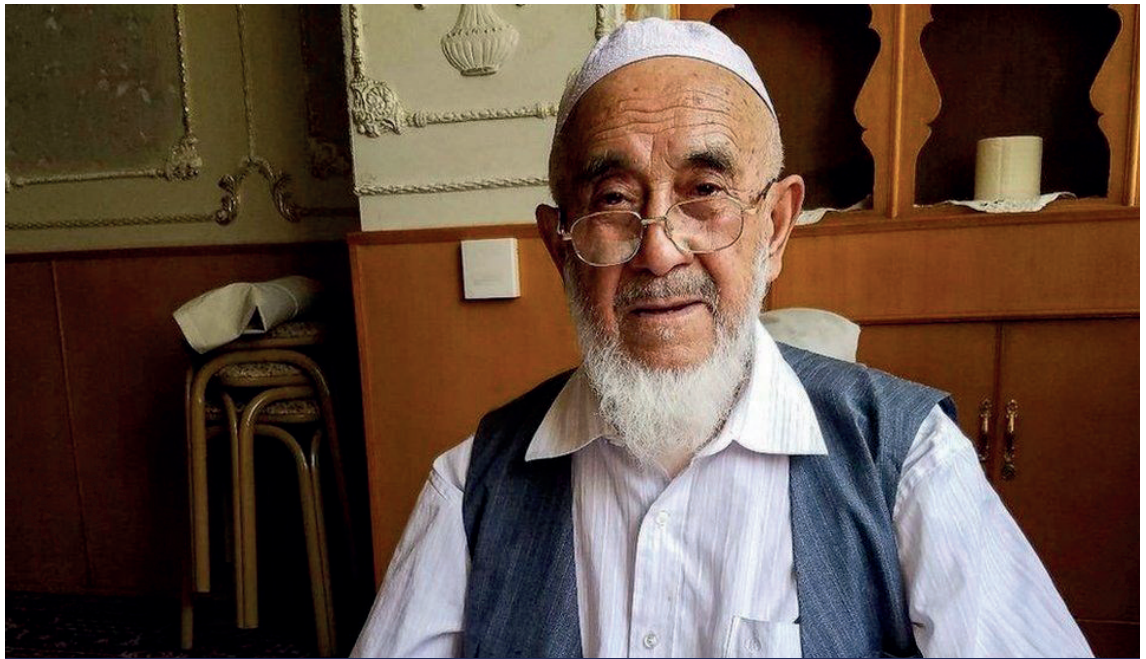


## UYGHUR IMAMS TARGETED IN CHINA'S CRACKDOWN



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## UYGHUR IMAMS TARGETED IN CHINA'S XINJIANG CRACKDOWN

**China has imprisoned or detained at least 630 imams and other Muslim religious figures since 2014 in its crackdown in the Xinjiang region, according to new research by a Uyghur rights group.**

The research, compiled by the Uyghur Human Rights Project and shared with the BBC, also found evidence that 18 clerics had died in detention or shortly after.

Many of the detained clerics faced broad charges like “propagating extremism”, “gathering a crowd to disturb social order”, and “inciting separatism”.

According to testimony from relatives, the real crimes behind these charges are often things like preaching, convening prayer groups, or simply acting as an imam.

The UHRP, working with rights group Justice for All, tracked the fates of 1,046 Muslim clerics — the vast majority of them Uyghurs — using court documents, family testimony

and media reports from public and private databases.

While all 1,046 clerics were reportedly detained at some point, in many cases corroborating evidence was not available because of China’s tight control over information in the region.

Among the 630 cases where it was, at least 304 of the clerics appeared to have been sent to prison, as opposed to the network of “re-education” camps most closely associated with China’s mass detention of the Uyghurs.

Where information was available from court documents or testimony about the length of the prison sentence, the punishments reflect

the harsh nature of Xinjiang justice: 96% sentenced to at least five years and 26% to 20 years or more, including 14 life sentences.

The database, which drew on research by the Uyghur activist Abduweli Ayup, as well as the Xinjiang Victims Database and Uyghur Transitional Justice Database, is by no means exhaustive — representing only a fraction of the total estimated number of imams in Xinjiang — and much of the data cannot be independently verified.



**But the research shines a light on the specific targeting of religious figures in Xinjiang, appearing to support allegations that China is attempting to break the religious traditions of the Uyghurs and assimilate them into Han Chinese culture.**

China denies those allegations, saying the purpose of its so-called “re-education” programme in Xinjiang is to stamp out extremism among the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.

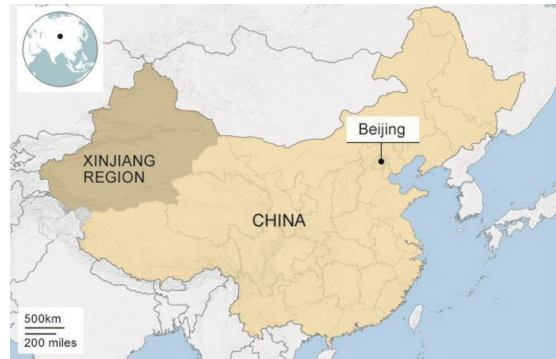
### Tying religion to extremism

China is believed to have detained more than a million Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang, a large region in north-western China that is home to various ethnically Turkic peoples. The state has been accused of human rights abuses in the region, including forced labour, sterilisation and rape.

Most of those detained in Xinjiang are sent to “re-education” facilities — prison-like camps where they are held for indeterminate periods of time without charge. But others have been given formal prison sentences, the number and severity of which have increased dramatically since 2017.

Publicly available detention or charging documents are rare, but those that do exist demonstrate how the state has worked to tie ordinary religious expression in Xinjiang to extremism or political separatism.

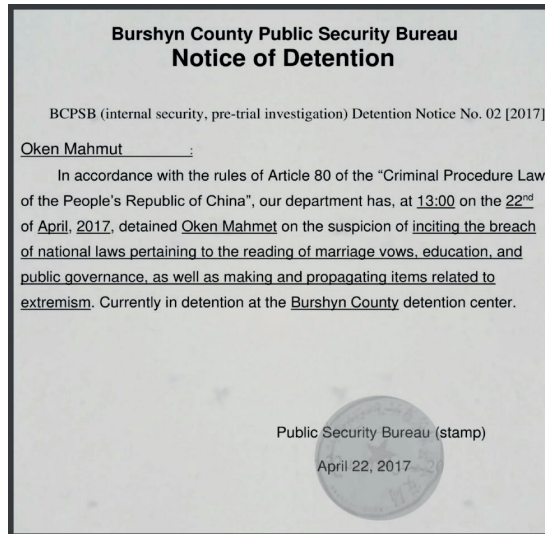
According to the arrest notice for Oken Mahmet, a 51-year-old Kazakh imam from Qaba in Xinjiang, Mahmet was charged with “propagating extremism”. According to testimony collated by the Xinjiang Victims Database, his family says he was arrested for leading Friday prayers and officiating marriages at a mosque.



Mahmet’s initial detention notice says he was detained for “inciting people to violate national laws pertaining to the reading of marriage vows, education, and public governance, as well as making and propagating items related to extremism”. His sentence was reportedly eight to 10 years.

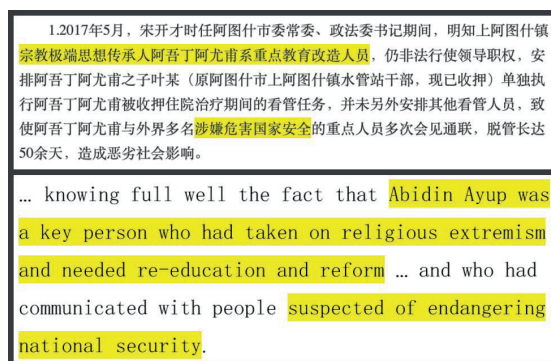
Baqythan Myrzan, a 58-year-old state-approved imam from Hami prefecture, was also arrested for “propagating extremism”. Myrzan was detained in August 2018 and held at a detention facility until May 2019, when he was sentenced to 14 years at the Bingtu-

an Urumqi Prison. Myrzan's family says his only crime was going about his duties as an imam.



And the only clues to the alleged offence committed by Abidin Ayup, a prominent scholar and imam from Atush city, were a few lines that appeared in a long court document from a separate case against a Han Chinese official. The official was accused of allowing Ayup's son to visit him at a hospital detention facility after he was arrested. The court document refers to Ayup, who was 88 when he was detained in 2017, as a "religious extremist".

Ayup's niece Maryam Muhammad told the BBC the imam was a "kind, hardworking, charitable man, cultured and knowledgeable, who encouraged young people to study not only religion but all the school subjects".



Muhammad, who is now in the US, said nearly 60 members of her extended family had been detained since Ayup's arrest, including her husband and all of the imam's eight children.

Extremism charges were being issued on a "flimsy legal basis" in Xinjiang for "offences that shouldn't even qualify as offences", said Donald Clarke, a professor at George Washington University who specialises in Chinese law.

"Setting to one side for a moment whether you accept 'propagating extremism' as a valid charge, the question is do the facts make a plausible case for that charge?" he said. "And the alleged offences we have seen — things like having a beard, not drinking, or travelling abroad — suggest they don't."

**The real reason imams were being targeted was "because of their ability to bring people together in the community", said Peter Irwin, senior programme officer at the Uyghur Human Rights Project.**

**"The state has been carefully dealing with imams for a long time because it knows the influence they have," he said. "The detentions and imprisonments of the past few years are just the culmination of three decades of repression designed to constrict Uyghur culture and religion."**

A spokesman for the Chinese government told the BBC that Xinjiang "enjoys unprecedented freedom of religious belief".

"Xinjiang's 'de-radicalisation' effort has effectively contained the spread of religious

extremism and made a great contribution to global ‘de-radicalisation’ efforts,” he said.

## The beginnings of ‘re-education’

Targeting of the Turkic ethnic groups in north-western China is not a new phenomenon. Muslim minorities suffered long periods of repression between the 1950s and 1970s, when Qurans were burned, mosques and cemeteries desecrated, and traditional dress and hair styles prohibited.

The 1980s brought a period of relative openness and revival. Damaged mosques were repaired and new mosques built; religious festivals allowed and imams and other figures permitted to travel; and the Quran translated for the first time into Uyghur, by the prominent Uyghur scholar Muhammad Salih Hajim.

But a violent uprising by Uyghur militants in 1990, in the town of Baren in Xinjiang, precipitated a crackdown by the Chinese state and the beginning of a two-decade period of gradually tightening control. Imams, seen by authorities as influential community figures, were increasingly required to demonstrate loyalty to the state.

**In the early 2000s, many imams were compelled to attend formalised education courses that foreshadowed the mass “re-education” programmes pursued today against the general population. According to Human Rights Watch, roughly 16,000 imams and other religious figures underwent “political re-education” between 2001 and 2002.**

Among them was Tursun, an imam who was first detained in 2001 for translating prayers from Arabic into Uyghur for his congregation, according to his niece.



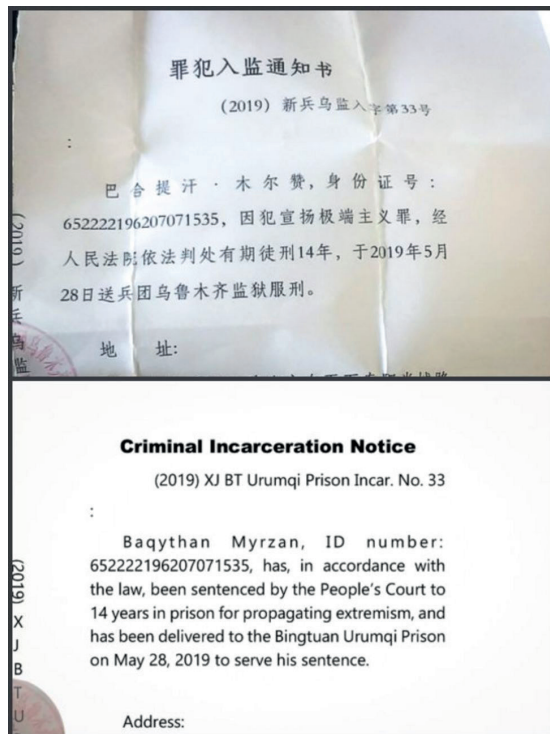
Tursun’s two-year stint in a “re-education through labour” camp marked the beginning of a two-decade ordeal at the hands of the state, his niece told the BBC from outside China. Her uncle was freed from the labour camp in 2002 but constantly harassed by police, she said, and frequently taken away again for two-week periods of “study”. Then in 2005, he was detained again but this time sentenced to four years in prison.

“We were not given any notice from the court,” his niece said. “My family went to the police station to enquire about his fate and the police gave them a handwritten note containing information about his prison sentence and the address of the prison.”

Tursun was released from prison in 2009, only to be detained again in 2017 after the hardline politician Chen Quanguo was put in charge of Xinjiang and escalated the campaign against the Uyghurs.

As appears to be the case with other imams in the region, Tursun’s family was subsequently targeted en masse, said his niece, who had left China by that time.

“After I heard the news of my uncle and his wife’s arrests, I heard that my mother and many of my relatives were also arrested. Anyone over 14 was taken away,” she said. “For the last four years I have been trying to find information regarding their whereabouts, especially my mother.”



About a month ago, Tursun's niece learned that her mother had been sentenced to 13 years in prison and her younger brother to five years. She doesn't know what the charges were. Her father is already serving a life sentence, she said, issued in 2008 for "illegal preaching" and "separatism".

"My mother was a simple housewife and she was sentenced to 13 years," she said. "I cannot imagine how long my uncle has been sent to prison for."

**They were targeted "because of their invisible authority", she added. "The state has tried everything to break them, to destroy them. And not only the religious leaders but also those who practise Islam quietly, and take pride in being Uyghur. They have made every effort to dig them out and destroy them."**

Some that disappear into detention never come out. Eighteen imams named in the da-

tabase were reported to have died while in custody or shortly after.

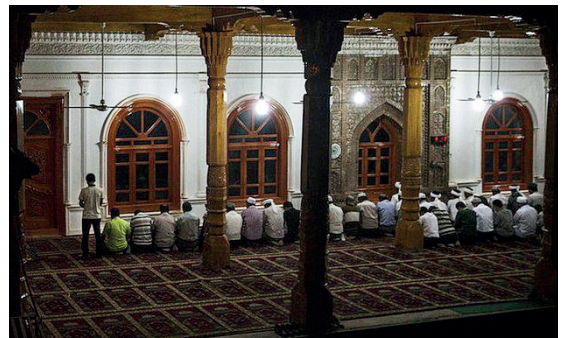
Nurgazy Malik, a father of two, graduate of the official Xinjiang Islamic Institute and editor-in-chief of a state-approved religious magazine, reportedly died in detention in November 2018. Unconfirmed reports say Chinese authorities acknowledged his death to his family, but did not produce a body — a situation echoed in other, similar reports. Malik's friends and relatives held a funeral for him in Kazakhstan all the same.

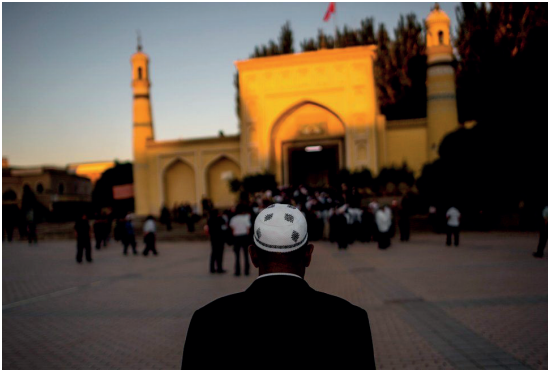
## A secret prayer

In late 2019, as its network of "re-education" camps drew intense international scrutiny, China claimed it had released everyone from the system. Significant numbers had been released, into house arrest or into the otherwise controlled environment of Xinjiang, but rights groups say many were simply transferred to formal prisons.

There is also evidence that many thousands had been in prison all along. Incarceration rates exploded in Xinjiang in 2017 and 2018, according to reporting by the New York Times and others, sweeping up at least 230,000 people — about 200,000 more than in previous years.

According to Chinese government data, criminal arrests in Xinjiang accounted for 21% of the country's total in 2017, despite the region having about 1.5% of the population.





Unlike the “re-education” system, formal prison sentences should create a paper trail. But the court documents are “nowhere to be found”, according to Gene Bunin, the researcher behind the Xinjiang Victims Database.

**According to Bunin, only 7,714 criminal verdicts are available for Xinjiang for 2018, despite the region logging 74,348 criminal cases that year. The near total absence of verdicts on charges typically levied against religious Uyghurs, like “propagating extremism” and “inciting separatism”, suggests China is intentionally scrubbing the record.**

Where official documents are available and contain details, offences can be shocking in their innocuity.

In one 2018 verdict, now deleted from the government records but archived by the Xinjiang Victims Database, a 55-year-old Uyghur farmer already serving 10 years for “propagating extremism” had his sentence doubled after he “used a disguised and simplified method to perform the namaz prayer in the prison dormitory”.

Essentially, Ismayil Sidiq secretly prayed in prison. He was reported by a cellmate and charged with “illegal religious activities” and

“inciting ethnic hatred and discrimination” — the latter charge for allegedly shouting that Uyghurs should not inform on one another. He will be eligible for release in 2038.

Those who are detained in camps stand a better chance of release after a few months or years, but release in Xinjiang does not necessarily mean freedom.

Memet, a Uyghur who fled Xinjiang, told the BBC his father was detained in 2017 after many years serving peacefully as an imam. Memet had been able to learn news of his family over the years from an acquaintance in Xinjiang — someone distant enough from the family that she felt safe messaging abroad from her WeChat account — but Memet heard virtually no news of his father’s condition for four years.

Then recently he heard his father had been released, and Memet imagined speaking to him for the first time in years. He asked the family acquaintance if she would be willing to find his father and connect them again via her phone.

On the appointed day, Memet received a message on his WeChat account from the acquaintance. She said she had found his father, but he had told her it would be better if he didn’t speak to his son. And after she sent the message, she blocked Memet from contacting her again.

*By Joel Gunter*



## MEPS VOTE TO FREEZE CONTROVERSIAL EU-CHINA INVESTMENT DEAL

The European Parliament has overwhelmingly voted to freeze the ratification of the EU-China investment deal due to the sanctions that Beijing has imposed on five members of the hemicycle.

**In a strongly-worded resolution passed on Thursday afternoon, the Parliament also deplors what it calls the “crimes against humanity” that are taking place against the Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region and the crackdown on the democratic opposition in Hong Kong.**

The latest development represents a new blow to the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) that European leaders reached during a video call with Chinese President Xi Jinping less than five months ago.

The Chinese government reacted to the European Parliament’s vote by calling on Brussels to “immediately stop interfering in China’s internal affairs (and) abandon its confrontational approach”.

“The unreasonable sanctions imposed by the EU have led to difficulties in China-EU relations. That is what China does not want to see, and the responsibility does not lie with the Chinese side,” China foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a daily briefing.

Zhao reiterated China’s stance that the agreement is a “balanced and win-win deal that benefits both sides, rather than a gift or favour bestowed by one side to the other.”

“China has always been sincere in promoting cooperation between the two sides, and we hope that the European side will move in the same direction as us, with less emotional outburst and more rational thinking, and make the right decision in their own interests,” Zhao said.



## EU, China sanction each other

The agreement’s main goal is to increase market access and ensure fair treatment for EU investors and companies doing business in China. The text wants to create a so-called level playing field and contains provisions on state-owned enterprises and subsidies.

While initially hailed as landmark, the agreement was quickly criticised for what critics say are insufficient commitments made in regards to labour rights, particularly forced labour. This issue has become politically thorny after revelations emerged of forced labour inside the detention camps in Xinjiang, which add to accusations of torture, disappearance, forced sterilisations, sexual violence and mass surveillance.

The ratification of the investment deal by the European Parliament – a necessary step in the EU legislative cycle – was in doubt from the very moment the draft text was published, but tensions escalated rapidly when, in late March, the European Union decide to impose the first sanctions against China in more than 30 years.

The raft of measures, designed in coordination with Western allies, targeted four Chinese officials and one entity believed to be involved in the human rights violations against the Uyghur minority.

China reacted swiftly and furiously: in an almost instantaneous counter-strike, the Chinese Foreign Ministry slapped sanctions

on ten European individuals, including five Members of the European Parliament, and four entities, among which was the Parliament’s subcommittee on human rights.

Beijing also blacklisted democratically-elected officials from the UK, the US and Canada. In total, more than 30 individuals and entities were sanctioned.

### An ‘attack’ against the EU

The Chinese counter-sanctions have infuriated the European Parliament and soured the mood for ratification.

In the joint resolution approved on Thursday with 599 votes in favour and 30 against, MEPs lambaste Beijing’s response, calling it “an attack against the European Union and its Parliament as a whole, the heart of European democracy and values, as well as an attack against freedom of research”.

**“While the EU’s sanctions target human rights violations and are based on legitimate and proportionate measures embedded in international law, China’s sanctions lack any legal justification, are entirely unsubstantiated and arbitrary and target the criticism of such human rights violations,” the parliamentarians wrote.**

The MEPs say that any discussion around the investment deal “has justifiably been frozen because of the Chinese sanctions” and refuse to open the debate as long as they remain in place. They argue their ability to scrutinise the agreement has been “significantly hindered” by the restrictions placed on the subcommittee on human rights.

Moreover, the Parliament “considers the sanctions to be part of an effort to police

Final votes - Second voting session				
Subject	AM	Voting		
		+	-	0
Doleschal (A9-0152/2021)				
Aarhus Convention Vote:	693	613	51	29
referral back				
(RC9-0269/2021) Chinese				
countersanctions Vote:	687	599	30	58
resolution (as a whole)				



speech about China worldwide and to determine what kind of speech and discussions would be allowed globally, and sees this effort as part of a totalitarian threat”.

The lawmakers took the opportunity to push the European Commission, which acts as main negotiator of the deal, to “improve the protection of human rights and support for civil society in China” and underlined that other trade and investment agreements with regional partners, like Taiwan, “should not be held hostage to the suspension of the CAI ratification”.

MEPs also urged the Chinese government to ratify and implement several conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), including those related to forced labour, freedom of association and the right to organise.

China and the United States are the only big economies that have not ratified the 1930 convention that abolishes forced labour in all its forms. China hasn’t ratified either the United Nations’ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Reacting to the move from Brussels, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said the investment

deal is a “win-win” for both sides and asked for “positive efforts” towards an early ratification. Spokesperson Zhao Lijian defended the Chinese counter-sanctions as a “necessary, legitimate and just reaction to the EU’s moves of imposing sanctions and seeking confrontation”.

“China has every sincerity in developing its relations with the EU. That said, we will firmly safeguard its sovereignty, security and development interests. Sanctions and confrontation cannot solve the problems; dialogue and cooperation is the right way forward,” he said.

### **‘This agreement is in the freezer’**

The European Parliament has no intention of backing down on its demands, at least not for the time being.

Reinhard Bütikofer, one of the MEPs punished by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, believes that, beyond the diplomatic show-down, the whole deal needs to be reviewed and reworked in order to get the Parliament’s green light.

“Basically the resolution says this agreement is in the freezer, buried very deep in the freezer. And we demand that China lift its sanctions before the European Parliament could be willing to consider dealing with the matter,” Bütikofer, who co-authored the resolution, told Euronews ahead of the vote.

**“When you look at the substance, there are issues not really addressing the application of forced labour in China. [The deal] doesn’t give a very strong conflict-resolution mechanism. If China fails to implement the provisions of the deal, the instruments that we have to force them to live by [them], the letter that they have signed onto, are extremely weak,” said the German MEP, who sits with the Greens and currently chairs the Parliament’s Delegation for relations with China.**

“There are restrictions with regard to the market access. This is neither providing a level playing field nor is really very beneficial to the European industry, with a few exceptions maybe. And on the other hand, it allows the Chinese side to enjoy national treatment with regard to European media while European

media are still excluded from the Chinese market completely.”

Bütikofer hopes member states will send a “clear signal of solidarity” with the European Parliament in its standoff with China. The MEP thinks that the growing reluctance of countries like Poland, Italy and the Netherlands, together with the scheduled departure of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been one of the deal’s main promoters, doesn’t bode well for the agreement’s future.

Dr Fabian Zuleeg, chief economist at the European Policy Centre (EPC), shares the Green MEP’s assessment and warns the new confrontation heralds a challenging chapter in EU-China relations.

“It’s not necessarily the actions of the parliament, but clearly the sanctions, the counter-sanctions, the overall international situation are all leading to a situation where member states are considering what the relationship with China is and how to take things forward,” Zuleeg told Euronews.

“I think China has its own agenda [in] deciding the relationship with the European Union and with the United States. But it looks like we are in for a difficult period, certainly for the next month, if not years.”

*By Brussels Bureau*





## LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENT LATEST TO CALL CHINA'S TREATMENT OF UYGHURS 'GENOCIDE'

Lithuania's parliament on Thursday became the latest to describe China's treatment of its Uyghur minority as "genocide", voting to call for a U.N. investigation of internment camps and to ask the European Commission to review relations with Beijing.

The Biden administration in the United States has used the term genocide to describe China's actions towards the Uyghurs, as have countries including Britain and Canada. Beijing denies abusing minorities and has condemned countries for using the term.

The non-binding resolution, supported by three-fifths of Lithuanian parliament members, also called on China to abolish a national security law in Hong Kong, and to let observers into Tibet and begin talks with its spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

Neither Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte nor Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis participated in the vote, despite being present in the parliament.

"We support democracy, as we will never forget the cruel lesson of living under occupation by a Communist regime for 50 years",

said Dovile Sakaliene, a lawmaker blacklisted by China and who sponsored the resolution. [read more](#)

China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a briefing on Friday that Beijing firmly opposed the move and urged Lithuania to correct its mistakes to avoid harming relations.

Lithuania, which suffered repression under Soviet rule from 1940-1991, is now a member of the EU and NATO, and has often taken a prominent role in pushing for tougher Western diplomatic lines towards Russia and Communist countries such as China.

Rights groups, researchers, former residents and some Western lawmakers say authorities in China's Xinjiang province have arbitrarily detained around a million Uyghurs and members of other primarily Muslim minorities in camps since 2016.

Beijing initially denied the camps existed but has since said they are training centres designed to combat religious extremism.

*By Andrius Sytas*



蓬佩奥又开始对我们新疆指手画脚

## CHINESE AUTHORITIES ORDER VIDEO DENIALS BY UYGHURS OF ABUSES

URUMQI, China (AP) — China has highlighted an unlikely series of videos this year in which Uyghur men and women deny U.S. charges that Beijing is committing human rights violations against their ethnic group. In fact, a text obtained by the AP shows that the videos are part of a government campaign that raises questions about the willingness of those filmed.

**Chinese state media have published dozens of the videos praising the Communist Party and showing Uyghurs angrily denouncing former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for declaring a genocide in the far west Xinjiang region. The videos, which officials have insisted are spontaneous outpourings of emotion, have also featured prominently in a series of government news conferences held for foreign media.**

But the text obtained by AP is the first concrete confirmation that the videos are anything but grassroots. Sent in January to government offices in the northern city of Karamay, the text told each office to find one Uyghur fluent in Mandarin to film a one-minute video in response to Pompeo’s “anti-China remarks.”

“Express a clear position on Pompeo’s remarks, for example: I firmly oppose Pompeo’s anti-Chinese remarks, and I am very angry about them,” the text said. “Express your feelings of loving the party, the country and Xinjiang (I am Chinese, I love my motherland, I am happy at work and in life, and so on).”

While it’s not impossible officials were able to find Uyghurs willing to be in such a public relations campaign, China’s track record in Xinjiang and its documented abuses of Uyghurs have led many experts to conclude it’s more likely those in the videos were forced to take part.

“There’s something instinctive about these videos which feels ingenuine, but the significance is that there’s hard evidence here that the Chinese government is requesting these kinds of videos,” said Albert Zhang, a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute who recently coauthored a report on Beijing’s disinformation campaign on Xinjiang.

Xinjiang spokesperson Xu Guixiang did not directly deny the authenticity of the text, but said it didn’t follow the usual format of state orders and that his understanding was that “the government has never issued this kind of notice or made this kind of request.” He suggested the videos were made voluntarily.

“This didn’t require government organization. Many among the masses made this totally spontaneously,” Xu said in a recent interview. “Pompeo’s anti-China remarks arose the intense resentment of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang.”

Beijing is increasingly under fire for its campaign of mass detention, cultural destruction and forced assimilation of Uyghurs and other largely Muslim minorities native to Xinjiang.

Western governments have levied sanctions against top Chinese officials, while the U.S. government has banned imports of cotton and tomatoes from Xinjiang, citing concerns over forced labor.

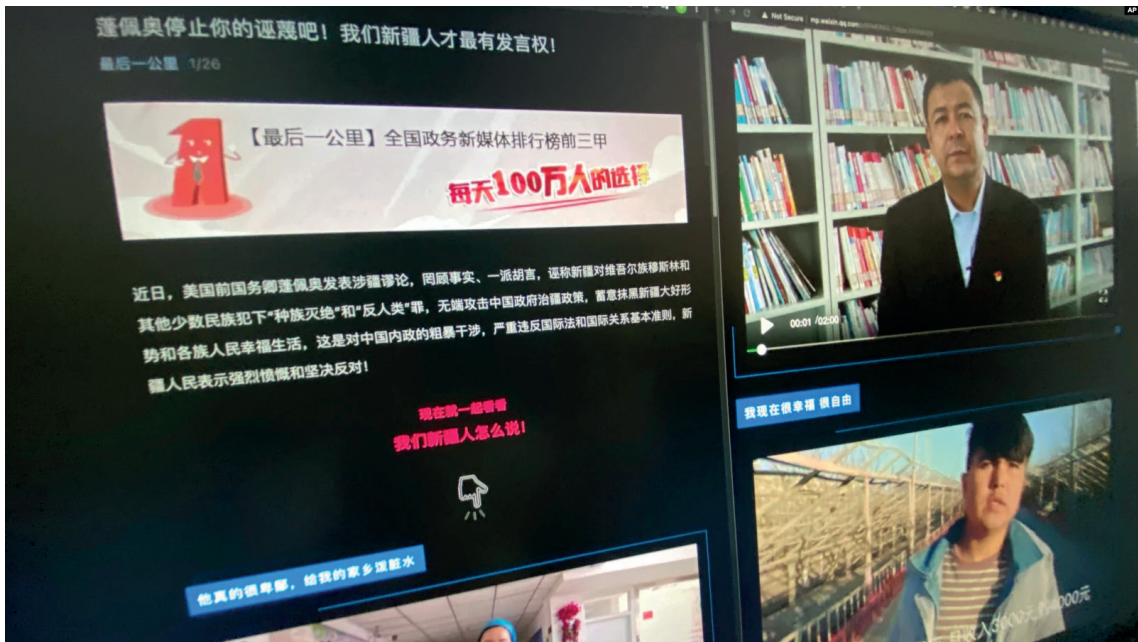
Tahir Imin, a Uyghur activist who fled China in 2017, said the videos are almost certainly state-orchestrated and coerced, given that information in Xinjiang is heavily censored.

“People don’t know who Pompeo is or what he’s saying,” Imin said. “How would they know what Mike Pompeo is saying about the Uyghurs?”

The AP was unable to authenticate the text independently. However, friends of Firdavs Drinov, the man who sent a screenshot of the text to the AP, said he had obtained it from a friend with family working for the Karamay government. Three days after he sent it, police detained Drinov and the friend, holding a special meeting on how to punish him, two other friends said.

In a fax, the Xinjiang government confirmed that Drinov had been arrested, saying he was suspected of “fabricating and posting fake





information” and “poisoning and bewitching ignorant groups and instigating splittism.” Referring to Drinov by his legal Mandarin name, Chen Haoyu, it said he is awaiting trial in a detention center and that his “rights will be protected according to the law.”

The fax did not answer a question about whether Drinov’s detention was linked to the screenshot.

His friend Vincent Gao called the charges nonsense, saying Drinov, who is biracial, opposed Xinjiang independence and believed in friendship between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, the country’s dominant ethnic group. Gao added that Drinov was very wary of fanatic extremism.

“He’s never said or done anything to split the country,” said Gao, a PhD student in Italian at Yale University in the U.S. “He was very proud of his Han heritage. There is no rational reason why he would support separatism.”

Drinov is a linguist who harbored dreams of obtaining a doctorate in the United States despite never having gone to college. Fluent in

Mandarin, English, Uzbek, Uyghur, Russian, and French, he had at one point trained to represent China at the International Linguistics Olympiad in 2015.

Drinov maintained an open presence on Western social media platforms banned in China such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. He had run into trouble with authorities before.

**In December 2019, he was put in a detention center for 15 days for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” a vague charge often used against people the ruling Communist Party sees as threatening. Police grilled him after he posted internal documents about the government’s crackdown in Xinjiang from a New York Times story on one of his Chinese social media accounts, according to texts he sent to Wang Tonghe, a computational linguist who befriended Drinov online.**

Experts say the videos of supportive Uyghurs ordered up by authorities are part of a broader state-coordinated disinformation campaign aimed at whitewashing their policies in Xinjiang.

**Dozens of new Twitter and TikTok accounts promoting those policies have cropped up. Some purport to be run by Uyghurs from Xinjiang, even though merely downloading those apps has landed others in detention. The accounts share videos promoting Xinjiang's lush landscapes and snow-capped mountains, depicting an idyllic, carefree life at total odds with accounts from hundreds of Uyghurs and Kazakhs who have fled the region in recent years.**

Zhang's Australian Strategic Policy Institute report traced some of the social media videos to a company funded by the Xinjiang government. It found that many of the accounts were likely to be inauthentic and state-linked, though it could not prove so definitively.

"I think it's interesting, the amount of resources the Chinese government is willing to use to produce this content and disseminate it," Zhang said. "The scale and the persistence of it is new and sort of concerning."

Many of the glowing Uyghur social media posts have been shared by a slew of new ac-

counts opened by Chinese officials and state media outlets in recent years.

China has had a much different reaction to scholars and activists using social media to research or speak out against the situation in Xinjiang.

Nyrola Elimä, a Uyghur living in Sweden, said that after she started tweeting about the detention of her cousin, police pounded on her mother's door in Xinjiang clutching printouts of her tweets. "Make your daughter delete these," they said, threatening to detain her if Elimä didn't comply.

In March, Beijing sanctioned British Uyghur specialist Joanne Smith Finley after she repeatedly characterized the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang as a genocide, first doing so in an AP story about forced birth control measures.

Finley responded to the sanctions on Twitter: "I have no regrets for speaking out, and I will not be silenced."

*By DAKE KANG*







## XINJIANG BIRTHS PLUMMETED AFTER CRACK-DOWN ON UYGHURS, SAYS REPORT

Birthrate fell by almost half between 2017-2019, research finds, adding to evidence of coercive fertility policies

Birthrates in Xinjiang fell by almost half in the two years after the Chinese government implemented policies to reduce the number of babies born to Uyghur and other Muslim minority families, new research has claimed.

**The figures show unprecedented declines which were more extreme than any global region at any time in the 71 years of UN fertility data collection, including during genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia, according to the authors of the report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Aspi).**

The data adds to mounting evidence of coercive fertility policies in Xinjiang, including first-person accounts of forced sterilisation or birth control, and leaked policing data on the internment of women for violating family planning regulations.

They are among Chinese government policies believed to be designed to forcibly assimilate the Uyghur and other Muslim populations. In April, Human Rights Watch determined the Chinese government was committing crimes against humanity but said the extent of coercive birth control and sexual violence, while alarming, needed more investigation.

The authors of the report, Nathan Ruser and James Leibold, said they compiled it using publicly available Chinese government statistics to create datasets of county-level

birthrates from 2011 to 2019, and comparing counties with higher proportions of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities.

It covered the period before, during, and after the implementation of the Chinese Communist party’s campaigns against “illegal births” in April 2017, when authorities also stopped publishing statistics on the birthrates of separate minority groups.

**Aspi’s report found the birth-rate across Xinjiang fell by 48.74% between 2017 and 2019. In counties where the population was at least 90% non-Han Chinese, the birthrate dropped by an average 56.5% between 2017 and 2018. By examining county-level statistics, the report provided further evidence of “the systematic targeting” of communities, it said.**

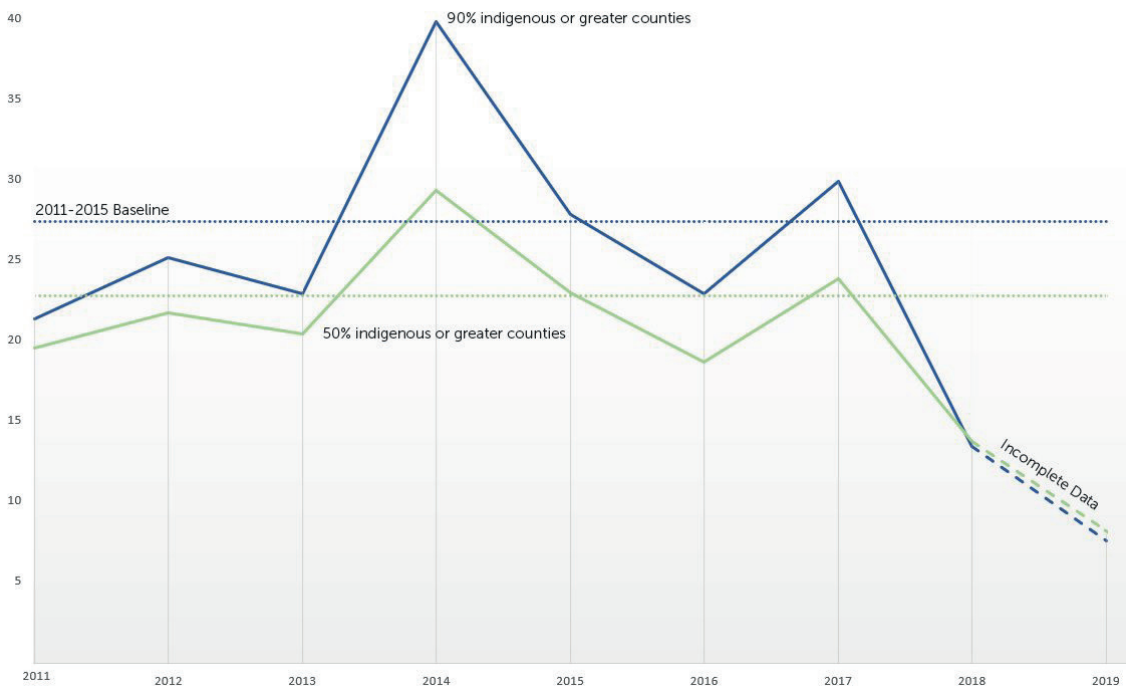
“Previous research by both Chinese and foreign experts has examined the tightening of

birth control policy in Xinjiang and a corresponding drop in natural population growth beginning in 2015, but even more dramatically after 2017,” it said.

Among the evidence cited in the report, Aspi also included state media reports about crackdowns on “illegal births”, and the collection of US\$1m from 629 families over four months in a single county. In other areas authorities launched hotlines and rewarded people who informed on their neighbours, and punished officials who failed to meet targets.

“The crackdown has led to an unprecedented and precipitous drop in official birthrates in Xinjiang since 2017. The birthrate across the region fell by nearly half (48.74 %) in the two years between 2017 and 2019,” said the report.

Citing state media, the report said in 2017, 460 party members and state employees were punished for illegal births in Hotan prefecture, where 97% of the population is Uyghur or from other non-Han groups.



While China’s government enforced a one-child policy for decades, it allowed minority families to have three children in rural areas or two in urban areas. The report said while the overall birthrate for the Xinjiang region remained relatively stable throughout the period, many individual counties, especially in the Uyghur-majority south, had exceptionally high birthrates in the past decade. There were 68 children born per 1,000 people in Kashgar in 2014, compared with 16.5 at the regional level.

Aspi said policymakers saw this as “an increasingly urgent problem and source of perceived instability, literally a breeding ground for the ‘three evil forces’ of extremism, terrorism and splitism”.

The Chinese government denies allegations of mistreatment, genocide and crimes against humanity, saying many of its policies – including the mass detention network it says includes vocational training centres – are anti-terrorism efforts. It says birth control is entirely the choice of individuals and there is no agency interference. This claim has been contradicted by women who claim they were coerced into sterilisation or contraception.

**The crackdown on minority population growth comes at the same time the Chinese government is trying to stave off a demographic crisis due to low birthrates in the rest of the country, and an ageing population.**

**The Aspi report was published a day after the Chinese government released figures from its once-a-decade census, finding the decade to 2020 had the slowest annual population growth since the early 1960s.**

**The census reported a bigger increase to China’s minority population compared with the Han population, however this was not broken down to county levels, and included the seven years prior to the major interventions on fertility in Xinjiang.**



“One thing we found is that in other provinces of similarly high minority populations ... the birthrate climbed by about 3% in the last decade,” said Ruser. “So these policies seem to be very deliberately targeted towards the community of Xinjiang and the Uyghur community. When they talk about those general minority figures, I think you have to keep in mind there are 55 other minorities.”

*By Helen Davidson*



## CHINA TARGETS MUSLIM WOMEN IN PUSH TO SUPPRESS BIRTHS IN XINJIANG

In most of China, women are being urged to have more babies to shore up a falling birth-rate. But in Xinjiang, they are being forced to have fewer.

**When China's government ordered women in her mostly Muslim community in the region of Xinjiang to be fitted with contraceptive devices, Qelbinur Sedik pleaded for an exemption. She was nearly 50 years old, she told officials. She had obeyed the government's birth limits and had only one child.**

It was no use. The workers threatened to take her to the police if she continued resisting, she said. She gave in and went to a government clinic where a doctor, using a metal speculum, inserted an intrauterine device to prevent pregnancy. She wept through the procedure.

"I felt like I was no longer a normal woman," Ms. Sedik said, choking up as she described the 2017 ordeal. "Like I was missing something."

Across much of China, the authorities are encouraging women to have more children, as they try to stave off a demographic crisis from a declining birthrate. But in the Xinjiang region, China is forcing them to have fewer, tightening its grip on Muslim ethnic minorities and trying to orchestrate a demographic shift that will diminish their population growth.

Birthrates in the region have already plunged in recent years as the use of invasive birth control procedures has risen, according to reports by a noted researcher, Adrian Zenz, along with The Associated Press.

It is part of a vast and repressive social re-engineering campaign by a Communist Party determined to eliminate any perceived chal-

lunge to its rule, in this case, ethnic separatism. Over the past few years, the party, under its top leader, Xi Jinping, has moved aggressively to subdue Uyghurs and other Central Asian minorities in Xinjiang, putting hundreds of thousands into internment camps and prisons. The authorities have placed the region under tight surveillance, sent residents to work in factories and placed children in boarding schools.

While the authorities have said the birth control procedures are voluntary, interviews with more than a dozen Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim women and men from Xinjiang, as well as a review of official statistics, government notices and reports in the state-run media, depict a coercive effort by the Chinese Communist Party to control the community's reproductive rights. The authorities pressured women to use IUDs or get sterilized. As they recuperated at home, government officials were sent to live with them to watch for signs of discontent; one woman described having to endure her minder's groping.

**If they had too many children or refused contraceptive procedures, they faced steep fines or, worse, detention in an internment camp. In the camps, the women were at risk of even more abuse. Some former detainees say they were made to take drugs that stopped their menstrual cycles. One woman said she had been raped in a camp.**

To rights advocates and Western officials, the government's repression in Xinjiang is tantamount to crimes against humanity and genocide, in large part because of the efforts to stem the population growth of Muslim mi-

norities. The Trump administration in January was the first government to declare the crackdown a genocide, with reproductive oppression as a leading reason; the Biden administration affirmed the label in March.

Ms. Sedik's experience, reported in *The Guardian* and elsewhere, helped form the basis for the decision by the United States government. "It was one of the most detailed and compelling first-person accounts we had," said Kelley E. Currie, a former United States ambassador who was involved in the government's discussions. "It helped to put a face on the horrifying statistics we were seeing."



**Beijing has accused its critics of pushing an anti-China agenda.**

The recent declines in the region's birthrates, the government has said, were the result of the authorities' fully enforcing longstanding birth restrictions. The sterilizations and contraceptive procedures, it said, freed women from backward attitudes about procreation and religion.

"Whether to have birth control or what contraceptive method they choose are completely their own wishes," Xu Guixiang, a Xinjiang government spokesman, said at a news conference in March. "No one nor any agency shall interfere."

To women in Xinjiang, the orders from the government were clear: They didn't have a choice.

Last year, a community worker in Urumqi, the regional capital, where Ms. Sedik had lived, sent messages saying women between 18 and 59 had to submit to pregnancy and birth control inspections.

“If you fight with us at the door and if you refuse to cooperate with us, you will be taken to the police station,” the worker wrote, according to screenshots of the WeChat messages that Ms. Sedik shared with The Times.

“Do not gamble with your life,” one message read, “don’t even try.”



### ‘I lost all hope in myself’

All her life, Ms. Sedik, an ethnic Uzbek, had thought of herself as a model citizen.

After she graduated from college, she married and threw herself into her work, teaching Chinese to Uyghur elementary school students. Mindful of the rules, Ms. Sedik didn’t get pregnant until she had gotten approval from her employer. She had only one child, a daughter, in 1993.

Ms. Sedik could have had two children. The rules at the time allowed ethnic minorities to have slightly bigger families than those of the majority Han Chinese ethnic group, particularly in the countryside. The government even awarded Ms. Sedik a certificate of honor for staying within the limits.

**Then, in 2017, everything changed.**

As the government corralled Uyghurs and Kazakhs into mass internment camps, it moved in tandem to ramp up enforcement of birth controls. Sterilization rates in Xinjiang surged by almost sixfold from 2015 to 2018, to just over 60,000 procedures, even as they plummeted around the country, according to calculations by Mr. Zenz.

The campaign in Xinjiang is at odds with a broader push by the government since 2015 to encourage births, including by providing tax subsidies and free IUD removals. But from 2015 to 2018, Xinjiang’s share of the country’s total new IUD insertions increased, even as use of the devices fell nationwide.

**The contraception campaign appeared to work.**



Birthrates in minority-dominated counties in the region plummeted from 2015 to 2018, based on Mr. Zenz’s calculations. Several of these counties have stopped publishing population data, but Mr. Zenz calculated that the birthrates in minority areas probably continued to fall in 2019 by just over 50 percent from 2018, based on figures from other counties.

The sharp drop in birthrates in the region was “shocking” and clearly in part a result of the campaign to tighten enforcement of birth control policies, said Wang Feng, a professor of sociology and expert in Chinese population policies at the University of California,

Irvine. But other factors could include a fall in the number of women of childbearing age, later marriages and postponed births, he said.

**As the government pushes back against growing criticism, it has withheld some key statistics, including annually published county-level data on birthrates and birth control use for 2019. Other official data for the region as a whole showed a steep drop in IUD insertions and sterilizations that year, though the number of sterilizations was still mostly higher than before the campaign began.**

In Beijing’s depiction, the campaign is a victory for the region’s Muslim women.

“In the process of deradicalization, some women’s minds have also been liberated,” a January report by a Xinjiang government research center read. “They have avoided the pain of being trapped by extremism and being turned into reproductive tools.”

Women like Ms. Sedik, who had obeyed the rules, were not spared. After the IUD procedure, Ms. Sedik suffered from heavy bleeding and headaches. She later had the device secretly removed, then reinserted. In 2019, she decided to be sterilized.

“The government had become so strict, and I could no longer take the IUD,” said Ms. Sedik, who now lives in the Netherlands after fleeing China in 2019. “I lost all hope in myself.”

**‘The women of Xinjiang are in danger’**

The penalties for not obeying the government were steep. A Han Chinese woman who violated the birth regulations would face a fine, while a Uyghur or Kazakh woman would face possible detention.



When Gulnar Omirzakh had her third child in 2015, officials in her northern village registered the birth. But three years later, they said she had violated birth limits and owed \$2,700 in fines.

Officials said they would detain Ms. Omirzakh and her two daughters if she did not pay.

She borrowed money from her relatives. Later, she fled to Kazakhstan.

“The women of Xinjiang are in danger,” Ms. Omirzakh said in a telephone interview. “The government wants to replace our people.”

**The threat of detention was real.**

Three women told The Times they had met other detainees in internment camps who had been locked up for violating birth restrictions.

Dina Nurdybay, a Kazakh woman, said she helped one woman write a letter to the authorities in which she blamed herself for being ignorant and having too many children.

Such accounts are corroborated by a 137-page government document leaked last year from Karakax County, in southwestern Xinjiang, which revealed that one of the most common reasons cited for detention was violating birth planning policies.

Those who refused to terminate illegal pregnancies or pay fines would be referred to the internment camps, according to one govern-



ment notice from a county in Ili, unearthed by Mr. Zenz, the researcher.

Once women disappeared into the region's internment camps — facilities operated under secrecy — many were subjected to interrogations. For some, the ordeal was worse.

Tursunay Ziyawudun was detained in a camp in Ili Prefecture for 10 months for traveling to Kazakhstan. She said that on three occasions, she was taken to a dark cell where two to three masked men raped her and used electric batons to forcibly penetrate her.

“You become their toy,” Ms. Ziyawudun said in a telephone interview from the United States, where she now lives, as she broke down sobbing. “You just want to die at the time, but unfortunately you don’t.”

Gulbahar Jalilova, the third former detainee, said in an interview that she had been beaten in a camp and that a guard exposed himself during an interrogation and wanted her to perform oral sex.

The three former detainees, along with two others who spoke to *The Times*, also described being regularly forced to take unidentified pills or receive injections of medication that caused nausea and fatigue. Eventually, a few of them said, they stopped menstruating.

The former detainees' accounts could not be independently verified because tight restrictions in Xinjiang make unfettered access to

the camps impossible. The Chinese government has forcefully denied all allegations of abuse in the facilities.

“The sexual assault and torture cannot exist,” said Mr. Xu, the regional spokesman, at a news briefing in February.

Beijing has sought to undermine the credibility of the women who have spoken out, accusing them of lying and of poor morals, all while claiming to be a champion of women's rights.



### ‘We are all Chinese’

Even in their homes, the women did not feel safe. Uninvited Chinese Communist Party cadres would show up and had to be let in.

The party sends out more than a million workers to regularly visit, and sometimes stay in, the homes of Muslims, as part of a campaign called “Pair Up and Become Family.” To many Uyghurs, the cadres were little different from spies.

The cadres were tasked with reporting on whether the families they visited showed signs of “extremist behavior.” For women, this included any resentment they might have felt about state-mandated contraceptive procedures.

When the party cadres came to stay in 2018, Zumret Dawut had just been forcibly sterilized.



Four Han cadres visited her in Urumqi, bringing yogurt and eggs to help with the recovery, she recalled. They were also armed with questions: Did she have any issues with the sterilization operation? Was she dissatisfied with the government’s policy?

**“I was so scared that if I said the wrong thing they would send me back to the camps,” said Ms. Dawut, a mother of three. “So I just told them, ‘We are all Chinese people and we have to do what the Chinese law says.’”**

**But the officials’ unwelcome gaze settled also on Ms. Dawut’s 11-year-old daughter, she said. One cadre, a 19-year-old man who was assigned to watch the child, would sometimes call Ms. Dawut and suggest taking her daughter to his home. She was able to rebuff him with excuses that the child was sick, she said.**

Other women reported having to fend off advances even in the company of their husbands.

Ms. Sedik, the Uzbek teacher, was still recovering from a sterilization procedure when her “relative” — her husband’s boss — showed up.

She was expected to cook, clean and entertain him even though she was in pain from the operation. Worse, he would ask to hold her hand or to kiss and hug her, she said.

Mostly, Ms. Sedik agreed to his requests, terrified that if she refused, he would tell the government that she was an extremist. She rejected him only once: when he asked to sleep with her.

It went on like this every month or so for two years — until she left the country.

“He would say, ‘Don’t you like me? Don’t you love me?’” she recalled. “If you refuse me, you are refusing the government.”

“I felt so humiliated, oppressed and angry,” she said. “But there was nothing I could do.”

*By Amy Qin*





## WEST AND RIGHTS GROUPS ACCUSE CHINA OF MASSIVE UYGHUR CRIMES

Human rights groups and Western nations led by the United States, Britain and Germany are accusing China of massive crimes against the Uyghur minority and demanding unimpeded access for U.N. experts

UNITED NATIONS -- Human rights groups and Western nations led by the United States, Britain and Germany accused China of massive crimes against the Uyghur minority and demanded unimpeded access for U.N. experts at a virtual meeting on Wednesday denounced by China as “politically motivated” and based on “lies.”

China’s U.N. Mission sent notes to many of the U.N.’s 193 member nations last week urging them not to participate in the “anti-China event.” And China’s U.N. Ambassador Zhang Jun sent text messages to the 15 Western co-sponsors of the meeting expressing shock at their support, urging them to “think twice” and withdraw it.

He warned that if they don’t, it will be “harmful to our relationship and cooperation.”

At the meeting, Britain’s U.N. Ambassador Barbara Woodward called the situation in Xinjiang “one of the worst human rights crises of our time.”

**“The evidence, from a growing number of credible sources – including satellite imagery, survivor testimony and publicly available Chinese Government documents – is of grave concern,”** said Woodward, who previously was the UK ambassador in China. **“The evidence points to a program of repression of specific ethnic groups. Expressions of religion have been criminalized and Uyghur language and culture are discriminated against systematically and at scale.”**

In recent years, an estimated 1 million people or more have been confined in camps in



Xinjiang, according to foreign governments and researchers. Most are Uyghurs, a largely Muslim ethnic group. Authorities have been accused of imposing forced labor, systematic forced birth control and torture.

The Chinese government has flatly rejected the allegations. It has characterized the camps, which it says are now closed, as vocational training centers to teach Chinese language, job skills and the law in order to support economic development and combat extremism. China saw a wave of Xinjiang-related terrorist attacks through 2016.

Organizers said there were 152 participants in Wednesday’s event, including 51 countries, and speaker after speaker called on China to end its abuses against the Uyghurs.

Germany’s U.N. Ambassador Christoph Heusgen thanked “all the co-sponsors who came together despite some massive Chinese threats.”

He urged them to remain committed “until the Uyghurs can live again in freedom, until they are no longer detained, no longer vic-

tims of forced labor and other human rights abuses, until they can exercise freedom of religion and freedom of speech.”

Heusgen appealed to China to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “and tear down the detention camps.”

“If you have nothing to hide, why don’t you finally grant unimpeded access to the (U.N.) High Commissioner for Human Rights?” he asked.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said the Biden administration “will keep standing up and speaking out until China’s government stops its crime against humanity and the genocide of Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang.”

“And we will keep working in concert with our allies and our partners until China’s government respects the universal human rights of all its people,” she said.

Uyghur human rights activist Jewher Ilhan spoke about her father Ilham Tohti, a noted economist who has called for autonomy for Xinjiang and is serving a life sentence on separatist-related charges. “We don’t even know if he’s alive,” she said.

**“Hundreds of thousands, even millions of Uyghurs are still being targeted,” said Ilhan, who now lives in the United States. “The fate of my father and my community is in the world’s hands now. We all need to join together and take action to stop this humanitarian crisis from continuing.”**

A Chinese diplomat countered, saying: “I make it clear that China is here to tell the truth, it doesn’t mean in any way we recognize this event.”



He then showed a short video and said: “The truth is, it’s not about human rights in Xinjiang, it’s about using Xinjiang as a political tool to contain China. The U.S. and some of its allies make a presumption of guilt, and then fabricate so-called evidence.”

Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth, whose organization recently concluded that China’s atrocities amount to the crime against humanity of persecution, said the challenge is what to do about it.

**“Beijing clearly calculates that through censorship, propaganda, intimidation, and threats it can somehow avoid accountability,” he said, pointing many actions including its “extraordinary lengths of disinviting people” from Wednesday’s event, its “endless charade” that has prevented Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet from visiting Xinjiang, and U.N. inaction.**

Roth expressed disappointment that Bachelet, who was invited to the event, turned down the invitation. “I’m sure she’s busy. We all are. But I have a similar global mandate to defend human rights and I couldn’t think of anything more important to do than to join you here today. I certainly wasn’t deterred by the commute -- all the way to my laptop,” he said.

“The good news is that the tide seems to be turning,” he said, pointing to more countries condemning China’s crimes. But he said more must be done.

Roth called for a U.N. Human Rights Council resolution on Xinjiang, for moving discussions to the U.N. Security Council, for seeking avenues to justice including the use of universal jurisdiction, and for considering creation of an international investigative mechanism similar to those for Syria and Myanmar.

“The true test of the significance of today’s event will be the follow-up steps that we all take,” he said.

Amnesty International Secretary General Agnes Callamard said the persecution of the Uyghurs is “a critical test” for the international human rights system to investigate allegations of “massive violations” by a government against its own people and hold those responsible accountable.

She called “the silence, fear and timidity” of Bachelet’s office and the U.N. Secretariat “frankly unacceptable and a breach of their mandate, as are the silence of many states.”

Callamard said supporting a multilateral response to what is happening in Xinjiang is not about “picking sides in a fight with China or supporting the U.S. or anyone else, it is about fighting for human rights.”

*By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press*



## HOW CHINA TURNED A PRIZE-WINNING IPHONE HACK AGAINST THE UYGHURS

**An attack that targeted Apple devices was used to spy on China’s Muslim minority—and US officials claim it was developed at the country’s top hacking competition.**

**Beijing secretly used an award-winning iPhone hack to spy on Uyghurs**

**The United States tracked the attack and informed Apple**

**Tianfu Cup is a “venue for China to get zero-days,” say experts**

**In March 2017, a group of hackers from China arrived in Vancouver with one goal: Find hidden weak spots inside the world’s most popular technologies.**

Google’s Chrome browser, Microsoft’s Windows operating system, and Apple’s iPhones were all in the crosshairs. But no one was breaking the law. These were just some of the people taking part in Pwn2Own, one of the world’s most prestigious hacking competitions.

It was the 10th anniversary for Pwn2Own, a contest that draws elite hackers from around the globe with the lure of big cash prizes if they manage to exploit previously undiscovered software vulnerabilities, known as “zero-days.” Once a flaw is found, the details are handed over to the companies involved, giving them time to fix it. The hacker, meanwhile, walks away with a financial reward and eternal bragging rights.

For years, Chinese hackers were the most dominant forces at events like Pwn2Own, earning millions of dollars in prizes and establishing themselves among the elite. But in 2017, that all stopped. you got into this world of magic was through a security system.”

The couple left Xinjiang in 2018 amid an exodus of foreigners after visa rules were tightened.

“There were so many restrictions,” said Gary. “We just felt we were living in a huge penitentiary” with 12 million Uyghurs.

“Also we felt we were becoming a liability to Uyghurs around us, those who knew us, that they could be taken into camps for any reason, and knowing us could be one of those,” Gary said.

In an unexpected statement, the billionaire founder and CEO of the Chinese cybersecurity giant Qihoo 360—one of the most important technology firms in China—publicly criticized Chinese citizens who went overseas to take part in hacking competitions. In an interview with the Chinese news site Sina, Zhou Hongyi said that performing well in such events represented merely an “imaginary” success. Zhou warned that once Chinese hackers show off vulnerabilities at overseas competitions, they can “no longer be used.” Instead, he argued, the hackers and their knowledge should “stay in China” so that they could recognize the true importance and “strategic value” of the software vulnerabilities.

**Beijing agreed. Soon, the Chinese government banned cybersecurity researchers from attending overseas hacking competitions. Just months later, a new competition popped up inside China to take the place of the international contests. The Tianfu Cup, as it was called, offered prizes that added up to over a million dollars.**

The inaugural event was held in November 2018. The \$200,000 top prize went to Qihoo



360 researcher Qixun Zhao, who showed off a remarkable chain of exploits that allowed him to easily and reliably take control of even the newest and most up-to-date iPhones. From a starting point within the Safari web browser, he found a weakness in the core of the iPhones operating system, its kernel. The result? A remote attacker could take over any iPhone that visited a web page containing Qixun’s malicious code. It’s the kind of hack that can potentially be sold for millions of dollars on the open market to give criminals or governments the ability to spy on large numbers of people. Qixun named it “Chaos.”

Two months later, in January 2019, Apple issued an update that fixed the flaw. There was little fanfare—just a quick note of thanks to those who discovered it.

But in August of that year, Google published an extraordinary analysis into a hacking campaign it said was “exploiting iPhones en masse.” Researchers dissected five distinct exploit chains they’d spotted “in the wild.” These included the exploit that won Qixun the top prize at Tianfu, which they said had also been discovered by an unnamed “attacker.”

The Google researchers pointed out similarities between the attacks they caught being used in the real world and Chaos. What their deep dive omitted, however, were the identities of the victims and the attackers: Uyghur Muslims and the Chinese government.

## A campaign of oppression

For the past seven years, China has committed human rights abuses against the Uyghur people and other minority groups in the Western province of Xinjiang. Well-documented aspects of the campaign include detention camps, systematic compulsory sterilization, organized torture and rape, forced labor, and an unparalleled surveillance effort. Officials in Beijing argue that China is acting to fight “terrorism and extremism,” but the United States, among other countries, has called the actions genocide. The abuses add up to an unprecedented high-tech campaign of oppression that dominates Uyghur lives, relying in part on targeted hacking campaigns.

**China’s hacking of Uyghurs is so aggressive that it is effectively global, extending far beyond the country’s own borders. It targets journalists, dissidents, and anyone who raises Beijing’s suspicions of insufficient loyalty.**

Shortly after Google’s researchers noted the attacks, media reports connected the dots: the targets of the campaign that used the Chaos exploit were the Uyghur people, and the hackers were linked to the Chinese government. Apple published a rare blog post that confirmed the attack had taken place over two months: that is, the period beginning immediately after Qixun won the Tianfu Cup and stretching until Apple issued the fix.



MIT Technology Review has learned that United States government surveillance independently spotted the Chaos exploit being used against Uyghurs, and informed Apple. (Both Apple and Google declined to comment on this story.)

The Americans concluded that the Chinese essentially followed the “strategic value” plan laid out by Qihoo’s Zhou Hongyi; that the Tianfu Cup had generated an important hack; and that the exploit had been quickly handed over to Chinese intelligence, which then used it to spy on Uyghurs.

The US collected the full details of the exploit used to hack the Uyghurs, and it matched Tianfu’s Chaos hack, MIT Technology Review has learned. (Google’s in-depth examination later noted how structurally similar the exploits are.) The US quietly informed Apple, which had already been tracking the attack on its own and reached the same conclusion: the Tianfu hack and the Uyghur hack were one and the same. The company prioritized a difficult fix.

Qihoo 360 and Tianfu Cup did not respond to multiple requests for comment. When we contacted Qixun Zhao via Twitter, he strongly denied involvement, although he also said he couldn’t remember who came into possession of the exploit code. At first, he suggested the exploit wielded against Uyghurs was probably used “after the patch release.” On the contrary, both Google and Apple have extensively documented how this exploit was used before January 2019. He also pointed out that his ‘Chaos’ exploit shared code from other hackers. In fact, within Apple and US intelligence, the conclusion has long been that these exploits are not merely similar—they are the same. Although Qixun wrote the exploit, there is nothing to suggest he was personally involved in what happened to it after the Tianfu event (Chinese law requires

citizens and organizations to provide support and assistance to the country's intelligence agencies whenever asked.)

**By the time the vulnerabilities were closed, Tianfu had achieved its goal.**

**“The original decision to not to allow the hackers to go abroad to competitions seems to be motivated by a desire to keep discovered vulnerabilities inside of China,” says Adam Segal, an expert on Chinese cybersecurity policy at the Council for Foreign Relations. It also cut top Chinese hackers from other income sources “so they are forced into a closer connection with the state and established companies,” he says.**

The incident is stark. One of China's elite hacked an iPhone, and won public acclaim and a large amount of money for doing so. Virtually overnight, Chinese intelligence used it as a weapon against a besieged minority ethnic group, striking before Apple could fix the problem. It was a brazen act performed in broad daylight and with the knowledge that there would be no consequences to speak of.

## Concerning links

Today, the Tianfu Cup is heading into its third year, and it's sponsored by some of China's biggest tech companies: Alibaba, Baidu, and Qihoo 360 are among the organizers. But American officials and security experts are increasingly concerned about the links between those involved in the competition and the Chinese military.

Qihoo, which is valued at over \$9 billion, was one of dozens of Chinese companies added to a trade blacklist by the United States in 2020 after a US Department of Commerce assessment that the company might support Chinese military activity.

Others involved in the event have also raised alarms in Washington. The Beijing company Topsec, which helps organize Tianfu, allegedly provides hacking training, services, and recruitment for the government and has employed nationalist hackers, according to US officials.

The company is linked to cyber-espionage campaigns including the 2015 hack of the US insurance giant Anthem, a connection that was accidentally exposed when hackers used the same server to try to break into a US military contractor and to host a Chinese university hacking competition.







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Other organizers and sponsors include NS-Focus, which grew directly out of the earliest Chinese nationalist hacker movement called the Green Army, and Venus Tech, a prolific Chinese military contractor that has been linked to offensive hacking.

**One other Tianfu organizer, the state-owned Chinese Electronics Technology Group, has a surveillance subsidiary called Hikvision, which provides “Uyghur analytics” and facial recognition tools to the Chinese government. It was added to a US trade blacklist in 2019.**

US experts say the links between the event and Chinese intelligence are clear, however.

“I think it is not only a venue for China to get zero-days but it’s also a big recruiting venue,” says Scott Henderson, an analyst on the cyber espionage team at FireEye, a major security company based in California.

Tianfu’s links to Uyghur surveillance and genocide show that getting early access to bugs can be a powerful weapon. In fact, the “reckless” hacking spree that Chinese groups launched against Microsoft Exchange in early 2021 bears some striking similarities.

In that case, a Taiwanese researcher uncovered the security flaws and passed them to Microsoft, which then privately shared them with security partners. But before a fix could be released, Chinese hacking groups started exploiting the flaw all around the world. Microsoft, which was forced to rush out a fix two weeks earlier than planned, is investigating the potential that the bug was leaked.

These bugs are incredibly valuable, not just in financial terms, but in their capacity to create an open window for espionage and oppression.

Google researcher Ian Beer said as much in the original report detailing the exploit chain. “I shan’t get into a discussion of whether these exploits cost \$1 million, \$2 million, or \$20 million,” he wrote. “I will instead suggest that all of those price tags seem low for the capability to target and monitor the private activities of entire populations in real time.”

*by Patrick Howell O’Neill*



## PARLIAMENT CONDEMNS ‘SEVERE HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES’ AGAINST UYGHUR IN CHINA

Parliament has condemned “severe human rights abuses” against Uyghur in China - but not “genocide”, as had been originally proposed.

**The original wording of the motion requested Parliament debate whether human rights abuses against the Muslim minority group Uyghur in the Chinese region of Xinjiang amounted to genocide, and in turn called on the Government to fulfil its obligations under international law.**

The motion, filed by Act deputy leader and foreign affairs spokeswoman Brooke van Velden last week, needed the support of each MP in the House in order to be debated.

But Labour only supported the motion if the term “genocide” was removed.

As the topic was debated in the House, Act,

the Green Party and te Pāti Māori (Māori Party) all asserted their support for the original motion using the term “genocide”.

### What the parties said

Speaking on behalf of Labour, Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta acknowledged unanimous support for the motion across the house.

The Government would continue to work with international partners and the United Nations to push for an investigation and abuses to end, she said.

Van Velden said having to dilute and soften the motion to gain the acceptance of the governing party was “intolerable”.

“Our conscience requires that we support this motion, we know that a genocide is taking place.

“Genocide does not require a war, it does not need to be sudden, it can be slow and deliberate and that is what is happening here.



The motion was not a criticism of the country of China or Chinese people, or of “Chinese Kiwis”.

She also noted New Zealand must stand with its international allies on the matter.

There had been forced sterilisation on the Uyghur population, she said, and noted the United States had declared there was a genocide occurring, under both former president Donald Trump and President Joe Biden.

Parliaments in the Netherlands, Canada and the United Kingdom had also voted to pass similar motions condemning the abuse as “genocide”.

She would continue advocating for a proper investigation to determine if genocide was occurring, she said.

National’s Todd Muller commented on the depth of the relationship with China, which meant criticising where necessary.

“Neither do we shirk from uncomfortable conversations and today this House speaks in one voice with our concerns about severe human rights abuses in China.”

Green MP Golriz Ghahraman called for a stronger wording of the motion, and criticised both major parties for bringing up trade when debating using the term genocide.

**“I was deeply disappointed to hear leadership from both major political parties refer to trade as a consideration for them when they were discussing whether or not they would allow a motion using the word genocide when they were talking about the mass torture, extrajudicial detention, sterilisation and slavery of some one million people.”**

“That was stunningly callous, it was absolutely morally indefensible and it is a breach of new Zealand’s legal obligations.

“The Green Party unequivocally condemns the grave atrocities being suffered by the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province and other cultural and linguistic minorities at the hands of the Chinese government.”

She again called for a proper investigation to determine if New Zealand was involved in any trade involving slave labour from the region, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade thus far has been unable to confirm.





Te Pāti Māori co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer said they welcomed the Greens' motion to revise the wording.

“We will continue to advocate for indigenous peoples and fight racism and bigotry in all its forms.

“We stand in solidarity with all indigenous and oppressed peoples right around the world. Ethnic violence starts with racism.

“We should use this place to lead and stamp it out.”

**She said the party struggled to understand why Act had “suddenly developed a desire to support indigenous peoples in China”, considering they pushed colonial agendas that oppressed indigenous people in Aotearoa, and had recently called for the abolition of New Zealand’s Human Rights Commission.**



### “Nothing has changed”

Waikato University law professor Alexander Gillespie said “nothing has changed” as a result of the vote.

“Parliament created a perfect circle. It started with New Zealand’s existing position, had lots of rhetoric, and then ended at exactly the same point that it started.

### “Nothing has changed.

“While it was correct to not make a declaration of genocide without the existing independent UN experts, it would have been better if they set down some next steps: such as promising to revisit the topic in six months if there is no satisfactory change; or laying out some initiatives, or offers, to be explored and reported back on.

“China will be happy with the outcome. Our Five Eyes allies who use the word ‘genocide’, disappointed.

“Most importantly, for those impacted by the alleged crimes, nothing will change.”

### The motion agreed to by Parliament:

That this House is gravely concerned about the severe human rights abuses taking place against Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and that it call on the Government to work with the United Nations, international partners, and to work with all relevant instruments of international law to bring these abuses to an end.

*By: Michael Neilson*



**The Position Of The Chinese Regime, Which Is Committing Genocide In East Turkistan, On Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, Has Once Again Exposed Its Hypocrisy.**

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